

THE WORLD IS
STRANGER
— THAN WE —
KNOW

DEVOTIONALS



UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Lenten Prayer

Heavenly Father, during these 40 days of Lent, I surrender my life to You at the foot of the cross. Help me to confess my sins and hurl my earthly idols into the fire. I seek Your face as I pick up my cross to serve You. May my life begin anew as I anticipate the joy of Your resurrection, surrounded by Your everlasting love. I pray this in Your Holy Name,
Amen.

Many thanks to our writers and to Annie Volk, our proofreader, who foster intentional faith development by lending their gifts to this project. To learn more about the Legacy Writers group or join in our next project, please contact Amanda@legacyumc.org.

Day 40 – Enough to Believe
John 21:15-25

Do you ever finish a good book and wish that it wouldn't have ended? It was so good, that you wish there were a couple more chapters? Or that there was another book to make it a series? It can be the same with a good movie. When a story is really good, we don't want it to end. When I read the end of John and he finishes with "Jesus also did many other things" I have that feeling. I wonder what all those other things were. John says that if everything were written down it would be too much to put into books. I don't need to read about everything, but I would sure like to read more.

John wrote this book to let everyone know that Jesus is the Messiah, and there was a reason he only included the things that he included. If you count, you will have found 7 times Jesus performs a miracle. There are 7 "I Am" statements where Jesus is letting people know who He is. John was very specific in what he included in this book, and I'm sure there are many reasons he did this that I will never understand. I just feel that sometimes I would have a better understanding with more of the story. But, then again, we don't need to understand. We only need to believe.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 1– God Became Human
Read John 1:1-34

How many of us think Jesus came into existence on Christmas Day? John 1:2 says "He existed in the beginning with God" (New Living Translation). Jesus always existed...before creation, during creation, and ever since. On Christmas, Jesus as God, one part of the Trinity, became human. To Jewish readers, to say Jesus "was God" was blasphemous.

It is hard to grasp how the creator of the universe could be contained in the flesh of a human baby. Throughout the Old Testament prophets proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, so the Jews were waiting for their Messiah. On Christmas, the prophet's predictions came true and the Messiah was born. But, John 1:11 says, "He came to his own people (the Jews), and even they rejected him."

John the Baptist prepared the Jews for the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In John 1:29, as John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he said "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" In the Old Testament, when Jews sought forgiveness, they took an animal (many times a young lamb) to the priest to be sacrificed for their sins. Jesus was about to begin His ministry, yet John declared Jesus to be the Lamb of God. About three years later, Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb that died on the cross for all our sins.

How many of us keep searching for a Savior? Someone that is always with us, that can help in times of trouble, can comfort in times of pain, and can share times of joy. But how many times do we reject this Messiah- this answer we have been searching for? We know about Jesus, but have we actually accepted Him into our hearts and into our lives? If we haven't accepted Him, are we rejecting Him?

Bruce Walth

Day 2 – Siri or Godly Maps
Read John 1:35-51

When Siri says, “turn here” I often double check. I don’t want to go the wrong way, come to a dead end, or drive into a lake. In today’s Scripture, when John the Baptist called out, “Look, the Lamb of God!” the disciples followed Jesus (John 1:36 New International Version). What destination were they seeking? Christ asks them apparently not for his knowledge but for them to ask themselves.

What destination are we seeking? We open our Bibles seeking comfort or answers for challenges of the day. We attend church to connect with other believers and set our path for the week, but do we truly wish for a different destination? Are we willing to follow the map God has given? Christ knows us well, just as He knew Nathanael (John 1:47-48). Christ invites us to follow Him resolutely and without reservation (John 1:43).

Kenton Carlson

Day 39 – Watch For God
Read John 21:1-14

Have you ever heard someone in anger exclaim, “you wouldn’t know a _____ if it bit you on the face!”? When Jesus asked “Friends, haven’t you (caught) any fish?” it was like being bit in the face (John 21:5 New International Version). In our daily life, events come and go and it isn’t until afterwards, sometimes much later, that we see God’s hand in the plot. To explain why the fisherman hadn’t tried the other side of the boat seems almost as ridiculous as our blindness to God’s actions.

A good movie or novel usually contains a great deal of tragedy in order to build interest on the way to a happy ending. Yet, who among us would choose to go through all that tragedy in our lives even if we knew in the end it would turn out well? Certainly the disciples did not want to see Jesus crucified even though he had told them he would rise again. I wish I could run to Jesus and have lunch with him, as described in today’s passage. As I read the Scripture, I envision a happy gathering of old chums laughing and hugging, reliving the huge catch and good times. But these verses also tell me the story of my risen Savior.

So often, I am embarrassed that I don’t recognize God in my day. I am too wrapped up in my daily challenges of earning a living and other duties. I forget his promises and don’t see him in today’s work. He tried to wave me down and still I continued on with my head down. So, he starts a “bonfire” and waves me in (Hey! Look over there for fish!). But when I stop and truly look for God, He is there. I know he didn’t go back to heaven without me, but rather for me.

Kenton Carlson

Day 38 – Doubtful
Read John 20:19-31

Children often believe what they're told without proof, yet adults need more convincing. With so much misinformation literally at our fingertips, how can we discern what's true and false? Even the most trustworthy news sources seem more intent to report news that reaffirms their own beliefs and ignore everything contradicting those views.

I'm no different. I tend to go to sources I already agree with, so in the end I avoid evidence that might force me to change my perspective. While it's prudent to ask for evidence for many things, faith requires something else. Something that can't be seen or touched.

The disciple, Thomas, and I have much in common. Like him, I don't always take people at their word. Perhaps that makes me cynical, and that's okay. Mostly. As long as I keep an open mind. Matters of faith are different, however. Jesus rebuked Thomas' doubt with, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29 English Standard Version).

This world requires proof of everything—even God. It can't conceive that to see God, it has to believe in him first (or at least the possibility of him). The idea is illogical and counterintuitive.

Why doesn't Jesus appear, scars and all, to us?

To quote Norman Geisler, "God has provided enough evidence in this life to convince anyone willing to believe, yet he has also left some ambiguity so as not to compel the unwilling." Jesus wants to be sought after, to believe, evidence not withstanding. After all, we don't have to believe the Sun exists. We can see it and feel its heat, requiring no faith to know it's there.

A line in the movie *Santa Clause* states this even more concisely, "Seeing isn't believing; believing is seeing."

Andra Marquardt

Day 3 – Heavenly Intervention
Read John 2:1-12

Many love this story of Christ. His first miracle! Jesus at a party! This is the upbeat and fun message we want to hear. What grabs my attention is the young Jesus feeling bothered by his mother. What parent or teenage child cannot relate to this interaction? We want to jump to the end of the story: where there is plenty of the finest wine and where the disciples marvel at the miracle. Let's back up just a bit though.

Mary, mother of Jesus comes to him with a request. She knows he is the Son of God. She has always known this. However, does she come because someone is ill, facing death, or tragedy? Does she come because the task could not be accomplished by worldly power? Does she make a request that will change the path of someone's life or significantly impact others? No, she comes with a personal issue of the day. One where even a teenager or certainly a heavenly being might declare "why bother me?"

Jesus expresses reluctance in adjusting the master plan but shows his omnipotence in this scripture. He shows how he cared for his mother's concern. I have been blessed with similar miracles in my life when calling out to Jesus. He has performed physically impossible events where one would doubt heavenly intervention a worthy request. Are you afraid to bother our God in Heaven? Christ is alive. He would much rather be 'bothered' by your worldly requests than ignored. Praise be to God!

Kenton Carlson

Day 4 – Zeal For Your House Will Consume Me Read John 2:13-25

Sometimes I lack passion—zeal if you will—for Jesus, his Word, and for those who need him. I go about my life in a repetitive fog, barely pick up my Bible, too consumed by worldly problems to think about anything else.

While I may claim the busyness of life as an excuse, I fear it goes even deeper. I don't want to take risks, to set myself apart and be noticed as one of Jesus' followers. Doing so requires sacrifice and accepting certain consequences for not following the dictates of the world.

The title above originates from Psalm 69:9. The second part verse 9 says "... and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me" (English Standard Version). Another way of saying Jesus will bear the burden of our sins, to claim our guilt. Something few humans would have the courage to do-- certainly not me.

Yet Jesus didn't allow fear to consume him. He embraced his purpose wholeheartedly. Zeal forced him to act against injustice with as much fervor as he sought out the lost. He came both to save and be the perfect example of what God expects of us. He doesn't want us to simply go about our day, solving worldly problems and little else. If our faith is lukewarm, he will spit us out (see Revelation 3:16).

It's hard, because the world considers "zealot" an insult. Then again, Jesus never said following him would be easy. He, in fact, said the opposite.

Yet he also doesn't allow excuses. We must either be hot or cold; no in between. We must stop and ask, "What's my passion? What breaks my heart to the point I must act? How, can I zealously serve you today and all days forward?"

Andra Marquardt

Day 37 – The Empty Tomb Read John 20:1-18

John 20:1-18 details the account of Mary Magdalene's experience at Jesus' tomb. When she saw the tomb was empty, she frantically ran to the disciples, exclaiming His body had been taken. Upon returning to the tomb, her fear turned into deep sadness at the reality of her missing Lord, Savior, and Friend. After faithfully following Jesus and witnessing His crucifixion, she was overcome by grief at Jesus' absence. Doubt and despair entered her mind and heart at the thought of His fate. As she peered into the empty tomb, she was grief-stricken. Perhaps she was thinking, "What has become of my Lord? What if He hasn't risen at all? Will evil prevail?" As she wept, she heard a voice asking, "Woman, why are you crying?" At first Mary thought the voice was the gardener speaking to her. She asked him if he had carried Jesus' body away, and if so, where the body lay so she could go and get Him. Once He spoke again, she knew it was Jesus and she was filled with immense, overwhelming joy. She went and proclaimed the miraculous news of Jesus' ascension to the disciples as He had commanded her. Three points come to mind upon studying John 20:1-18:

- 1) Mary was like us. She found herself in a distressing circumstance and immediately forgot the promises of God. She was instantly filled with fear and doubt instead of trusting Jesus and His Word. Can you remember a specific time when you forgot God's promises for you and your life? What can you do to never forget Jesus' promises?
- 2) Mary thinking Jesus was the gardener is very fitting. Jesus is a gardener in His own way. He plants us, waters us with His love, grace, and mercy, supports us with His forgiveness, and guides us as we grow. How is Jesus a gardener in your life?
- 3) Women were so important and so loved by Jesus. Women of the Bible had some of the most important roles in Jesus' life and witnessed His ministry firsthand. Mary Magdalene was the first person to see the empty tomb after Christ's resurrection. That did not happen "by chance." It was by God's design that Mary Magdalene be the first to directly learn and share in the intimate and miraculous moment. Can you think of other women who had a front row seat in Christ's ministry?

Corrie Lund

Day 36 – It Is Finished
Read John 19:28-42

When you have a car or home loan, you make payments month after month. It is such a burden to have money come out of your account to make these payments. When the day comes when you make that final loan payment, that burden changes to excitement. You can't wait to receive the final paperwork with the words "paid in full" to tell you that your debt is paid.

Jesus' final words before He died were said in a loud cry, "It is finished" (John 19:30 New Living Translation). The word in this verse, "finished," is actually from the Greek word, "tetelestai," which is the same word that means "paid in full."

He spoke it out loud. He declared it for all to hear. He uttered a loud cry to His Father in heaven for the whole world to know, and for every evil force to have to flee, for Christ's work on the cross was complete. Done. Accomplished.

He came to "finish" God's work of salvation in us. He came to "pay it in full," the entire penalty, or debt, for our sins.

Are you burdened by your sins? Do you think you can never be forgiven for all your sins? Remember, Jesus died once for all our sins. Hebrews 10:17 says, "I will never again remember their sins and lawless deeds." Jesus forgives completely, so there is no need to confess our past sins repeatedly. As believers, we can be confident that the sins we confess and renounce are forgiven and forgotten. Amen.

Bruce Walth

Day 5 – His Sacrifice, Our Gift
Read John 3:1-21

When both of my children were in high school, I decided to begin the course work to complete my Master of Education Degree. I was teaching second grade full time and busy with our children's sports and music activities. I attended classes two times a week by video conference during the school year and spent two summers traveling three hours twice a week to attend classes at UND. The time commitment and sacrifices that my family and I made seemed awful at that time, but when I received my hood, all the sacrifices seemed insignificant and worth it. I sacrificed a small amount of time for the reward of a degree, God sacrificed his Son for the promise of eternal life with the Father.

Our God sent his beloved Son from heaven to earth as a sign that He loved all the world. Jesus chose to sacrifice His all for our redemption. As the Father watched His Son during his time on earth performing many miracles, His love for him must have grown deeper. It makes me think that our God loves us even more because of what his Son did for us. **His sacrifice, our gift!**

John 3: 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (New Living Translation)

Lord, you descended from heaven, and became human to purchase our lives with your death on the cross. I love and adore you for leaving the splendor of heaven to take on our limitations. Your light has come to the world, and I thank you for your sacrifice. Amen.

Lori Campbell

Day 6 – It's Not about You

Read John 3: 22-36

When you're a parent, it's easy to tell others about all the good things your child is doing. You brag about how smart they are, how well they did in a certain activity, how proud you are of them for taking care of a friend or getting up and speaking in front of a group of people. It's easy for us to do this, because we know that if our kids are doing these great things, it reflects well on us as a parent. I also feel this way about a young man I hired right out of college once. I trained him, watched him grow as an employee and a man, and now he has his dream job at another bank, and I find myself bragging about him as though he is my own son.

Most of the time, though, when it's someone other than our kids, it's a little different. It's harder to tell others about the great things someone is doing, especially when that someone is doing the same thing you do. Can you imagine being John the Baptist? As you can see from his title, he was known for baptizing people. If it wasn't for that, people may not have even known who he was. John is told that this man named Jesus is also baptizing people and his crowds are getting to be bigger than John's. John's response to this and his understanding of his purpose is amazing to me. John knew that "He (Jesus) must become greater and greater, and I (John) must become less and less." Let us try to be more like John every day. Of course, we need to be telling others about the goodness of Jesus. But I think John also shows us that part of God's plan for our lives is to focus more on those around us and less on ourselves.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 35 – God's Plan

Read John 19:1-27

"Pilate went outside again and said to the people, 'I am going to bring him out to you now but understand clearly that I find him not guilty'" (John 19:4 New Living Translation).

Pilate tried so hard to not shed innocent blood. He didn't believe Christ to be a threat and stated that he had the power to grant Christ life or death. Then Jesus said, "You have not power over me at all unless it were given to you from above..." (John 19:11). I'm sure Pilate had never heard anyone tell him that before. He caved under the pressure of a chanting crowd. However, Pilate was just as much part of God's plan as the chief priests and temple guards that were shouting, "Crucify him!"

God always has a plan. He planned our salvation through His Son's suffering, death, and resurrection. He has an equally awesome plan for each of us. When you are feeling alone and vulnerable, He will provide just what you need, exactly when you need it. Thank you, Lord, for your continual mercy, grace, and blessings. We feel so unworthy of this great gift and are so very grateful and humbled by it.

Patty VerDouw

Day 34 – Hypocrites
Read John 18:25-40

How many times a day do you find yourself complaining about someone's inability to drive? Or how often do you get frustrated when someone doesn't open a door for you? I'm with you. I find myself secretly thinking that some people should be more considerate and less annoying. The problem is, I can think back to many times when I drove in a way that would frustrate others (like the time I didn't let someone merge into my lane just one day after I was complaining that someone wouldn't let me merge into their lane). And I'm certain I've been so preoccupied with my own thoughts that I didn't realize someone was behind me as I entered a building. These are simple courtesies that we offer to others most of the time but expect from others all of the time. The reason we have different expectations of how we should act and how others should act is because we are so focused on ourselves and how the actions of others affect us.

The Jewish leaders in today's verses were just like us, although the actions are a little more severe than someone cutting you off while driving. They were focused on themselves and realized that this Jesus was greatly affecting their way of life. They were willing to continue to do the things that would benefit them, like trying to remain ceremonially clean, so they could eat the Passover. But when their way of life was threatened, they were willing to bend the rules. Sure, cutting someone off while driving is wrong, but we think it's fine at the time because where we need to get to is more important than where others need to go. The Jewish leaders would tell you that killing someone is wrong, but in this case, they believe it's fine because their livelihood has been threatened and that's more important than this guy named Jesus. As we go through our day, let's remember the Golden Rule and treat those around us as we want to be treated, even when they don't do the same in return.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 7 – Samaritan Woman
Read John 4:1-26

A Jewish man is resting near the well. He looks tired and asks me to draw him a drink with my bucket. That is crazy, I think to myself, what kind of Jew would want to drink out of the same vessel as me—a Samaritan woman? I say as much to him. But then he responds unexpectedly and keeps responding to my intellectual challenges. He puts my religious knowledge to shame. Then he plainly calls me out on my personal sins...things he would have no way of knowing. That's when it starts to sink in. This man knew my sin yet was willing to share my cup. He knew my sin yet was willing to give me eternal gifts. The religious stories are not fiction, and this guy is more than just a man. He is the Messiah.

I could have been the Samaritan woman. In some ways I am. So are you. It doesn't matter what our backgrounds are. God is still looking for those who will worship "in the Spirit and in the truth" (John 4:24 New International Version). Will you recognize the Truth as He seeks to share life with you?

Colette Leingang

Day 8 – My Food Is to Do the Will of Him
Read John 4:27-54

I love food. And it shows. As much as I try to eat less, to eat better, my eyes invariably stray to yet another tempting sweet, and I can't say no. If only I could have that kind of insatiable attraction to the food God offers! While our bodies need fuel to function, our spirits need spiritual food as well. In John 4, the disciples wondered why Jesus wasn't eating. He responded with, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34 English Standard Version).

This reminds me of a movie about Mother Theresa (I forget the title). She had also refused to eat, instead giving her food to the poorest around her. Until someone told her that if she didn't eat, she'd get sick or die and not be able to help those same poor.

If we are to do his will, we need to eat the food God gives us. What does that food look like? Prayer, study, and worship perhaps? They sound so obvious, don't they? I bet you're wondering why I even mention them. After all, we go to church, pray, worship and study. Isn't that enough?

Even after doing all of the above, I sometimes feel spiritually unsatisfied. So what's missing? Am I merely eating spiritual nutrition of studying, praying and worshiping without taking the next step of doing his will? After all, to be physically healthy, we need to both eat healthy and exercise. Our spirit is not much different; without spiritual exercise, we get spiritually fat and lazy. What that exercise looks like is between us and God, because only he knows the best methods for our spiritual health and growth.

Andra Marquardt

Day 33 – Questions
Read John 18:1-24

"Jesus fully realized all that was going to happen to him, so he stepped forward to meet them. 'Who are you looking for?', he asked" (John 18:4 New Living Translation).

I am a teacher's kid. I also was raised in a small town where my dad is related to half the population. As such, I got away with nothing growing up. There were several times I would get home from school to have my parents ask, "What happened today?" I never understood why they asked, since they already knew! Before I could even make it home to explain, they had already heard I was sent to the principal's office, got a speeding ticket, or whatever it was. If they already knew the answer, why did they ask the question?!?

In this section of Scripture, Judas and the soldiers had just walked up to Jesus with their torches and weapons. They didn't have time to say a word before Jesus asked the question above. John tells us Jesus knew exactly what they wanted and who they were looking for before he asked the question, but he asked it anyway.

Looking back now, I think my parents wanted to see if I would freely admit what I had done, if I would tell the truth, and what my side of the story was. Even though they knew the answer, they wanted me to say it out loud so they could gauge my remorse, anger, or fear. I wonder if Jesus asked this question for the same reasons. Was he giving Judas a chance to confess and repent? Did he want to look in Judas' eyes and gauge his feelings? I can't help but think he was being a loving parent who was giving his child, disciple, and friend one last chance to have a change of heart.

Father, when you ask me questions that you and I both know the answer to, I pray I heed that warning and think carefully about my response.

Bethany Whitworth

Day 32 – Waiting

Read John 17

What do you wait for? That list is different for all of us. It could be the big game, a family celebration, or the birth of a child. The excitement of a trip, the planning, and then the trip itself may top some lists.

The list for what we don't anticipate is just as long, if not longer. There are things we have to go through whether we want to or not: visiting the doctor, dentist, or in my case the audiologist. With the passing of a friend or loved one, funerals are also not something we look forward to. We know events come along that we have to endure, and we go through them as best as we can. Sometimes the events were way less worrisome than they needed to be. Different times they were as difficult as or more so than we could imagine.

The very first verse of our Scripture reading brings a lot of emotions to the surface. "After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed, 'Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you'" (John 17:1 New International Version). Likewise, from Mark 14 we know that Jesus asks God to take this cup from him. Jesus knew what was going to happen. He knew he was going to be betrayed, arrested, humiliated, and crucified. What makes this different from our waiting list, in most cases, is that what we go through is normally for ourselves. He went through it for us and us alone.

Remember that Christ came to this world not to condemn it, but to save it. Better yet, remember that Christ came to you, not to condemn you, but to save you.

Kevin Sailer

Day 9 – God Given Gifts

Read John 5:1-15

Why did Jesus allow the lame man who was healed to tell others who healed him and where his new abilities came from? There are instances in the Bible when Jesus doesn't allow this. Part of this may be that Jesus knew the Jewish leaders would need more evidence to carry through on the prophecies that led to the new covenant, and our eventual salvation. However, when I hear this story, I also think about all those around him who heard of the miracles that Jesus performed. They came to know Jesus because they were told a story by someone who experienced God's love and blessings.

When an athlete gives a sign to heaven or speaks about how they performed well with the help of God, it drives me crazy. Don't get me wrong, I am as grateful for the gifts I have been given by God as anyone else. It just seems like a really weird time to talk about it. Do they really think that because they believe in Jesus, he is going to help them hit a home run or catch a touchdown? That seems absurd.

But if we're following the lame man and athlete's example, maybe we should be purposeful about telling those around us that our abilities come from Jesus. How many people in your life might find their way to Jesus if you let them know that your gifts came from God, and that your role is to give back to the world? I am, by my own admission, a very poor prophet of Jesus, but today I'm going to start making a more intentional effort to get better at it. Will you join me, and find another follower for Jesus?

Aaron Van Ningen

Day 10 – Eternal Life
Read John 5:16-47

“I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believes in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins but have already passed from death into life” (John 5: 24 New Living Translation)

Eternal life was unfathomable to me when I was younger. I imagined it meant unending years, and years, and years after death.

Jesus said, “those that listen to My message and believes in God who sent Me HAVE eternal life”. Not “will have” but HAVE! The life we have is inseparably connected with the eternal life beyond. We don’t have to wait for eternal life, because it doesn’t start when we die. It began the moment we believed. It’s a personal relationship with a PERSON, not just doctrine. It is in knowing the Father and the Son personally, not just academically. It’s about the eternal life we are enjoying now, and our happy future in heaven.

Believing is the connection that is now uniting us with God. God’s existence is eternal, so if we have God, we have eternal life right now. So, talk to God about your day, dreams, regrets, short-comings – thank Him in everything. Give up control. Trust Him to be the pilot of your life and be willing to LISTEN to His guidance and the courage to follow Him.

Patty Ver Douw

Day 31 – Never Alone
Read John 16:16-32

“But the time is coming – indeed is here now – when you will be scattered, each one going his own way, leaving me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me” (John 16:32 New Living Translation).

How many times have you felt like that lone prairie cottonwood tree – standing with arms outstretched, reaching for help and heaven, weathering the elements, afraid of the next lightning strike. Were you secure in your belief that you could withstand the next crisis all by yourself?

It is easy to slip into despair when you feel abandoned or neglected by family, friends, and coworkers. When connections with others are damaged or frayed, remember that God is always with us and we are never alone. We may not feel His physical presence, but He is with us. He carries us so much of the time.

Rest in the image of God carrying you, your head on His shoulder, with Him whispering words of hope, guidance, and encouragement. Thank you, Lord, that we can depend on You to never leave us lonely or alone. You are our hope and salvation.

Patty VerDouw

Day 30 – Never Alone
Read John 16:1-15

But I tell you the truth, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7 paraphrased).

Excuse me? Did the disciples think this was a good idea? Why couldn't Jesus just stay? And who among us likes anything that is for our own good? Truth be told, it was probably exciting to be around Jesus as he engaged with people. Their connection to Jesus even made the disciples celebrities.

Growing up, my mom stayed home with my brother and me. So starting kindergarten was a huge change. It was a long time ago, but I know there would have been lots of excitement surrounding the big day. And maybe I was even a bit of a celebrity myself that summer when people heard I would be heading off to kindergarten in the fall.

But the awful truth on that first day was that Mom left me there! After 5 years by her side 24/7, I was now on my own. Soon I was being left other places – 4-H, piano lessons. But actually, I wasn't entirely on my own. Each step along the way I had teachers and leaders there to make sure I didn't have to rely on my own limited knowledge.

Jesus didn't leave the disciples on their own either. Soon after Jesus left, he sent the Holy Spirit to guide them in continuing the work he started. And the good news for you and me is that the Holy Spirit is still with us and his help is available just for the asking.

“But you have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you, so you don't need anyone to teach you what is true. For the Spirit teaches you everything you need to know, and what he teaches is true—it is not a lie. So just as he has taught you, remain in fellowship with Christ” (1 John 2: 27 New Living Translation).

Cheryl Sailer

Day 11 – Bread of Life
Read John 6:1-40

At this point in his life, Jesus is a pretty popular guy. Everyone knows him, and he is starting to gain a lot of followers, but the people don't really get who he is. Many follow Jesus because of the miracles he has performed. When Jesus feeds a crowd of more than five thousand with a little boy's lunch of five small barley loaves and two small fish, the crowd sees the miracle of the bread for their physical needs instead of their spiritual needs. In verse 26 Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, but not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill” (New International Version). He continues in verse 35, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” The little boy gave his lunch, but Jesus gave his life. Our Father's wish is that “everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Lord, let me be a follower that feeds on the words of Jesus, our Living Bread and Savior of the world. Amen.

Lori Campbell

Day 12 – Bread from Heaven
Read John 6:41-71

"Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them'" (John 6:53-56 New International Version).

Cannibal Christians? Of course not. I think this passage points to the mysterious oneness of body and spirit. The immortal mortal, the infinite finite, the Holy Spirit in a body. Though Jesus came in the flesh, the body, he asserted that this body is not of lasting importance. Though he tells his listeners that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, he clearly conveys that the Spirit gives eternal life and that it is his words which are full of the Spirit and of life.

"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life" (John 6:63).

It is not the physical, tangible, touchable, measurable elements that sustain us forever. Indeed no! Like bread that we must eat to sustain our physical bodies, we must consume and digest the living words of Christ to sustain our spirits. These words are the true essence—the true body and blood--of Jesus. Are you Spirit filled?

Colette Leingang

Day 29 – If The World Hates You
Read John 15

The hardest part of growing up for me was longing for acceptance and receiving little of it. No matter how hard I tried to "fit in," I continued to fail. If anything, the harder I tried, the more my peers made fun of me, and to use an adult phrase—held me in contempt. After many frustrated years (and many nights of tearful despair), God impressed upon me that I was suppressing the very things he wanted me to nurture.

As an adult, I'm still trying to be everything God expects me to be, no matter what. I succeed sometimes but other times- often depending on my mood- I'll pull back and miss an opportunity.

Regardless of how much I may have matured, my past pains still affect me. Not so much for me, but for others. I don't get bullied for my faith, but I hear of many who do. Social media is the worst, and I try to defend those being attacked. It used to anger and frustrate me. I couldn't understand why people attack others for being Christian, especially in our country. Until I read John 15:18, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you" (English Standard Version).

Jesus also said in Matthew 5:11-12, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you." When we're bullied, insulted, and if ever persecuted, we can be assured of three things: we're not alone, we're doing what God wants us to do, and we will be rewarded for our courage.

Andra Marquardt

Day 28 – Not Without Help
Read John 14:15-31

I like to say I depend on God, and it is true. Sometimes. More often than not, though, I like to go my own way and don't invite God to join me. He comes along anyway, a few steps behind, watching, waiting. Perhaps even shaking his head at my incessant idiocy of trying to do things my way and failing. One problem of doing things on my own is I start to feel alone, abandoned even. Worse, I begin to lose my sense of right and wrong. I make excuses for my actions—my sins. I sometimes even consider them not sins at all.

When that happens, I no longer sense God's presence. His voice becomes weaker, but when I do stop and strain my spiritual ears, I hear him ask, "Do you love me?" John 14:15-16 says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper to be with you forever" (English Standard Version) There's that word again. The big "if." The qualifier to all of God's promises.

Do I love God? Tough question, because I want to say "yes" without hesitation or equivocation. Yet I have to admit it's not always true. Pride in myself interferes. I should therefore not be surprised when the Helper Jesus promised goes silent. We must always keep in mind that while Jesus is always ready to forgive us and intercede on our behalf, and the Helper always ready to give us the strength and wisdom we need to face whatever comes our way; we must do our part. We must love him above all else and keep his commandments as an expression of that love. What a tiny sacrifice compared to what Jesus did for us.

Andra Marquardt

Day 13 – Look Beneath the Surface
Read John 7:1-31

“Look beneath the surface so you can judge correctly” (John 7:24 NLT).

In the selected reading for today, there are a number of people who make incorrect judgments about Jesus. First his brothers did not believe him. They knew him his whole life, certainly there wasn't anything extraordinary about their brother. Then, there were crowds who based their judgement on gossip and hearsay, "He is a good man...no, he deceives people" (John 7:12 New International Version). The people of Jerusalem said, "But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from" (John 7:27). And the Jewish leaders asked, "How did this man get such learning without having been taught" (John 7:15)?

How often do we also judge people based on who they were or where they lived in the past, or the gossip we've heard about them, or through the lens of our own rules and beliefs?

Lord, I am ashamed to admit that I have used these filters to judge people. I would most likely have judged Jesus in one of the ways his community did. Help me to instead rely on my head and heart when I may be inclined to judge others.

Cheryl Sailer

Day 14 – Flawed Thinking
Read John 7: 32-52

Do you ever pay attention to your thoughts about someone who you disagreed with? Either they did something or said something you didn't like, and before you know it, your brain begins telling you that everything they say or do is wrong. They don't attend church and you do; they can't possibly know how to raise kids. They think your boss is awesome and you don't; you can't listen to their suggestions for a project at work. They let their kids stay up late while you have a set bedtime for yours, and their movie recommendation is probably not something you're going to enjoy. These things have nothing to do with each other, but for some reason that's where our thinking goes. We're not interested in facts or the truth or anything else they have to say. They are just always going to be wrong.

In today's verses, people don't want to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Some said, "But he can't be! Will the Messiah come from Galilee? For the Scriptures clearly state that the Messiah will be born of the royal line of David, in Bethlehem, the village where King David was born" (John 7:41b-42 New Living Translation). Maybe they hadn't been told that Jesus was born in Bethlehem or that He was descended from David. On the other hand maybe they were told, but because they didn't agree with something else Jesus was doing they decided to ignore that information and say anything that would convince others not to believe in Him. If you believe that Jesus was the only perfect human that lived on this earth, you also believe that every other human is not perfect, including you and me. So that means that each of us will do or say something that is wrong or just different than what someone else thinks. I know it is hard, but let's remember that each of us will disagree with each other about something, but that doesn't mean we need to disagree about everything else we do or say.

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 27- Room For You
Read John 14:1-14

New parents go to great lengths to make sure the "baby room" is ready. When they bring their baby home, a room has been prepared for their child. When our grandchildren come over for a sleepover, they know there is room for them. When you take your family on vacation, you make a reservation to make sure there is room for your children.

In John 14:2-3 Jesus says, "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am" (NLT As a child of God, Jesus tells us when we leave this earth, a room will be prepared for us in heaven.

John 3:16 says "...everyone who believes in Him (Jesus) will not perish but will have eternal life." We know very little about what eternal life will be like, and there are few verses in the Bible that describes eternal life. All we know, as it says in the verse above, is that we will always be where Jesus is. For me, that is all I need to know.

How about you? Do you believe in Jesus and do you know in your heart that He will prepare a room for you in heaven? Don't think you are not good enough to get into heaven because of the life you lead or the things you have done. That is Satan putting those thoughts into your head, not Jesus. Our Savior tells us all we need to do is confess our sins and believe in Him--nothing more.

Bruce Walth

Day 26 – On the Eve of Crucifixion
Read John 13: 21-38

Tucked away between betrayal and disownment, Jesus proclaims the most beautiful of commands. He says “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13: 34 New International Version).

What an incredible weight of stress to carry--to know a friend is off in the night to plot your capture by enemies, to know another who proclaims their undying love will soon not even admit to knowing you, and to be aware that in a matter of hours you will endure torture at the hands of hate. Yet Christ saw beyond all this. He knew his “unfair” death would bring eternal life to everyone who would accept it, and it was worth it. Only one thing mattered amidst it all- love.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

To be like Christ is to love like him and to love each other. Amidst the complex stresses of this life, are we known by our love for one another?

Colette Leingang

Day 15 – Reflections of the Light of the World
Read John 8:1-20

Have you ever been told you resemble your father? My father passed away several years ago, but I am told frequently by those who knew him well that I am more like him each year. My cushionless knees and worn out shoulders reflect him, but I hope it is his humor or more positive image others speak of.

John 8:13-20 discusses how the Pharisees challenge Jesus in a legalese conversation. Yet, Jesus retorts how his Father in heaven and he are one. When Jesus says that he is “the Light of the World,” he is calling to us (John 8:12 New International Version) He is giving us a guiding principle that follows the message of grace over sin and condemnation. What a beautiful picture painted in John: a perfect Father who sent a sinless Son to earth to show love and forgiveness. He is our light and provides the path out of darkness. Let us reflect his light in our actions and love for others today.

Kenton Carlson

Day 16 – The Freedom of Truth
Read John 8:21-59

I like to say: The truth may set you free, but not before it stomps on you, rips you limb from limb, and sets you on fire until nothing but ash remains. The truth is painful. It shows us our failings—our sins—sometimes seemingly without compassion. As such, lies are easier to believe (to steal a line from the movie *Pretty Woman*). When we embrace lies in favor of truth, we can't help but seek to destroy that truth so we can continue believing in those lies. Jesus said as much in John 8:40, "...but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God" (English Standard Version).

At least to the Pharisees, he held nothing back when he criticized and rebuked them. They were supposed to be the "keepers" of God's Word and all the truth therein, yet they chose to believe their own lies, leading so many others to embrace those lies.

The question to ask ourselves now is, are we also embracing lies when it comes to our sins? Have we been so enslaved, that we figuratively try to destroy Jesus and the truth he came to represent? The most insidious part of sin and the lies that go with it are that they're often so subtle, we can be consciously unaware of them.

Only when we study God's word and follow Jesus can we see the truth of our deceptions, and the truth of our sinful nature. And as painful as it might be, only by embracing that truth can we free ourselves from sin. Lying and believing our lies will never solve the problems we face which far too often we create for ourselves.

Andra Marquardt

Day 25 – What Are You Doing?
Read John 13:1-20

Jesus replied, "You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will" (John 13:7 New Living Translation)

I cannot count the number of times I have looked at my particular circumstance or situation and thought, "Lord, what are you doing?!? This doesn't make any sense! How is this possibly going to work out for my good?" It's the same number of times that I've felt God answer me in much the same way as Jesus did above. Usually it's something along the lines of "back off, girl, I've got this."

In this passage, Jesus was preparing to wash his disciples' feet. When he got to Peter, Peter basically said, "Hold up, YOU are washing OUR feet?" Peter knew this situation was backward. This was not how things were supposed to be. It didn't make sense to him. Peter, though, didn't know what Jesus knew. Jesus understood perfectly what his future held. He knew what this teaching moment would mean to these men in the next few days and to us centuries later.

You may not understand what you're going through right now. This situation may seem as ridiculous and backward as Jesus washing your feet. However, you can be assured that our Savior knows exactly what he's doing and you'll see it someday too.

Bethany Whitworth

Day 24 – A Moment of Shame
Read John 12:20-50

Because I'm not a sports fan, when my son plays in pep band during school games, I drop him off and go to the local coffee shop to write. Tonight I felt a moment of shame bringing out my Bible to write this devotion. I didn't want anyone to think ill of me because *gasp* I'm a Christian. I took it out, but I was also grateful that the cover is polka-dotted and the title is on the spine only. Terrible, isn't it? How can I be expected to show Jesus to those who need him most if I'm uncertain about plopping my Bible on a table in a crowd of people who'll likely never give me a second glance?

Because God's timing is always perfect and proves again and again how I can't hide the most fleeting thoughts from him, he hit me with the following verse: "... but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue" (John 12:42b English Standard Version). I don't think God expected me to stand on a table in the middle of the shop and scream, "Repent for the end is near!" What he did (and does) expect, however, is that I be ready at all times to speak about Jesus and what he's done for me. There's no room for shame if I'm truly faithful.

We need not fear as yet of "being put out of the synagogue," so we have no excuses to be ashamed of Jesus. Our lives should be our testing ground of exercising and growing our faith. Regardless, we must stand for him without shame, fear, or apology because even if we are "put out of the synagogue," we walk instead into God's embrace.

Andra Marquardt

Day 17 – Who Has Sinned?
Read John 9:1-12

Growing up, my mom told both my sister and me one thing: "You can do whatever you want, but you will also take responsibility for everything you do. I will not save you." Harsh words, but wise ones. Because we knew our mom wouldn't save us from our misdeeds, we didn't get into (much) trouble. Both of us thought of the consequences before acting—at least when it came to the big, life-altering choices.

By the same token, when something bad happens, the first questions I ask are, "What did I do to bring this upon myself? Did I anger God in some way? Have I an unconfessed sin that He's trying to show me and convince me to repent of it?" In some cases, sure. Other times, however, no matter what I've done in the past, I could face a heartbreaking tragedy or illness. In fact, the odds are in my favor that I will face many more hardships that could break me regardless of my actions.

The questions I ask are nothing new. In John 9, the disciples asked Jesus who was responsible for a man's blindness: him or his parents. Jesus responded, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3 English Standard Version). We, like the disciples, often see hardship and tragedy as a punishment for wrongdoing. How, then, do we address our hardships when they're not our fault? The same way Jesus did. He showed the disciples that the man's life-long struggle with blindness was a perfect vehicle to show God's love, care and grace—that no one and no thing is beyond God's healing, and how all praise for healing (physical or spiritual) belongs to Him.

Andra Marquardt

Day 18 – Seeing and Believing

Read John 9:13-41

In today's text, the Pharisees, even after hearing the man's testimony, still didn't believe. They were still blinded so much that they threw the man out. Verse 34 shows that the Pharisees still believed that the man's blindness was caused by sin; therefore, he had no right to lecture them, so they threw him out on his ear.

Keep in mind, up to this point in the Scripture, the blind man was still thinking that Jesus was just a prophet. That Jesus was simply a man who made some mud, put it over his eyes, and told him to go wash it off.

Have you ever heard someone say, "I'll believe it when I see it?" Perhaps you have said the same thing. The Pharisees heard this man's testimony; they had even witnessed Christ's miracles, and yet they still were blinded and didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah. All it took for the former blind man to believe was Jesus telling him: "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you" (John 9:37 New International Version).

Kevin Sailer

Day 23 – Broader Vision

Read John 12:1-19

But Judas said, "That perfume was worth a year's wages. It should have been sold and the money given to the poor" (John 12:5 New Living Translation).

Sometimes, I have really great ideas. My brainstorming is creative and brilliant. My thoughts and suggestions could solve the world's problems. If global leaders would just ask me, I could tell them what should be done. I sometimes think I know best. Later on, I find out my suggestions majored on the minor, as the saying goes. Have you ever felt that way about yourself?

While Jesus was in Bethany (great name for a town), his friend Mary put expensive perfume on her Lord's travel-weary feet. Judas, regardless of what we know about his character and future, felt the money spent on the perfume could have been used better elsewhere. He thought he knew best, just like me. His suggestion of giving the money to the poor wasn't a bad one. Helping the poor was one of Jesus' main teachings. It's a noble cause, but not so noble as Mary honoring and loving Jesus in the way she did. Mary knew what was most important in that moment. Judas made a valid and worthy point, but he missed the major meaning.

This portion of scripture is a great reminder for me to take a step back when I think I know what is best. In reassessing the situation, I may find that there is a major theme or idea that I missed. Father, give me Mary's priorities and broader vision.

Bethany Whitworth

Day 22 – Have Faith
Read John 11: 38-57

My wife and I have different ways of fixing things. If something breaks, she tends to be the one that is ready to call someone right away. My first inclination is to Google how to fix it and try to do it myself. Earlier on in our marriage, my wife was usually hesitant about letting me try to fix things. We've been married over 16 years, and I don't know if she could tell you a time that I tried to fix something and made it worse. Now, she is much more apt to let me try before calling someone, but every once in a while, it's like she forgets that I can be handy.

When Jesus stood in front of the tomb where Lazarus was buried, we find Martha acting like she forgot who she was talking to. Just 12 verses earlier, Martha is saying that, yes, she believes Jesus is the Messiah. Then, in verse 39, Martha reverts to her typical thinking. We don't want to remove the stone. It's going to stink! We don't get to read about Martha's reaction after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, but I bet it was similar to my wife's response when I fix something she was ready to call someone about. In those instances, her response is usually, "How did I ever doubt you?" As we go through our week, let's have faith and not forget the words Jesus spoke to Martha. "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

Jeremy Skoglund

Day 19 – Christ is Our Shepherd
Read John 10:1-21

I am a child of the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis. I had a very real fear of the Russians invading my neighborhood. My plan was to hide in Mrs. Meyer's dense hedge or to use my superpowers. I dreamed almost every night that if I stood with my back to our giant cottonwood tree, stood stick straight, clenched my fist and willed it to happen, I could levitate to the upper branches. Surely the Russians would never think to look in the hedge or up in the tree for me!

Don't we all want to be in a safe place? How reassuring it is to know that Christ is our shepherd, always with us, answering our calls – day or night – listening to our every word, keeping us safe from invasion and corruption at the hand of the enemy. How blessed we are to have Him leading the way. May we have the courage to listen to His voice and follow Him through the gate.

Patty VerDouw

Day 20 – Eyes Wide Open
Read John 10:22-42

The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.” John 10: 24-25 (New International Version)

Do you believe? Do you REALLY believe? For me, despite my upbringing, all the sermons I have heard at church, and miracles I have witnessed in my life, I can’t say that I always truly believe that Jesus is the Messiah, every minute of every day.

I still have experiences that make me question whether it is true. When I see true suffering, or the inequality that exists in the world (or even in our community), I have sneaking thoughts that this all might be a lie. I sometimes feel that it cannot be true, despite what I have learned, because there are still a lot of bad things that happen to good people.

The problem with this is that in these times, I’m reverting to a backward way of thinking. Yes, bad things happen. That is the nature of a world infused with sin and imperfection. However, when I open my eyes, I see the great things that we, the body of Christ, are able to do. When we act in the image of Jesus, following his example to do good works with the Spirit of God, we are able to bring relief to suffering and balance the inequality by giving our excess so that others might have what they need.

When the negative thoughts creep in, remember the evidence you have seen in your life. The good deeds, great or small, coming from those working for God’s mission have more power to change the world than most of us realize. The evidence is right in front of us – the key is opening our eyes to see it.

Aaron Van Ningen

Day 21 – Do You Believe?
Read John 11:1-37

“I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11: 26-27 New Living Translation).

When I was young, if you asked my Dad, he was never going to die. My Mom pleaded with him to write a will, take care of his health, and plan for the end of life. He always told us to just dig a hole and use him like a fence post, if and when he ever left us. He just could not bring himself to accept the reality of death.

Dad became active in the church in his fifties and I know he believed that Jesus was the resurrection and the life. My dad was sick exactly 40 days with cancer. He wanted to believe his doctor who continually reassured him that there was hope and a cure was ahead.

It was when the family had gathered, asked for the blessing of the sick, and had gotten a will and power of attorney ready for his signature, that he finally realized that death was imminent. He quit eating the next day. He was made as comfortable as possible and spoke of being halfway up the stairway to heaven, visiting with his friends, relatives, and parents as he ascended. On the last day he was speaking, I asked him if he could see heaven. “Oh yes!” he replied.

Doesn’t it all come down to saying yes to Christ’s question? Do you believe that He is the resurrection and the life? Don’t we all want to say, “Oh yes!” May we all come to life and be alive in Him.

Patty VerDouw