



SEEING JESUS

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

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A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL BY
THE PEOPLE OF EASTBROOK CHURCH



INTRODUCTION

When you read through the Bible there are remarkable connections that God has woven through its pages. From century to century, through a diverse group of authors, God has provided a consistent message of love, justice, grace, redemption and hope.

In particular, it is amazing to see the way God used His prophets to provide glimpses of His ultimate solution to our greatest problem, sin. Time and again God placed clues about the coming Messiah in the prophets' messages, preparing us to encounter Jesus. From His birth to His death (and everything before, during and after!) God used the prophets to paint a portrait of the Christ, the Messiah that would bring salvation to His people among all the nations.

The devotional booklet you hold in your hands is a forty-day guide written by people within the Eastbrook family to help us draw near to Jesus Christ as we prepare ourselves for the joys of Easter. Traditionally, this journey is called Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and carrying forward to Easter Sunday. Lent is shaped as a forty-day journey, echoing the forty-year journey of Israel to the Promised Land and Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness, intending to lead us into deeper engagement with God through prayerful reflection and reading of Scripture.

This year, our Lenten devotional will trace these glimpses and clues as they bring into focus the Hope of our salvation: Jesus, the promised Messiah. Each week explores a particular theme through a series of prophecies. The daily readings will include both an Old Testament prophecy and a New Testament scripture that echoes, expands, or clarifies it.

And so, we enter into this forty-day journey during the season of Lent, inviting God to paint a clearer picture of His plan for the world. Through prophecy and fulfillment, we will explore Jesus' incarnation, His mission, earthly work, and suffering, as well as what is still to come: the fullness of God's Kingdom and the final judgment.

May God grow all of us as we embark on this journey together.

Matt Erickson

Senior Pastor, Eastbrook Church

HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

1. Plan a 15-minute window each day when you can thoughtfully do the daily reading. Set a time, create a pattern, and stick to it for the Lenten season.
2. Decide whether you want to invite your friends, family, or small group to join you.
3. Begin each day by reading the Scripture passage printed at the top of each page.
4. Read the devotional and reflect on it. Use the “Dig Deeper” questions to talk about it with someone else or to journal on your own.
5. The “Family Talk” section of the devotional (p. 60-67) is written for, and addressed to, elementary-age kids. Each page introduces the week’s theme in a kid-friendly way. After you complete each week’s readings from Genesis, you can discuss the “Family Talk” questions together.
6. Use the online version of the devotional readings to reach out to friends online and around the world. Invite them to follow along with you during Lent this year. Find the online version with sharable graphics at eastbrook.org/seeingjesus. Use Eastbrook’s Facebook page (facebook.com/eastbrookchurch) and other social media outlets such as Twitter and Instagram ([@eastbrookchurch](https://twitter.com/eastbrookchurch)) to share ideas. Post your comments, thoughts, and questions in the online version. Read others’ comments. This is a great way to learn from the perspectives of others.

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WEEK 1

SEEING THE INCARNATION OF JESUS

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

Week One begins, appropriately enough, with some of the more familiar prophecies associated with the Messiah, those associated with His birth and incarnation. Passages indicating where the Messiah would be born, how they would know to be ready for His arrival and even a reference of an early trip His family would take all were recognized by the early church as messages of confirmation and hope that Jesus was the Promised One of God.

As you read these passages, you will see how intentionally God worked out His plan for our salvation. You will see the great love He shows us through the prophecy and fulfillment of the incarnation of Jesus, the Messiah.

THE SIGN OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Read Malachi 4:5-6 and Matthew 11:10-15

"This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist..." (Matthew 11:10-11)¹

One of the greatest commendations Jesus ever offers about a human being was what He says about John the Baptist. Jesus affirmed that there was really no one quite like John.

Even with that great commendation, John the Baptist knew clearly **who he was** and **who he wasn't**. That understanding shaped the way he lived and ministered. When John was questioned by religious leaders about his identity, he makes it clear that he is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Great Prophet promised in Deuteronomy. Instead, he says, *"I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'"* (John 1:23). John echoes that later in his ministry when he said to his disciples: *"You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him'"* (John 3:28). He was not the Messiah but the one who prepares for the Messiah's coming. John knew **who he was** and **who he wasn't**.

Not only that, John knew who the Messiah was – Jesus of Nazareth – and he sought to direct attention to Jesus. The most memorable example was when Jesus passed by and John exclaimed to his followers, *"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (1:29).

In many ways, John the Baptist is an appropriate focus for the beginning of our Lenten journey with the Hebrew prophets. John is a prophet, and he is a prophet foretold in the earlier Hebrew prophets. As with all the biblical prophets, John directs attention to the One who deserves it most. As we begin this Lenten journey of seeing Jesus in the Hebrew prophets, let's follow John the Baptist's words and gestures to focus on Jesus as the promised Messiah of God.

DIG DEEPER:

- What stands out to you about John's attitude about himself in relation to Jesus?
- How might we learn from John about directing attention to Jesus in our own lives?

SACRED CONCEPTION

Read Isaiah 7:10-15 and Luke 1:35

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those born under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons." (Galatians 4:4-5 ESV)

Evangelical Christians tend to be very cautious discussing Mary that she is nearly invisible in conversation and preaching. Yet upon her was bestowed arguably the greatest of all God's gifts: to bear the human nature of the second person of the Trinity. In an instant, the divine Logos was joined to a single cell, for, *"in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form"* (Colossians 2:9). This is mind-boggling.

In Isaiah 7:14 the prophet uses the powerful word *"Behold!"* (Hebrew *hinneh*) which means pay attention: something big is going to happen in the future. *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and will call his name Immanuel"* (Isaiah 7:14). The sign is Hebrew, *immanu-el*, God with us. This name is unmistakable. No other child could be "God with us" than the Messiah. We are told that Gabriel was sent to a virgin (Greek *parthenos*) who told her *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you"*—the same phrase used in Acts 2:2 at Pentecost—a violent rushing wind would come upon her.

In 2020, someone will be chosen to carry the Olympic torch—one of the greatest honors on earth. Yet Mary was chosen from among the billions of all women of all centuries to bear the Son of God, the Messiah, The King of Kings. I am inspired by Mary's response to all of this. When she is told she is the one chosen to carry out this prophecy, she simply replies, *"I am the Lord's servant..."* (Luke 1:38).

About Mary, theologian Hermann Bavinck wrote, "She has been given an honor that has not been given to any other creature. She far surpassed men and angels in the undeserved **grace** bestowed upon her."² We've all been given gifts of grace by God...talents, relationships, opportunities to serve. May we, as Mary did, humbly respond to God with willing hearts eager to serve Him fully.

DIG DEEPER:

- Mary, this humble girl from the Middle East, did nothing to earn this honor. She was much graced. Have you considered the unimaginable grace that has been bestowed upon you? List ways God has graced you. How will you use them to serve Him?

CALLED OUT

Read Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:13-15

As a little girl, my twin sister and I loved to play while my mother shopped in the department store. We would hide in the clothes racks or dance in front of the dressing room tri-fold mirrors, enthralled with the multiple reflections of ourselves. One time, I remember crawling out from inside a circular clothes rack, only to realize that I was lost. My little heart panicked. Then, I heard a familiar voice calling out my name, beckoning to me. I followed the voice and ran into the arms of my searching mom.

Today's verses give three glimpses into God's Great Plan. In these verses, we see how God desires to call His people out.

Glimpse 1: Hosea 11:1 refers to the historical deliverance of God's people out of slavery in Egypt; Israel is called out of bondage. Yet, Hosea 11:1 is also a prophecy of what will happen 800 years after Hosea's time.

Glimpse 2: Matthew records how Hosea's prophecy is fulfilled when Jesus, who was sent to Egypt as a young child to escape death at the hands of a jealous Herod, was called out of Egypt and back to Israel.

Glimpse 3: God desires to call us out of our spiritual bondage to sin and death. Like a loving Father, God calls to His wayward children, and we must decide whether we will hide, turn our backs on Him and walk away, or respond to His call.

DIG DEEPER:

- God has always been in the business of tenderly, patiently and persistently calling to His children. In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve willingly sinned, God called out to them, asking, "Where are you?" If He asked you this question today, how would you answer?
- Is there something God is calling you out of and/or into so that you can fulfill His plan?

BETHLEHEM, THE UNIMPORTANT TOWN

Read Micah 5:2-4 and Matthew 2:4-6

"The Lord says, 'Bethlehem Ephrathah, you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah. But out of you will come for me a ruler over Israel.'" (Micah 5:2a NIV)

Today we get to see Jesus in the minor prophet of Micah. We then see this prophecy fulfilled in Matthew. The Messiah would be born in the town of Bethlehem. But why did God choose Bethlehem as the birthplace of His son? Does it really matter where the Messiah was born?

God always meets us where we are. Where we come from is important to us. It tells stories about us before our story even begins. I grew up in Milwaukee, but I was born in Texas. That's where my parents came from. That's why random, southern words come out of my mouth occasionally. That's why I was very confused as a kid the first time I heard someone ask for the "bubler."

God was setting up the scene from the beginning to help us understand who He is and that this Savior is for everyone.

In Micah, the Lord says this about Bethlehem: *"you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah"* (Micah 5:2 NIV). That's where He chose for His son to be born, in an unimportant town.

We know that Bethlehem became the home of Ruth the moabite widow, who married Boaz (Ruth 4:11). We know that King David was from Bethlehem, a shepherd boy anointed to be King of Israel (1 Samuel 16). And we know that Bethlehem is the ancestral home of Joseph the carpenter, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Each one of these people are part of the line of Jesus.

God shows us through this town and its inhabitants that He wasn't coming to just save those with a great resume, or those who are financially stable, or the Jews, but everyone. So He came, God with us, Immanuel: Jesus our Savior, born in Bethlehem.

DIG DEEPER:

- How do you better understand the love of God because He chose His son to be born in an unimportant town?
- Do you view people or think about people differently based on where they were born? How can you grow in the ability to see them the way God does?

WEEK 2

SEEING THE MISSION OF JESUS

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

Throughout Scripture we read descriptions that shake us. We read of the brokenness and sin in the world, and of people who commit horrific acts of violence and destruction against others. And we know that our Savior is deeply troubled as well. God even describes His relationship with the nation of Israel as that of a man seeking to remain faithful to a promiscuous and unfaithful bride. And yet, the prophets tell us there is hope in this story. It's a story about a God who made a covenant with His people, even while knowing they would disobey Him. A God who loves the world and shows immeasurable compassion.

Throughout the prophets we catch glimpses of a God who would go so far as to enter our sinful world. Jesus would know our weaknesses, see the injustice in the world, and would ultimately bring peace through the Cross. The mission and purpose of Jesus is and has always been to write a story of reconciliation and a story of hope, one that we see through the prophets.

ENDURING HOPE

Read Isaiah 42:1-4 and Matthew 12:15-21

"He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope." (Isaiah 42:4)

I've loved reading stories ever since I could remember. My mom and I would go to the library and I would pick out as many books as I could stack in my arms even before I could read on my own. I loved the process of reading through a story and getting lost in the character's world. Being part of a narrative, a story so much larger than yourself, was something I frequently thought about, wanting to be similar to the heroes from my favorite books and movies.

In our world today, it's easy to lose hope at what surrounds us. If we view our lives in the sense of just our own individual story, it's easy to get lost in the mundane of our lives; often we're surrounded by discomfort and pain that we go through. I frequently have to slow down and remind myself that I am part of a narrative so much larger than myself—that of God's story of redemption—and how grateful I am to play a part in His story. In the Old Testament, a lot of the writing from the prophets reference this narrative: of God's steadfast love to a people who are quick to turn away, again and again. Despite their failings then, as well as our shortcomings now, God still invites us to be part of His narrative of restoration and hope.

I'm grateful that Jesus doesn't falter or become discouraged with the injustice in the world, because I know I certainly can be. He knew what He was stepping into when He came into our world filled with injustice and pain. And the narrative of Scripture and the writings of the Old Testament prophets tell the overarching story of how we have such a God who will meet us in this world we live in, and will eventually establish justice on earth.

DIG DEEPER:

- Take some time this week to intentionally slow down and reflect on your own story. How does your life story fit in with God's overarching narrative of redemption and hope for the world?
- Are there parts of this story that you've lost hope in? How can you let God into that suffering to bring healing to your heart?

SEEK THE LORD, SEEK JUSTICE

Read Amos 5:21-24 and Matthew 12:3-7

"Let justice flow like a river, and righteousness like a never-ending stream!" (Amos 5:24)

Amos, one of the minor prophets, brought the word of the Lord to the Israelites under the reign of King Jeroboam II. At this time, the Israelites were committing injustices against the poor, which included selling the poor into debt slavery and denying them legal representation. Amos reveals the hypocrisy of the wealthy Israelites and religious leaders and delivers them a message from the Lord: *"I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me"* (5:21). Seeking the Lord is intimately connected with seeking justice for the poor and oppressed. You can't have one without the other. Amos goes on to say, *"Let justice flow like a river, and righteousness like a never-ending stream"* (5:24). This is true worship.

Similarly, when Jesus walked this earth, He turned the tables on the religious leaders' beliefs about following God's law. The religious leaders were concerned with following the letter of law, while Jesus was concerned with the law of love. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees were trying to catch the disciples doing work on the Sabbath. In Jesus's defense of the disciples, he quotes Hosea, *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice"* (Matthew 12:7). Religious acts and ceremonies mean nothing without the presence of mercy, justice, and love for my neighbor.

Today, we can read countless news articles about people who are experiencing injustice, even in our own backyard. It's easy to become numb. Amos's message to the Israelites is one that we need today. If I go through the religious motions, such as going to church or reading the Bible, but am not opening my eyes to injustices of the world and taking action, then I am not following God's call to love the Lord with all my heart and love my neighbor as myself.

DIG DEEPER:

- Why do you think it is often easier to pursue religious "rules" than to see God's justice?
- What is a justice issue in your community you believe God would want you to learn more about?

IF I WERE KING OF THE FOREST...

Read Jonah 4:1-11 and John 3:16-17

"If I were king of the forest," the Cowardly Lion sang, things would happen the way I want them to. Maybe you've sung that song with me, questioning God and His ways, holding on to resentment and self-righteousness.

Jonah wanted to be king of his forest, too. If he were king, he would judge sinners—those different from him and his people. Those that were not just bad, but wicked and evil.

Nineveh embodied evil for Jonah. They were deserving of God's punishment, wrath, and destruction. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, known for ruthlessness and an archenemy of Israel. Jonah would rather die than preach repentance to them!

Why such a dramatic response? Because Jonah knew his God. God called him to cry against Nineveh *"for their wickedness has come up before Me"* (1:1). But Jonah also knew that God was *"a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity"* (4:2). Calamity was what Jonah wanted, not forgiveness.

Jonah fled from the presence of God, almost drowned, and was saved by a fish. All orchestrated by God. He finally obeyed. He didn't stick around but watched from a distance. The Ninevites repented, God relented, and Jonah was furious.

God had pity on Nineveh, but He cared about Jonah, too. Through a plant, a worm, and heat, Jonah was mad enough to die. God grilled him that Jonah might grow in his faith.

God is not wanting anyone to perish. Not the Ninevites, and not those we think deserve exclusion and condemnation. In sending His son, the whole world is invited into everlasting life (and growth) with Him.

DIG DEEPER:

- Have you been angry with God? How has your desire to be "king of the forest" prevented you from being used by God in boldness, forgiveness, and grace?
 - Are there people that you think deserve God's judgment and that you refuse to see as made in God's image? Don't flee from them or from God; ask for His help now.
-

A QUESTION WITH ONLY ONE ANSWER

Read Micah 7:18-20 and John 8:12

There is certainly much Scripture preceding Micah 7:18 but if you would allow the question in the first half of the verse to stand alone for a bit, we would all do well to ponder and chew on it for a while.

It reminded me of a preacher, who through humbled anguish and a quivering voice, offered the question “What love is this?” during a sermon for his listeners to wrestle with while meditating on the Cross of Christ. These are the types of questions that ought to not just cause us to pause for a half-hearted second the way we would glance at a frivolous post, but rather bring us to an impasse that refuses to let us continue until we have earnestly wrestled with the magnitude of what is being presented.

Seriously, “Who is this?” How can our loathsome selves ever think that we deserve any level of forgiveness, let alone a complete and total pardon? Just look at us. And therein lies the beauty of the prophet’s message. He is pointing to a “solution” that can only be God Himself, and thus validating the “will” statements in verses 19 and 20.

Back to our key question...who could possibly accomplish this? Only the “*Light of the World!*” (John 8:12).

DIG DEEPER:

- In what way does the “Who is a God like you?” question resonate with you? What about God blows your mind as you consider how counter to our expectations He can be?

WHY?

Read Hosea 1:2-10 and John 1:12

"In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'children of the living God.'" (Hosea 1:10)

Have you ever endured a heartache and wondered why God allowed it? Are you ever so bewildered by circumstances that you ask God *why*?

Why would God ask Hosea to marry a prostitute? Why would he remain devoted to a wife who was unfaithful? Adding insult to injury, why did God bring judgment? Hosea was obedient, so why should he suffer? It's simply not fair! As perplexing as suffering is, Hosea is a comfort, for he shows us who God is: the Great Lover of our soul! Pure and unconditional, God's love is deep and wide, reaching out to the whore, the unfaithful, the sinner, people like me and you. Sadly, Gomer shows us who we are; the harlot, who gets wooed away into the arms of idolatry.

Why are bad lovers, like Fear, Pride, Anger, Self-Entitlement, and Self-pity...so seductive? Why are we tempted to turn away from God's love? Gomer's bad choices must have been a painful blow to Hosea, just as our unfaithfulness is like a slap in God's holy face! After all Hosea did for Gomer, adultery must have felt like an arrow straight into his heart. Similarly, after all God has done for us, our sin must feel like a stab in His back! God has every reason to be a scorned lover, to make us, the guilty ones, pay, but His contempt for us was poured out completely, on Jesus, at the Cross.

Why? "Because this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (1 John 3:16). His arms were stretched out wide for us and remain held out for the world around us. Are you willing to take up your cross and suffer for His name's sake, so that others may know how loved and forgiven they are?

DIG DEEPER:

- Is God asking you to do something that feels impossible? Forgive someone who has wounded you? Love someone who is difficult? Consider Luke 7:36-50 and ponder how forgiven you are so that you, too, can become a person who is empowered to love much. What will your first step of obedience in this direction be?

JESUS, OUR PEACE

Read Micah 5:3-5a and Ephesians 2:11-18

"And he will be our peace" (Micah 5:5a)

We all long for peace. We long for wholeness, completeness, safety, and soundness. As far as I can remember, I have always longed for an end to hostility and war between siblings, parents, friends and even nations. I long for peace.

Peace was missing from the Israelites during the time of the prophet Micah because of their sin against God. They hate good and love evil (Micah 3:2a) and they *"despise justice and distort all that is right"* (Micah 3:9b). Therefore, Micah warned that Israel would be punished and taken into exile. Praise God that Micah also mentioned that a leader would come, sent by God who will save them from their enemies and bring peace. He Himself will be their peace (Micah 5:5a).

This leader is Jesus. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus brought peace, not just to the Israel, but also to the whole world by saving us from the principalities and forces of evil that enslaved us. He reconciled us back to God and one another. Ephesians 2:13-14 states, *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."* The prophet Isaiah also proclaims that Jesus is our Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) and mentions in chapter 53:5b that *"the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds, we are healed."*

Jesus is our peace. He has and will bring an end to all hostility and war. The peace I long for is in Christ alone. C.S Lewis notes, "God (Jesus) cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."³

DIG DEEPER:

- Where in your life do you most need to experience the peace that Christ can bring?
- Where else have you sought this peace?
- Praise Jesus right now for His work on your behalf to give you peace and reconcile you back to God and others.

HOPE IN CHRIST

Read Malachi 3:1-3, Luke 1:17, and John 2:13-17

"And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:17)

My mother told me many times as I was growing up to 'hope for the best but prepare for the worst.' I listened to her words and hoped to always be prepared just like a Girl Scout. What I didn't understand at that time was that these words would cloud my view of God. Was I really believing in the promises of God or in the salvation offered by Jesus if deep down I was working hard to make sure that I gained God's love and eternal life? Once I chose to believe that God's word is true, His promises are real, and that salvation is Jesus' gift, I didn't need to prepare for the worst any longer. I also didn't need to hope for the best because I can put my hope in Christ (Romans 5:5).

Malachi, 'my messenger,' brings two messages to the people: God is displeased with His people and He is going to send a messenger. Malachi points toward the coming of John the Baptist 400 years before his birth. John was *"to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"* (Luke 1:17). Jesus came with a purpose and a mission to reconcile the world to the Father and give us hope. From the beginning God had a plan to restore us through His son—His plan not ours. We need not hope for the best for the **best** has already been provided.

DIG DEEPER:

- How has a belief from your past been changed by a new understanding of the Gospel?
- Find scriptures to combat this skewed thinking and present the true picture of God, Jesus, His character. Write them down.

WEEK 3

SEEING THE EARTHLY WORK OF JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

This week's devotionals focus on how the Prophets described the future earthly work of the Messiah. From how He would be recognized (through healing and the miraculous power of the Spirit) to how He would be received (as a stumbling block to some, understanding by others), they spoke of a Messiah that would be discerned by those seeking God.

Jesus Himself would call to mind some of their more direct descriptions, whether as evidence in which John the Baptist would find hope, or as confirmation to the sermons He would share in the synagogues and by the waysides. The work of the Messiah as He walked the earth was to bring a glimpse of God's restoring work to His people. The prophets foretold it and Jesus lived it.

YOUR SIXTH SENSE...THE HOLY SPIRIT

Read Isaiah 6:9-10 and Matthew 13:13-15

"This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" (Matthew 13:13-15)

If you had to give up just one of your five senses, which would it be: the ability to touch, see, hear, smell, or taste? Tough decision isn't it? The interesting thing is that our senses are actually very subjective and quite personal. It is apparent in our society today that many people can "see" the same situation in a multitude of different ways. People can hear the same story or fact, yet their interpretations can be the polar opposite. The reality is that our personal life experiences truly have an effect on how we interpret the sensations of our senses. Therefore, relying purely on our senses to see, hear, or feel God working in our lives or in those around us can be deceiving.

In Matthew 13:13-15, the disciples ask Jesus why He teaches in parables. Jesus refers directly to the foreshadowing words of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 6:9-10. Jesus explains that we can "see," but don't really perceive what God is showing us; we "hear" what God is saying but don't want to truly understand God's meaning for our lives; and lastly, our hearts have become calloused, therefore not allowing us to receive the healing and blessings that God has for us. Jesus points to the fact that our earthly senses can impede us from experiencing God to the fullest.

1 Corinthians 2: 9-10 emphasizes the point of not relying on our senses, but allowing the Holy Spirit to act as God's interpreter. Paul writes, *"What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God."*

DIG DEEPER:

- Let's challenge ourselves to put aside our earthly senses and make a conscious effort to consult (pray) with the Holy Spirit first to gain God's true meaning in our lives.
 - Are your senses blinding you from seeing something God is trying to show you? Are you deaf to the calling of God in your life? What can you do to be more aware of what God may be showing you?
-

TURN

Read Isaiah 9:1-2 and Matthew 4:12-17

“Repent, the kingdom of God is near.” (Matthew 4:17)

A few years ago, our family traveled west and visited Wind Cave, a huge cave complex beneath the South Dakota prairie. From sun and warmth, the park ranger led us through a door in a hill to descend deep into a labyrinth of rock passages and chambers with crevasses and dead ends. After 20 minutes of hiking, our guide stopped us and turned off the lights. We froze. With no light, there was no way back home.

The Bible says our sinful condition is like this. We are lost in the dark, far from our home with our Heavenly Father. We cannot restore ourselves. Israel, chosen among the nations, was a case in point. But God had a plan. The prophet, Isaiah, told of a light that would come to those living in darkness. Matthew reveals that Jesus fulfills these words as He begins to preach, and His earthly ministry starts with a call to turn from sin. *“Repent, the kingdom of God is near”* (Matthew 4:17). The way home—the way out of darkness—is to turn to Jesus and His rule: to love Him and to love your neighbor.

As God does His restoring work in me, I’ve found this turning must be done daily or hourly, sometimes easily, sometimes not. This last week, my will to keep my plans and prove my own rightness has battled against a call to extend love and grace to my neighbor. I cannot say that love for my neighbor erupted in my heart and won the day, but I can say that love and trust of our King did. I turn to Him because His ways are good, His Kingdom is good and He loves me. Praise the Light of the World, who leads us out of darkness back to our home with Him!

DIG DEEPER:

- What is an area of darkness God is calling you out of?
- What would it look like for the light of Jesus to transform this area of your life?

JESUS IS THE ROCK

Read Isaiah 8:14 and 1 Peter 2:7-8

"He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." (Psalm 40:2)

I have been challenged in looking deeper into these passages from both the Old and the New Testaments which depict Jesus as the "rock" that makes people stumble. Usually when God gives me a message it is one of giving comfort and hope. Here the prophet Isaiah tells us of the dire consequences if we fail to heed God's warnings. After Peter tells of Jesus being a "precious stone" to those who believe, he uses Isaiah's passage to emphasize that this same precious stone will bring those people who walk in disobedience to ruin.

In Michael Card's song, "Scandalon" (which means stumbling block), he sings this truth of who Jesus is:

He will be the truth that will offend them one and all
A stone that makes men stumble
And a rock that makes them fall
Many will be broken so that He can make them whole
And many will be crushed and lose their own soul⁴

For those who believe, we see Jesus as the precious "solid rock" on which we stand: the rock that cannot be shaken, cannot be moved. For those who do not believe, they will trip and stumble and ultimately fall over this precious stone never seeing its value, never to receive the hope and comfort to those who believe.

God's Word is timeless and changeless. What a danger we face if we choose to look at only that which makes us feel good. The ploys of the "enemy of our souls" would have us take our eyes off of the Rock where our salvation is secure, and delightfully see us stumble and fall into hopelessness and despair.

Yet, we are not without hope. In Psalm 40, the psalmist reminds those who put their hope in Jesus that they will be lifted out of the pit and the mud and the mire and placed on the solid Rock!

DIG DEEPER:

- If Jesus is your changeless rock, how does that impact your relationship with Him?
 - What was an aspect of following Jesus that at first was a "rock" you stumbled over? What changed about that for you?
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THE MERCIFUL WORK OF THE MESSIAH

Read Isaiah 35:5-6 and Matthew 11:2-6

*"Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."
(Matthew 11:6)*

John the Baptist preached that the Messiah would come in fiery judgment and glorious restoration. Jesus, filled with the Spirit, was working in Galilee among sinners. He intimately and compassionately showed God's mercy in teaching, preaching good news, healing and restoring life. John, in prison for rebuking Herod, heard of these works and struggled with how Jesus was working. He reached out to Jesus and received what he needed most: hope in Jesus as His works fulfilled Isaiah's messianic prophecy.

The mercy in Jesus' work continued and would bring forth freedom from sin and death through His sacrificial death and resurrection. As believers, we acknowledge our desperate need for God and His mercy. In this fallen world, we need God's compassion, love and help in doing what we cannot do for ourselves. God is at work in His loving-kindness toward us in forgiveness and steadfast love though we are unfaithful and undeserving. In His goodwill toward us He is freeing us from sin and suffering. If we become ensnared by Satan's lies that we do not need or cannot fully receive God's mercy, we can doubt and be fearful of God. If we do not seek God's mercy anew every day, we can become prideful. These are serious stumbling blocks.

Jesus warns in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) that without His mercy working in us, we will find ourselves in prisons of our own making. If we withhold forgiveness in judgment of other people, and sow seeds of division and strife in our relationships with them, we worsen their trials and suffering. But when we love God and others in serving them as Jesus calls with compassion, kindness and forgiveness we extend His merciful work to them and are greatly blessed.

DIG DEEPER:

- How is God working in you to receive His mercy and love?
- How is Jesus calling you to mercifully love, serve and share His good news with others?

MY PERSONAL JESUS

Read Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:16-21

*"..He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners..."
(Isaiah 61:1)*

The prophecy about the Messiah must have triggered a lot of expectation for the Israelites. They wanted to be free from literal slavery and the savior they imagined had to be someone who could make it happen. I wonder if they thought that this savior could heal their broken hearts or set them free from the slavery within.

When Jesus the Messiah eventually appeared on the scene, they didn't recognize Him. They knew the prophecy (at least the teachers of the law did) but they couldn't reconcile Jesus with what the prophets said. He didn't have an army, He shared no strategies to defeat Rome: it couldn't be Him.

I had my own underestimations and confused expectations of who Jesus should be. He was first introduced to me as someone who died so that I wouldn't go to hell. Then something started happening in me as I discovered that Jesus is way more than the world's atoning sacrifice: He is my personal Jesus. He is the one who sees deep into my soul with love; He is my deliverer and my safe place. He is my reliable friend. Experiencing Jesus this way makes life worth living right now, and it gives joyful anticipation of eternity.

Jesus pointed out to everyone as He walked the earth that He came for something deeper than He would be acknowledged for. He is still trying to show us that we don't have to stay broken, and oppressed. He wants us to see that He is who we need. His sacrifice covers everything.

DIG DEEPER:

- When you reflect on the hurting spaces in your life, do you consider Jesus as your willing and able healer?
- How can you show that you truly believe He has the ability to bring healing to these areas of your life?

THY KINGDOM COME

Read Micah 3:8-12 and Matthew 12:28

“But if it is by the Spirit of God that I [Jesus] drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Matthew 12:28)

In the original Lion King movie, the hyenas are so scary-looking and genuinely dangerous; all of their intentions are evil. But when the lion (the king of the jungle) shows up, they cower in fear and back down immediately. Likewise, in the New Testament, the demons trembled in fear at the sight of Jesus. They knew that He had all power and their strongholds could no longer protect them.

We each have areas in our life that can become strongholds for evil, but Jesus is stronger! In Micah, Jerusalem and its magnificent temple became a “pile of rocks” when God allowed the Assyrians to invade and cleanse the land of Israel’s sin. I can have hope that everything is subject to God’s authority. The song “Over All I Know” by Vertical Worship captures this truth:

You tell mountains they must fall, and they fall.
You tell oceans to be still, and they’re calm.
You tell sickness it must leave, and it’s gone.
In my weakness, God I know you are strong.
You are the One above it all,
I stand in awe.
You’re the God over all I know.⁵

Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God. He had the power to dispense justice, confront evil, and win. He stood up to the hypocritical religious leaders of the day and they could not deny His supernatural power. The people loved His miracles, but His Kingdom was confusing to them.

What is the Kingdom of God like? The Kingdom of God is so unlike our world. Whether in Micah’s time, in Jesus’ time, or in our time, selfishness and injustice abound. This is the way of Satan’s kingdom. But Jesus showed us another way. His Kingdom is marked by justice, compassion, love, mercy, righteousness, and selflessness. Let Thy Kingdom come!

DIG DEEPER:

- How have you seen Jesus overcome evil in your life?
- Is there an area of your life that you need to surrender to God’s authority?

BELOVEDNESS

Read Micah 2:12-13 and John 10:14-18

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (John 10:14-15a)

"Belovedness" was a theme in my life last year. It started last spring when Pastors Marc Erickson and Stuart Briscoe spoke at Eastbrook about Christian leadership. I remember Stuart asking us whether we treat the people we work with like units of production or like the beloved sons and daughters of the King? Immediately I thought of seasons in ministry where I have felt like a unit of production...and I also thought of situations where I have failed to treat others like the beloved child of the King.

Fast-forward to last fall and I found myself on two different spiritual retreats, both of which were themed around a "theology of belovedness." I wrote in my journal that I knew God was trying to teach me something, but I didn't even know what a "theology of belovedness" looked like. Since then, I've been on a journey, awakening to the sobering fact that God calls me His beloved. Beloved is who I am. ***I am beloved.***

While the word "beloved" isn't present in today's readings, it is at work behind the scenes. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls His own sheep by name; they are not units of production, they are His beloved that He knows as well as the Father knows Him (John 10:14). Stated another way: He doesn't just know ***about*** us, He ***knows*** us in an intimate, deep way.

And this passage from John takes the prophecy in Micah a step further. The deliverance that Micah prophesied is fulfilled in Jesus' earthly work and death on the Cross, but it is no longer only for the people of Israel. John 10 states that Jesus is building a community outside of Judaism, built upon His sacrificial death on the Cross that is for ***all*** who listen to His voice (v. 16). This new community is a diverse family of God's beloved people, living in cruciformity and communion.

I still have a lot to learn about belovedness, but I do know that it is central to my identity and to God's love for me. And these passages remind me that it must also be central to how I look at and treat the diverse community of God, themselves beloved sons and daughters of the King.

DIG DEEPER:

- What about your life would cause you to doubt that you are God's beloved? Pray your doubts to God and ask Him to reveal your belovedness to you today.
 - How does knowing that God calls you His "beloved" change your posture towards others?
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WEEK 4

SEEING JESUS AS ETERNAL KING OF THE NATIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

Since the beginning of time and throughout the entire Bible, God's heart has always been that the nations would be His and that His name would be known and lifted high among every people group. Jesus came to this earth to be a Savior for the nations and bring the Good News to both Jew and Gentile alike, so that all would know and find new life in Him.

Interwoven through the passages you will read this week is the great desire that all would know and submit to Him as Lord. Jesus has come to fulfill this great prophecy and will return to ensure that every tribe, tongue, and nation would come together to worship the Lord Almighty.

VISION OR REVISION?

Read Daniel 7:13-14 and Luke 1:31-33

"[One like a son of man] was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." (Daniel 7:14)

When God reveals His intentions through a vision, we ought to position ourselves accordingly so that we may live it out. Daniel and Mary essentially received the same vision: that the people of all nations will one day worship the Son of Man. If we remain in a place where everyone is like us, we won't see that vision fulfilled. Rather, our own vision will become stunted. We will make God small. We will come to imagine God favors us and our moment in time. We are prone, then, to a host of lies: that others do not love as we love, don't need as we need, don't suffer as we suffer. And if we manage to rouse ourselves to obedience and testify, it may be that the God we have to offer others—the God of our moment—is too small to matter.

I recently sat with a group of 22 people from 10 different countries. Everyone took time to formulate one question they would ask God if they could. Christians and non-Christians alike posed weighty questions about suffering, judgment, and evil. Even those who had no previous experience with God acknowledged that God, if He exists, is in control of everything and could answer their most pressing questions and fulfill their deepest needs. Who else among the nations is inquiring? What will it take to see them all one day worshipping the One who has all authority, glory and power?

I pray that you and I can keep in step with His spirit. He will forgive us when we falter, but woe to us if we ignore or try to revise what He long ago foretold. With or without us, His vision is coming to pass. Listen. Hear His praises rising in languages you do not understand.

DIG DEEPER:

- Break down the elements of the key verse. How might meditating on God's authority, glory, sovereign power, everlasting dominion, and indestructible kingdom affect the way you see God and other people?
- Consider that though Daniel and Mary received visions from God, we see those visions being fulfilled in ways they didn't. Given that privilege, what do you think God requires of you?

JESUS, THE KING WHO SEES US

Read Zephaniah 3:7-10 and John 1:48-49

*"How do you know me?" Jesus answered him,
"Before Philip called you.... I saw you." (John 1:48)*

Wonderful news: Jesus is the Good King who has come to bring peace to the nations, peace to our communities, and peace to our individual hearts!

When I try to share this wonderful news with my Japanese neighbors and friends, most of them think this is some story that is very far away from them. Japanese society and language have many levels of relationship and many lines drawn between what is near or inside (*uchi*) and what is far or outside (*soto*). The idea that Jesus is their King seems very far; the idea that they can decide whether to come into His Kingdom and receive His peace also seems very far. This reminds me of Nathanael. Full of skepticism, he reluctantly agrees to approach Jesus because of his friend Philip's joyful invitation. Surprised by Jesus' familiar greeting (as if they were already *uchi*), he asks the natural question: *"How do you know me?"* Jesus' answer shows that He saw Nathanael long before Nathanael had even heard of Him.

The Japanese people may feel that Jesus is very far from them; they may, like Nathanael, have no expectation that Jesus has anything to do with them. Or they may come to agree with part of Nathanael's statement, that Jesus is the King of Israel. But this view is too narrow. Jesus' rule extends from sea to sea, including Japan. He has come to bring peace to all of the nations. And perhaps most amazing of all, this great and mighty peace-bringing King actually sees each one of us. He invites us one by one to enter into the peace of His Kingdom, inside His love and care, close to His heart. No longer *soto*, through the grace poured out on the Cross, Jesus sees us, and invites us to come inside.

DIG DEEPER:

- When Jesus sees you today, what do you think He sees? Take some time to ask Him this question and then pray for the grace to agree with Him about what is beautiful in you and what needs to change.

RAISE YOUR BANNER HIGH

Read Isaiah 11:10 and John 12:18-21

*"In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious."
(Isaiah 11:10)*

Throughout the Old Testament, banners are used to identify different people groups. In Exodus 28:15-21, the Israelites are instructed by God to create banners or standards that represent each of the 12 tribes of Israel. Banners are also used to rally armies on the verge of battle as signified in Jeremiah 51:27: *"Lift up a banner in the land! Blow the trumpet among the nations! Prepare the nations for battle against [Babylon]."* Lastly, banners are used in celebration of victory. David declares in Psalm 20:5, *"May we shout for joy over your victory and lift our banners in the name of our God."* This comes as a prayer of thanksgiving that acknowledges the victory found in God alone.

Isaiah 11:10 proclaims that *"the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the people; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious."* Jesus fulfills this prophecy because He is a descendant of David, the son of Jesse. More importantly, His death on the Cross has made Him a banner for salvation, calling to not only Jews but peoples of every tribe and tongue and nation to be saved. Jesus is the banner under which we all find our identity as children of God. He is the banner we follow through the spiritual battles of this life to find strength and dignity. And He is the banner through which we have the ultimate victory.

As the church, we are called to look like Jesus. He is a banner for the nations, proclaiming the salvation that He alone can provide. We too should be a banner proclaiming the truth, righteousness, glory, and love of Christ to all peoples: men and women, Jew and Gentile, young and old. Just like the Israelites followed their banners into battle, we too must follow Jesus into the battles of this life with the knowledge that He alone can lead us to victory.

DIG DEEPER:

- How does Jesus inspire and empower you as you look to Him during tough times in your life?
- How do you think others would be inspired or rallied as they see the banner of Jesus raised in your life?

CHURCH HURT & HUMBLE WISDOM

Malachi 1:10-11 and Revelation 7:9-10

"...the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." (James 3:17-18)

Church hurts. That has been a theme in my life. First, it was about how the church hurt me or my family or people in general. I couldn't let go of the hypocrisy I witnessed. I was busy judging people who were busy judging me. Those hurts kept me away until my wife and late mother-in-law helped me understand that my problem wasn't with God, it was with people. God teaches us there are two types of wisdom: worldly and godly (James 3:13-18). My worldly wisdom was building bitterness towards the worldly religious people that surrounded me.

Later in life I would find another way church hurts: the conviction of the Holy Spirit. The very Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is in our bodies day and night! It is the kind of "hurt" that is good for me—spiritual growing pains. I don't always like it, but God is patient. God cannot stop loving people. God cannot stop loving you and me. God is teaching me to be patient, gentle, and kind.

Are we reaching out to the lost? Are we extending a hand to our brothers and sisters to resolve conflicts? Are we breaking bread with those within our church community that we normally wouldn't with our worldly wisdom? Or, do we "*show partiality*" to those with whom we interact (James 2:1-5)? These are questions that force me out of my comfort zone. Who am I inviting to the table? It is easy to sit with those that look and think like us. How much harder it is to interact with those that come from different backgrounds (spiritually, culturally, and economically). We must guard ourselves from becoming the tongue that blesses "*our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God*" (James 3:11). For God would rather have us close the doors of the church than offer useless praises to the wind (Malachi 1:10). Revelation 7:9 tells us of the multitude that will be with God. Thus, as a church, we are called to reflect that powerful and gentle image.

DIG DEEPER:

- Religious people don't always realize they are using earthly wisdom. When interacting with others, which do you use?
 - Who have you invited to the table that will help make the vision of Revelation 7 a reality? Are you willing to listen and learn from their stories?
-

UNITY TAKES WORK

Read Zechariah 8:20-23 and Revelation 5:9; 7:9-10

I think the idea of unity is a bit deceptive sometimes. Often, when I read Scripture about people from every tribe coming together in worship of the Lord, I picture a group of worshipers sitting in a sort of kum ba yah circle, mysteriously singing in English all together. But when I began to read these passages, I noticed something about unity in the Old and New Testaments. Unity takes work: it requires people to move, to journey with one another. People from all walks of life, and specifically people from different tribes and languages. Zechariah 8:21 says *"the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say 'let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going.'"* In this passage we see that the goodness of God and the greatness of His power is stirring up a desire for worship so strong that it not only causes people to journey to the house of the Lord, but also to reach out to others; to bring anyone and everyone along in this act of seeking God and asking for His blessing. Unity in Christ in the Old Testament, New Testament, and today requires believers to reach out to others, from every nation and tongue, to hold open our hands and say, "come with me to the house of the Lord! He has blessings for you too."

The best part about all of this though, is that Christ is the only one who is qualified to bring people from every tribe, tongue, and nation and create a genuine community of worship around the throne of God, because of the way that He radically loved others and sacrificed His life for us all. This is a relief to me, because left to me, unity in all tribes probably would just look like that kum ba yah circle I mentioned earlier. But because of Christ and His sacrifice, He is not only worthy to take the scroll and open it, He is also able to teach us how to reach out to one another in love; to extend a hand and invite someone into the goodness of God.

DIG DEEPER:

- Spend some time thinking about the sources you use in your devotional/ worship times... are you spending most of your time learning from, listening to, and worshipping with other believers who look, talk, and act like you? If so, ask God to open your eyes to ways that you might be able to connect with someone different from you, to begin a relationship with that person, and together discover more of what this Biblical picture of unity across the nations might be like. Identify devotional resources from another cultural perspective you can use to expand your understanding of God's Kingdom.

THE FINAL WORD

Read Isaiah 22:22 and Revelation 3:7

Four years ago, my brother John and I were waiting on a big decision from the immigration office in Chicago that was going to affect our entire life. After fleeing the civil war in Syria, coming to the U.S., and living in Milwaukee from 2014 to 2015, we still needed a final word from a judge in the immigration office to decide if we could stay in the United States or not. We were waiting on a final word. That final word was so important to us, our family, and our friends who we do life with everyday.

When I reflect on the verses of Isaiah 22:22 and Revelation 3:7 and look at the words, *"what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open,"* I know that God is in control and Jesus always has the final word. He has the final word because the authority is in His hands.

But sometimes life takes us on a crazy journey and we find ourselves facing decision-making moments that we never expected. John and I never expected to have to leave our home and come to a new country, with a language we barely knew, to a city we had never heard of. Maybe your decision-making moments are not as life-changing as that, but we all find ourselves in places or situations where we have to make decisions. Whether at work, or at home, life can sometimes seem like a series of decisions.

I want to encourage you today that Jesus has the final word over our lives and over our decisions because the authority was given to Him from the beginning. He is in control over our lives and circumstances. Trust Him. He has given us Himself and He cares about the smallest details in our lives. He has the final word. Like Psalm 37:5-6 says, *"Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun."*

Are you willing today to give Him full control and trust that He knows what's best for you? Are you willing to surrender everything and rest in His arms knowing that He has got it?

DIG DEEPER:

- What is a decision you're waiting to make or a decision you're waiting on? Is there any area of your life in which you feel "stuck"? Give these things to Jesus and let Him have the final word. All power is His and in Him every being moves. Cast your burdens on Him (Matthew 11:28-30) and trust in Him to bring you peace.

US AND THEM

Read Obadiah 15-21 and Revelation 11:15

"...And the kingdom will be the Lord's." (Obadiah 21b)

Our passage for today is not light reading. Did you know that Obadiah is the least read book of the Bible?⁶ There's not much cheer found in these 21 verses. It's about those "bad guys," Edom. **"Them."**

I live in Jerusalem, where everyone talks about "Us" and "Them." The Holy Land is fueled by hatred in every direction. I see it everyday. We want the "bad guys" to get what's coming to them! They deserve what they get! Let Edom have it! But in v. 15 it says *"The day of the Lord is near for all nations, as you have done it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head."*

Wait. Who are the bad guys again?

In Hebrew, "edom" is the same root letters as "adam" which is the word for mankind. Edom's wickedness is an example of the human condition. Mankind is the "bad guys," there really is no "Us" and "Them," the judgment is ours.

But there is hope...

In verse 17 we read, *"But on Mount Zion there will be deliverance,"* and verse 21 says, *"...and the Kingdom will be the Lord's."* Amos 9 and Joel 2 also talk about The Day of the Lord, stating God's plan to rebuild a Kingdom from David's seed; a Kingdom of salvation where everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be included! Even a remnant of Edom will be there, praising the Lord.

There is no "Us" and "Them" in God's Kingdom. The New Jerusalem will be re-populated with all the faithful and humble, all who have given their hearts to the Him...and the Kingdom will be the Lord's! As we read in Revelation 11:15: *"The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever!"*

DIG DEEPER:

- Ask yourself, who is the "Them" in your world?
- How can you join God in inviting them into His Kingdom?

WEEK 5

SEEING THE NEW KINGDOM OF JESUS

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

Each of us has countless phrases or words we might use to describe our identity and our place in the world—but the remarkable work of God's Kingdom is that it produces a new identity in us! This identity shapes how we live here on earth and when Jesus restores all of creation in His New Kingdom in the future as well.

This week's readings reveal to us how the prophets described this New Kingdom. It is a Kingdom that exchanges our old, worn rags into beautiful, fine garments and a Kingdom of full citizenship for all of God's people. This Lenten season, we live in the "now and not yet," seeing glimpses of this New Kingdom at work through the Holy Spirit's presence in God's people. Yet we also wait for a future Kingdom that will be like a refreshing, stream of life-giving water forever.

RICH GARMENTS

Read Zechariah 3:3-9 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

"The angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Take off his filthy clothes.' Then he said to Joshua, 'See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.'" (Zechariah 3:4)

I must admit that as I write this devotion it is hard for me to see myself wearing anything other than a dirty outfit.

Too often I go throughout my day wearing my sin, my blemishes, imperfections, ways that I have pained people, and ways that people have pained me. Most days the weight of my life and decisions threatens to hold me down. It tethers me to a kingdom of the temporal maze, so that I run in circles. Perhaps you can relate?

Furthermore, I often wear the filth of this world. I wear the tension of maneuvering and tightrope-walking within a culture that celebrates self-sufficiency and hard-earned perfection in place of loving relationships. I wear the grief of tragedy upon tragedy not just in the US, but also overseas. Chinese subway attacks. Continued Japanese suicides. Terror attacks in Kenya. Continued conflict in Iran. It seems that both my person and my environment carry the atmosphere of things which I would hardly consider clean. To escape it, I would have to escape the world. Perhaps you can relate?

So, what can be done? When will a new garment be shown? When will a kingdom of order, justice, and righteousness come to be? When will love become the final say and ultimate law of our lands?

Praise be to our God and Father, praise be to our Lord and Savior, and praise be to the Comforter and Keeper! He has done it, and we can hold on to Him knowing that through Christ's blood we are made citizens and ambassadors—the things of this world fall off of us when we are in His presence. In His presence, He reveals His New Kingdom and He brings out the rich garments to replace our filthy rags.

DIG DEEPER:

- What personal sins are you wearing today? What societal sins are you wearing? Confess these before your Father and gesture as though you were removing the filthy clothes, and putting on the Father's rich garments.
 - Why is it difficult to live every day in the rich garments the Father has given us?
-

THE GLORY DAYS

Read Haggai 2:1-9 and Ephesians 2:19-22

"The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the Lord Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the Lord Almighty." (Haggai 2:9)

Haggai's job as a prophet was to get the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem to **build the temple**. At first, he dealt with their apathy. Once they overcame that and got started on rebuilding, Haggai had to deal with their discouragement. Why? Because apparently the older people, who remembered how amazing the first temple was before it was destroyed, talked about it – a lot – as the younger workers worked. There's nothing quite so discouraging as thinking that what you're working so hard for is just going to be lame no matter what.

Haggai's message from the Lord was that the people needed to be strong. Isn't that interesting? You need strength to persevere in spite of people telling you about how the "glory days" were better. What was God's message to the workers? That the glory of Temple #2 was going to be greater than the glory of Temple #1. We can look ahead and see that Temple #2 was good enough for Joseph and Mary to take baby Jesus to for His circumcision when He was 8 days old. And it was good enough for 12-year-old Jesus to spend time in talking with the elders when His parents accidentally left Him behind. Temple #2 was the site of much of Jesus' ministry and teaching. Jesus brought incredible glory and peace! The Ephesians passage for today shows how the message of glory and peace is amplified further by seeing believers in Christ as a spiritual temple with Christ as the cornerstone.

As a member of the Baby Boomer generation, I want to be very conscious not to discourage younger Christians by talking about how great things used to be, whether that's in music, fashion, politics, communication, whatever. Let's not discourage people—let's all **build God's Kingdom**.

DIG DEEPER:

- Jesus Christ is described as the cornerstone of the holy temple made up of all God's people. How does thinking of Jesus as our cornerstone help you in your relationships with other believers?
- How can you encourage one of God's Kingdom builders this week, especially someone who is doing things differently from how you would do them?

THRIVE LIKE WATERED GRASS

Read Isaiah 44:3 and John 16:7

"...And I will pour out my Spirit on your descendants, and my blessings in your children. They will thrive like watered grass, like willows on a riverbank." (Isaiah 44:3b-4 NLT)

It is one thing to believe *in* Jesus, and a whole different thing to **believe** Jesus—who He says He is, who He says we are, and what He promises to do. Walking daily with the Lord, it can be easy at times to forget about His promises and the abundant life that is our reality. It is for this reason that I am so thankful for the Word of God as our source of truth and life and the promise that we are never walking on this earth alone; the Holy Spirit has been poured out onto us.

We have received *parakletos*: our Comforter, Counselor, and Advocate. God sent His Spirit to teach us and remind us of His incredible promises as we walk throughout life (John 14:26). We are identified as Christ's children through this deposit of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God's guarantee of the inheritance and redemption that is to come (Ephesians 1:13-14).

I put my faith in Jesus when I was 18 in a college dorm room after hearing the Gospel for the very first time. Since then, I have seen the incredible work and transformation of Jesus in my own life and in the lives of those around me. Yet, there are many days when I feel as though I'm at it alone, striving so hard to attain success and prove my worth, and then left feeling burnt out and broken, wondering where the Lord is in all of this.

But through His word, I know that even when I feel like a dry and barren wasteland, I can choose to believe what Jesus says is true: that my fields are irrigated and flooded with life. Despite how we might feel, we are not forsaken or abandoned or left for dead. His Spirit gives us life and allows us to thrive like watered grass and willows on a river bank (Isaiah 44:4).

The Advocate has come; His Spirit is upon us; we are full, we have life. Drink it in.

DIG DEEPER:

- What areas of your life are you struggling to believe Jesus and the promises He has made to you? What would it look like to fully trust in Him in that area?
 - When have you experienced the quenching and flooding experience of the Holy Spirit? What would it look like to live out of this reality more?
-

THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE BY FAITH

Read Habakkuk 2:2-4 and Hebrews 10:37-38

The Bible tells us there are none righteous, no not one (Romans 3:10). So today's readings are not talking about perfect or even good people, but those who have come to Jesus by faith and asked for forgiveness for their sin. Then our faith is credited to us as righteousness! That's the best deal we will ever make. So, how do we live by faith? Today's passages are set in the context of the end of time and God's judgment. Are you living with the end goal in mind, with thanksgiving every day to the one who paid the debt you couldn't pay to declare you righteous?

I recently read a story of two runners, one physically impressive, perfect in form and training; the other, pitiful in comparison, out of shape, no form, falls often, but somehow continually gets up and keeps going. The first runner is miles ahead, everyone is cheering for him, but suddenly he falls. He is mad, he quits, he won't finish if he can't win. The second runner keeps getting up and finishes the race. He beats the first runner simply by keeping the finish line as his goal. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, *"...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."*

To every man there openeth a way, and a ways and a way
The high soul climbs the high way and the low soul gropes the low,
And in between on the misty flats, the rest drift to and fro,
But to every man there openeth a way, a high way and a low,
And every man must choose which way his soul will go.⁷

We can aim low, we can be quitters, or we can fix our eyes on Jesus. We have daily decisions to make to reach the finish line.

The longer I walk with God the more I can see what He is accomplishing. There is so much joy when you look behind you and see a small parade of people transformed by Jesus making a difference in their world. Milwaukee is called the most segregated city in America, but then we see Eastbrook, totally integrated across all lines, worshipping together in love. His hope does not disappoint.

DIG DEEPER:

- Think of a tough time God has helped you through, what helped you get through it and what did you learn from it?

OUR IMMUTABLE GOD

Read Isaiah 51:4-5 and 1 Peter 1:3-11

"I am the Lord, I change not." (Malachi 3:6)

"Nothing that God has ever said about himself will be modified; nothing the inspired prophets and apostles have said about Him will be rescinded. His immutability guarantees this." A.W. Tozer⁸

Isaiah speaks of God's promise to bring His salvation to His chosen nation and the nations of the world. As Isaiah pens these words from the Lord, both Israel and Judah are under the chastisement of the Lord for their persistent disobedience. Through the complex and arduous times the Israelites were enduring, hope communicated through the prophets speaking of God's unchanging nature and the promise of a future remained. The swiftly approaching, powerful arm that brings salvation, righteousness, hope and justice seems fleeting in the current circumstances but the Christ, our Lord Jesus is coming, and so is the future Kingdom when all is made right according to His Justice.

During deep, dark and painful trials when things are the messiest, it's often hard to hear or receive a message of hope. Yet our benevolent God compels His children to listen, wait and hope; believing it's coming swiftly. We rejoice, as we're called to; sometimes very excitedly, very often tearfully by faith.

In 1 Peter 1, we read that our faith is perfected through grief and trials. How do we endure hardships and challenges while trusting in the living hope of Christ's Kingdom so that it perfects our faith? Peter encourages this through steadfast devotion to God. Henri Nouwen writes that it's impossible to separate the cup of sorrow and joy, the two co-exist together.⁹ The eternal, living hope secured through the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ from the dead allows us to live joyfully in the here and now and yet hope for a better tomorrow is the believer's greatest joy! The prophet Isaiah and apostle Peter both testify to these truths. Praise God!

DIG DEEPER:

- How does the unchanging, immutable character of God give you hope beyond your physical challenges and heart-pained circumstances (illness, injustice, oppression, death, etc.)?
 - What helps you reflect fullness of trust in Christ's salvation and His imminent return, so that your testimony, infused with spiritual strength, distinguishes you from the world?
-

SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES

Read Isaiah 2:2-4 and Acts 17:24-31

*"And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4b, ESV)*

This picture of Jesus' future Kingdom takes my breath away. No more war! Discarded weapons hammered into farming tools! Today's reality is a depressing contrast. Our selfishness, greed, and fear erupt into violence in neighborhoods and armed conflicts around the globe.

Isaiah's words are echoed in an 1800s spiritual that's often sung as a peace anthem. One verse says, "Gonna lay down my sword and shield / Down by the riverside." The chorus adds: "Ain't gonna study war no more, ain't gonna study war no more."¹⁰ Yet in spite of peace songs, marches, and negotiations, we are clearly incapable of true peace! *"The way of peace they do not know ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:17, 23 ESV).

Incredibly, despite our sin, God loves us and wants us in His Kingdom. *"From one man he made all the nations ... so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us"* (Acts 17:26-27 NIV). True peace begins and ends with God, who provides us a way to be forgiven and worthy of Kingdom citizenship through Jesus' sacrifice (Romans 3:24). In Isaiah's vision, wars will cease because all the nations stream to God's temple, learn His ways, and *"walk in his paths"* (Isaiah 2:2-3). Global peace will follow God's rule in human hearts.

Are there glimmers of such peace today? A few make the news, such as "reconciliation villages" established in post-genocide Rwanda by a Christian organization, and a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, launched by Ethiopia's Pentecostal premier. Beyond the headlines, believers launch myriad smaller acts of peace and reconciliation every day. They are acting in the Spirit's power as citizens of the Kingdom.

DIG DEEPER:

- Think of a situation in which you see peace replacing conflict, and give thanks to God.
- Spend time praying for peace in a local or global conflict.

THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUS SAVIOR

Read Jeremiah 23:5-6 and 2 Timothy 2:8-10

The life of a prophet was rough! They were often called to bring news of judgment to the people of a nation, and their messages were often aimed directly at those in power. The people of Jeremiah's day had turned from the true and living God to the very idols that they had been warned to avoid. To make matters worse, it was the political and religious leaders that had led the people astray.

The people had not only forsaken their God, they had turned to things that promised peace, prosperity, and satisfaction but could never deliver as only God could. Further, when trouble threatened, they did not turn to God in repentance, but looked to fruitless political alliances for help instead of to the God who had rescued them from captivity in Egypt. It is in this environment that Jeremiah was called to bring a message of coming judgment and exile.

If truth be told, we have all turned to things that promised peace, prosperity, or satisfaction to try to quench our thirst for significance, happiness, or pleasure instead of to the living God. We have often looked to the things of this world to deal with our troubled hearts instead of to the God of unrelenting love.

It is to this God and His coming Kingdom that Paul reminds the sometimes timid Timothy and us to remember: *"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel for which I am suffering"* (2 Timothy 2:8).

As I encounter the troubles, temptations, and failures in my own life, I am frequently reminded of passages like this that lift my eyes from my own striving and point me to the source of true satisfaction, *"The Lord Our Righteous Savior"* (Jeremiah 23:6b). My righteousness will never do; my hope can only be in the true righteous King, the One who purchased my righteousness through His death and guarantees my inheritance in His resurrection. He is the One who will usher in the true Kingdom of justice and righteousness in which my true home and longing is fulfilled.

DIG DEEPER:

- How have you been tempted to look to other things besides Christ for your satisfaction or righteousness?
- In what way have you learned to trust in the righteousness of God?

WEEK 6

SEEING JESUS AS FINAL JUDGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

A strong message seen throughout the prophets is that God will bring about His justice in the world. One instrument of that justice is the promised Messiah: the Judge who will enact God's justice. This week's readings will focus on how the prophets pointed to the final judgment of the nations and how Jesus identified Himself as that final Judge.

In these verses, look for how God's justice will be revealed. See how it is unleashed and what matters most when it arrives. When the "Great Day of the Lord" arrives, our hope will be found in our good, gracious and just Judge: Jesus.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHARP SICKLE

Read Joel 3:12-14 and Matthew 7:21-23

"Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision." (Joel 3:14)

Imagine suddenly seeing great multitudes of people. I don't mean just a large crowd; I mean the kind of multitudes where there are more people than sand on the seashore, where it seems the crowd could swallow up the earth, produce more dust than the oxygen in the air, and whose noise like a murmur, a rush, and then a roar causes you to believe you will never hear anything else again. Suddenly, all the lights go out and a typhoon of panic swoops over the multitude in a way you could never describe. The earth shakes in a way that removes the security of standing on solid ground. There is no decision left. The decision was the Lord's... The sharp sickle is ready to repay every violation of the law God had set up to protect the innocent and the helpless.

Yet some of them will say, "Didn't I donate to duffles with dignity? Didn't I save that child by doing that surgery? What about all the thankless laundry work I did? Doesn't that count for anything?" Then the Judge will say, "Let me be very clear to you: I never knew you. Away from me, you who slander your coworkers behind their back... You who updated the company numbers to take nearly all of that widow's annual bonus for your account.... You who told your wife you had nothing to hide... You who screamed demeaning words at your kids when you couldn't find the remote."

When I take the time to ponder this eventual day, I think the proper posture is to shudder at the upcoming wrath of God even for the vilest men in all of history. I think of friends and family for whom I am not sure what the Lord will say to them. Finally, I breathe a deep, pensive sigh of relief as I consider the incomparable, gracious gift of Jesus to those who trust in His name and Psalm 32:1, *"How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!"*

DIG DEEPER:

- How does the promise of God's overwhelming justice make you feel about the injustice you observe in this life?
- In light of these 2 passages, what are some of the implications of having one's sin covered?

BECAUSE HE LIVES

Read Isaiah 25:7-8 and 1 Corinthians 15:54

Our Bible is a work that progresses through time beginning with the ancient promises from God. Near the end of the eighth century B.C., God raised up a man capable of seeing down the corridor of time to the very end of this age. His name is Isaiah. His 66-chapter book is filled with amazing details of salvation history. None is more encouraging than his prediction that God would remove death as the final end of mankind.

*"On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever"*

He also saw that our Savior from death would first taste death and lie enshrouded in a rich man's tomb. Here are a few promising words from God to undergird our hope:

2500 BC Job: *"I know that my redeemer lives...in my flesh I will see God."*

2000 BC Abram: *"I am your shield and very great reward"*

1500 BC Moses: *"I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."*

1000 BC David, shepherd: *"I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."*

"When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'"

In mid-first century A.D., resurrection became a Good News reality:

Matthew: At the moment of Christ's death...tombs were broken open and after Jesus rose, many holy people who had died were raised to life.

Luke: From the Cross, Jesus said to a repentant dying terrorist, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

John: *"The only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."... "A time has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live."... "And I will raise them up at the last day."... "Whoever lives by believing in me will never die."... "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also will be where I am [The Father's side]."*

Paul: *"And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you....he will also give life to your mortal bodies...for we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God."*

DIG DEEPER:

- How do these verses support the idea that Jesus comes at our death to resurrect us home?
 - How does this hope impact how you approach your daily life?
-

WHERE'S YOUR HEART?

Read Jonah 1:14-17 and Matthew 12:38-42

"At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him" (Jonah 1:16)

Chapter one of Jonah seems to end with nothing more than a raging storm, a messy prophet, and sailors in complete desperation. But then, chaos turns to calm. These sailors, who previously had not followed God, now come with open hearts to the reality of an all-powerful yet compassionate God. As the story continues, Jonah remains resistant to the calling God has on Him, yet God remains relentless to show mercy on all whose hearts are open to receive it.

When I worked as a minister on a college campus, I sometimes had Jonah moments: wanting to run from the people God was inviting me to extend mercy to, hiding from people who I assumed might never come to know Jesus. But God was constantly surprising me with who would receive the signs that were being shown to them of His love. I look forward to the day when I stand next to these surprising witnesses at the throne of God, enjoying His compassionate love together for all of eternity.

The Pharisees in Matthew 12 had the opportunity to witness multiple signs. The problem is their hearts aren't willing to listen. They ask Jesus for a sign not because they are faithfully seeking to know Him more, but because they desire to test Jesus. And the consequences of that are clear. Jesus makes Himself known as the powerful and wise King, coming in compassion but also in justice: compassion on those who receive the signs revealed and judgment on those whose hard hearts remain resistant.

Those moments as a campus minister when I would be surprised by the people who turned to God, often served as a sign for me of just how real and relentlessly-loving God is. As I watched others respond with an open heart to the sign of our Savior, it caused my heart to open wider as well, to faithfully step into what Jesus revealed to me. And through that, I have experienced more of the faithful, wise, and powerful God, who, as the Final Judge, will turn in compassion to all those who come with hearts open to receive what He has revealed.

DIG DEEPER:

- Think of someone in your life who would surprise you if they came to know Christ. What will you do to help make that happen?
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GOD'S PROMISES OF JUSTICE AND COMFORT

Read Nahum 1:2-8 and Matthew 24:27-31

"The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into the realm of darkness." (Nahum 1:7-8)

Currently, in the country of Yemen, 22 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. 40% of North Koreans need humanitarian assistance. China is holding one million Uighurs in internment camps. These are only a few examples in our world today which cry out for justice.

The Assyrian empire, with Nineveh as its capital, was a violent regime and Israel's oppressor. Nahum prophesied God's judgment against Nineveh; Babylon would conquer Assyria and usher in the reign of the Babylonian empire.

While God proclaimed judgment against Israel's oppressors, simultaneously God declared His compassion for the oppressed: *"The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him"* (Nahum 1:7). The word Nahum means "comfort"—and in the midst of fiery words of judgment, God also expresses His care for Israel.

Frederick Buechner wrote in *Beyond Words*, "Justice also does not preclude mercy. It makes mercy possible...Justice is the grammar of things. Mercy is the poetry of things."¹¹ In chapter one of Nahum we read that God expresses both His wrath against arrogant and violent regimes, and also His concern for the oppressed, with a promise of comfort and refuge.

The Assyrian empire is but one example of an unjust and evil regime; we understand from Nahum that God cares about injustice in every age and era. God has restored us to Himself through His son who faced an unjust death on our behalf, a Son who will once again return and reign—with an ultimate restoration of justice.

Though the timing of the working out of God's justice on earth might be unclear to us, we can trust God sees injustice and will act. That is a word that brings me comfort—that God will address the turmoil, pain, and injustice in the world.

DIG DEEPER:

- How have you witnessed God work out injustices, either in your own life, or at a larger scale in the world?
 - Is there an area of your life or in the world that makes you grieve over its injustice? Pray over that situation today, releasing it into God's hands and trusting in His justice and mercy.
-

THE GREAT DAY OF THE LORD

Read Zephaniah 1:14-18 and 2 Peter 3:10-12

*"The great day of the Lord is near— near and coming quickly."
(Zephaniah 1:14a)*

These are not verses I really like to read. *"A day of distress and anguish."* *"Blood poured out like dust."* *"The destruction of the heavens by fire."* They make me think of Ghostbusters, or of horror movies.

But God doesn't tell us just what we want to hear, He tells us what we need to know, and throughout Scripture He used prophets and preachers to warn people. The same way that John the Baptist insisted, *"Repent! For the kingdom of God is at hand!"* (Matthew 3:2), Peter and Zephaniah warn that one day, the world will end and God's judgment will come. God has clearly laid out His plan for the end of this age in Revelation. We don't know when it will come, but this coming event should motivate us now. The expectation of future judgment is a strong incentive: *"You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God"* (2 Peter 3:11).

Jesus' blood covers believers from God's righteous wrath over our sins, but we are still expected to live as people who have been redeemed—bought with a price. This is why Peter tells us to live holy and godly lives; not to earn our salvation, but to stand before God with lives full of worship to Him, so that we are not ashamed on judgment day. This is a reminder of how holy our God is, that He always judges unrighteousness.

We know from the rest of Scripture what God expects of us, and how to live in a way that pleases Him. If we do that, we can *"look forward to the day of God."*

DIG DEEPER:

- Could your life be called holy and godly?
- If you were to stand before God in judgment, are there aspects of your life you would be ashamed for God to examine? What can you do to change these?

PERSISTENCE IN DOING GOOD

Read Zephaniah 1:2-3 and Romans 2:5-7

"God will repay each person for what they have done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life." (Romans 2:6-7)

At first glance, reading Zephaniah 1:2-3 is startling. When judgment comes, Zephaniah describes terrible destruction as all animals and all of mankind on the face of the earth will be destroyed. It sounds devastating.

But that's not the whole picture, right? As Christians we know God promises eternal life. We also know God is a God of justice and that He detests the injustices and suffering of this world.

What Zephaniah describes in these verses is actually a picture of redemption. In order to bring restoration to the world, broken things need to be destroyed. There are so many metaphors to illustrate this: a clean slate, the phoenix rising from the ash, a seedling growing on parched land. It would be easy to stop here, reflecting on the glorious restoration that is coming! But we can't because we have work to do. Romans 2:6 tells us that we will be repaid according to what we have done during our time on earth. Verse 7 goes on to provide details of what that means.

Here's the key: Persist in doing good with a righteous heart pointed toward Christ.

God has promised to restore the world one day, but He also instructs us to begin the hard work of restoration now, in the midst of brokenness. Persistence is critical. I have no doubt that we have all encountered the pain, suffering and injustice of this broken world in one way or another and therefore, we know, it is not an easy task to which we are called. Doing the good God calls us to demands persistence.

So go forth and bring restoration with a Christ-like heart and as you persist in doing good, know this: you do not do this work alone. God promises hope found in Jesus, our good, gracious and just Judge.

DIG DEEPER:

- We cannot do good for the sake of doing good, it must be with the heart seeking God's glory and honor. Consider what doing good with such a heart means and how this looks in your life.
- Reflect on injustices you have experienced or witnessed in your life. Prayerfully consider ways you might be part of God's restoration plan.

KEEP HIS WORDS

Read Isaiah 13:9-11 and John 12:44-48

*"If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world."
(John 12:47)*

I don't like to talk about the judge part of the Godhead. I don't really even like to think about it. But here I am staring at two passages that make it completely clear, that yes, part of the fullness of God is that He is a judge who will pass judgment. A God who will not only pass judgment, but enact it (read Isaiah 13:9 again). And yet I still don't like it. But maybe I shouldn't like it, maybe it should point me to something bigger.

Justice and judgment are great when it makes my life better, or benefits me, but when it negatively impacts me, I don't like it. Jesus is calling me to understand that He doesn't condemn me, rather the opposite. John 12:47 actually says that Jesus came into the world to save the world. And if there is condemnation, judgment, and justice to be handed down, it lays squarely on my response to the words He spoke. **Wow.**

This view really changes things for me and, hopefully, changes things for you. Jesus provides every avenue to escape that judgment, and it is simple: keep His words. While those words may from time to time provide a moral dilemma or a tough decision, they are simple in the face of the judgment that we may bring down on ourselves. God is going to judge the world, its a reality we have to face. But He hands us the key to escaping that wrath that comes with that judgment: Keep His Words.

DIG DEEPER:

- Why does judgment scare us?
- What are the ways that judgment gives us a fuller picture of who God is?
- How is judgment loving?

HOLY WEEK, WEEK 7

SEEING THE SUFFERING AND REJECTION OF JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

Despite the many prophecies pointing to the coming Messiah's suffering, the extent to which Christ would suffer was shocking. However horrible, Christ's suffering is significant. Without His rejection, without Him being beaten and ridiculed, bound and nailed to the Cross, without Him being cast out by God, we would still be enslaved to sin and would not have the incredible freedom of restored relationship with God. His suffering gives us life.

The prophets identified some of the specific ways Christ was to suffer. As you read the verses for this week's devotionals, reflect upon the significance of Christ's suffering and what it means in terms of trusting God within our own suffering. Rejoice in the incredible gift Christ's suffering brings us.

GOD'S GLORY ON DISPLAY

Read Zechariah 9:9 and Matthew 21:8-10

"Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?'" (John 11:40)

This is one of the most amazing and incredible ironies of history. One of the most baffling paradoxes. How could the God of the universe, the Lord of all, come to earth as an ordinary man, mingle with lowly people and essentially die the death of a common criminal? Even those who knew Jesus did not grasp this. Matthew 21:10 says Jerusalem wondered at His identity. Friend and foe alike were perplexed by Him.

Zechariah 9:9 tells us to rejoice. Why? Because of Jesus' coming. He brings with Him justice, and He brings with Him salvation. What in our world, and what in our lives needs God's touch of justice? Wrongdoing, racism, deception, exploitation, corruption, abuse, marginalization... What do we long for God's salvation to deliver us from? **Sin**. Oppression, slavery, suffering, disease, natural disasters, bondage, evil, destitution, environmental degradation...and on and on. Jesus can redeem, renew and restore. He is the ultimate Healer.

Hosanna is a plea for God's salvation. God's promise to bring justice and salvation are cause for a hearty Hallelujah! Jesus is blessed (highly favored) and so are we because He is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Though King and absolute royalty, His humility is on full display as He rides into Jerusalem knowing that He is on the path to the Cross. His appointment with death won for us freedom from sin and hell.

This person riding on a colt should not be disregarded or underestimated. Unlike you and me, He never sinned and the grave could not hold Him. The justice and salvation He brings is for us life-giving. Do you really believe this? By virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, we have the power to live extraordinary lives that attest to the reality of God's presence. This Palm Sunday, let us rejoice because if we believe, we will see the glory of God.

DIG DEEPER:

- By the way you live your life, would anyone realize that the same power that raised Christ from the dead is available to you? Do you give God free rein to do extraordinary things through you?
 - Humility should not be confused with weakness of character. Jesus was in no way a pushover. Think about Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and reflect on the strength that was required to start (or continue) this inexorable journey to the Cross.
-

DESPISED

Read Isaiah 53:3 and Luke 4:28-29

*"He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem." (Isaiah 53:3)*

What causes you to shrink away in disgust or fear? Does blood, an accident, chaos or ugliness cause you to turn your head away? Twice in the Old Testament passage today the word "*despised*" is used. It almost hurts to use the word as it connotes such a vigorous, active dislike and yet it is used to describe the reaction received by the Messiah. In today's New Testament passage, Jesus speaks truth to His own neighbors and He is forcibly taken to the brink of a cliff to be thrown off, a physical representation of being despised and rejected in the beginning of His ministry.

Every day we hear truth and see brokenness, our own or others, and choose how to respond. In this passage, Jesus responds by walking through the hate and scorn continuing on with His mission. While He was alone amidst the anger and rejection, we have the benefit of being able to walk on with Jesus having found healing from His death and resurrection. Forgiveness, hope and love flow from what many scorn and we must consciously see Jesus, His pain and suffering experienced for us. Our response may cause us to join Him in brokenness but, ultimately, we join Him in glorifying the Heavenly Father for His provision of hope and life. Our path in this season must include viewing and responding to the ugliness of life and bring Jesus' healing and hope to those we interact with daily. No matter their place or past, Jesus comes to all who are open to Him and His message of salvation and peace.

DIG DEEPER:

- How are you responding to the ugliness around you?
- How do you bring Jesus' healing presence into the brokenness around you today?

MERCIFUL SUFFERING

Read Daniel 9:25-26 and Galatians 1:3-5

"... the Anointed One will be cut off..." (Daniel 9:26)

What a disturbing message Daniel received from the archangel Gabriel. The long-awaited Messiah will come to Jerusalem for only a short time and then he will be "cut off" and Jerusalem itself will be destroyed along with the Holy Sanctuary. More than a hundred years earlier, Isaiah prophesied how the Anointed One would die. The Incarnate Son of God would be tortured, beaten, stripped naked, and nailed to a cross (Isaiah 53). His blood would be the atoning sacrifice demanded by a Holy God to cover our sin, purchasing our redemption.

This suffering servant, Jesus, who by His death gives us life, promises that we, as fellow heirs to the Kingdom, will also suffer in this life (Philippians 1:29). In our desire to know Christ and the power of His resurrection we must enter the fellowship of sharing in His suffering (Philippians 3:10). This became very clear to me this past year as God invited me into His suffering — not severe, mind you, but nevertheless life-changing. The newly imposed solitude generated a renewed awareness of my sin, even an uncovering of sin that I did not know was living in the deep recesses of my heart. Times of deep sorrow, lamenting, confessing, and repenting necessarily followed.

In this fallen world there will always be times of sadness, particularly when life doesn't play out the way we expected. We suffer losses, disappointments, and physical and emotional pain. But in these pitfalls we remember that all adversity comes to us through the loving fingers of a sovereign God. Mercifully Jesus guides us through our dark times and His resurrection power strengthens us to walk in newness of life, hand-in-hand with our King, through every circumstance of our lives, on our way home.

DIG DEEPER:

- What is the biggest distraction in your life that keeps you from privately enjoying time with God?
- Are you willing to let Him remove those distractions no matter what circumstance He chooses to use?

THROUGH BLOOD, BY GRACE

Read Zechariah 11:12-13 and Matthew 27:6-10

I closely follow the news about refugees, asylum seekers and other immigrants, people made in the image of God. I read about conflicts resulting in more than 70 million displaced people. I also experience first hand the lives of immigrants who have become friends. More specifically, I go from hearing about thousands of civilians being killed in Yemen to hearing stories from my Iranian friends, one who could not visit home after her parent's death because she was afraid of not being able to come back to complete her degree program. I think we all play some role in the suffering of these people. Because of our actions and inaction, real lives are affected.

The verses in Matthew 27 are part of a bigger story of how different people responded to the guilt they bore for the blood of an innocent person, Jesus Christ. I've been mainly thinking about the role played by the chief priests. They were aware of their participation in the injustice; they justified the death of the innocent. It's easy to think, "I have not killed anyone and I would not participate in the killing of an innocent person." But showing contempt, insulting, gossiping, fostering hate, speaking poorly, and degrading the character of another person is equivalent to murder according to Jesus (Matthew 5:21-22). We become guilty of innocent blood. Jesus made it hard for all of us here.

I think the appropriate response to our actions and inaction when it comes to the suffering of innocent people is indicated by Paul in 2 Corinthians: to repent with godly sorrow. When we acknowledge the ways in which we are guilty of innocent blood and earnestly seek to do what is right, we reveal the true nature of God who first loved us and died for us when we were still sinners: Grace!

DIG DEEPER:

- In what ways are we participants in the difficult/unjust things going on in our community (actively or passively)?
- In what ways do we sell Jesus for our own gain or comfort?

MY SHEPHERD

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Matthew 26:28

*"The days are coming...when I will make a new covenant with the people...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."
(Jeremiah 31:31, 33)*

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:28)

My Shepherd writes His words on my heart. He is faithful and intimate with me, sharing His very powerful and creative words with me, His sheep. My Shepherd speaks truth to my heart and mind, solidifying me in His right and good ways. He is faithful to lead me into all truth.

My Shepherd makes a new covenant. He is doing something new. He takes the broken things of my life—my hurt, my pain, my sin, my struggles—and He is doing something new, something beautiful with them. In fact, my Shepherd delights in making something lovely out of the ugly, forgotten, lonely and despairing parts of me.

My Shepherd is doing something new through His blood. My Shepherd willingly gives His lifeblood for me. He is willing to hurt Himself for my brokenness to be made whole. He is willing to serve me to the point of losing His life. He does this in order for my ugly and forgotten places to be made new with life. My Shepherd exchanges His chances at a good life to give me the good life.

My Shepherd will never leave me nor forsake me. He allows me to find other sheep who are like me. We follow our good Shepherd together, reminding each other of these things.

DIG DEEPER:

- What does it mean to you that the Shepherd writes His words on your heart and mind?
- Have you allowed the blood of the Shepherd to make you new? How?

THE WONDERFUL REVERSAL

Read Isaiah 50:3-6 and Matthew 27:27-31

*"I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting." (Isaiah 50:6)*

"After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him." (Matthew 27:31)

Good Friday is a day that often does not seem good. When we think about the Messiah sent from God suffering and dying upon a Cross, we cannot help but slow down and reflect on the sober seriousness of this day.

Though not the easiest to stomach, the physical aspects of Jesus' suffering through crucifixion are perhaps the easiest to grasp. We can visualize the impact of nails on His flesh, the weight of His body sagging down upon the wood, the dryness of His lips in the sun, and the slow agonizing suffocation of His death.

There is another aspect of His suffering worth considering, however, that both of our readings today highlight. Jesus, fully God and fully man, took upon Himself the utter indignity of mockery. Think about that for a moment. The God of the universe, who created all things with His powerful word, is now enfleshed as a man and suffering. He is not only crucified physically but crucified verbally by the worst words of humanity's making. What a terrible reversal of roles and the power of words!

Jesus takes upon Himself what we – lost in sin, shame, and evil – deserve, so that there might be a wonderful reversal through the power of His life-giving words for our salvation. Praise God for this gracious gift!

DIG DEEPER:

- Why do you think it is significant that Jesus suffered indignity and shame on our behalf?
- Slow down today and take some time to be still and reflect on the sufferings of Christ.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

Read Zechariah 12:10-11 and John 19:31-37

"...they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son" (Zechariah 12:10b)

My son was six month old when he died after open-heart surgery. Instead of a lifetime of memories, I have only a few mental snapshots. I remember his drunken-sideways smile when my face came into view. His marathon 2 am tube feedings. His muffled whines when he accidentally flipped from back to tummy. But, this side of heaven, I will never know his favorite color. I won't know if he liked sports or music, or how he would do in school. The loss of a child is the loss of what might have been.

So, when Zechariah prophesies that people would look on the pierced Jesus and mourn for him *"as one mourns for an only child"* or *"a first-born son,"* we understand that it is a deep loss, indeed. Zechariah compares this mourning to an incident in the plain of Megiddo—the 39-year old King Josiah slain in battle (see 2 Chronicles 35:22-25). It was the loss of what might have been, had Josiah lived longer.

In John's gospel, we see Zechariah's words carried out precisely. Just as a Passover Lamb, Jesus' bones were not broken, instead He is pierced. But another part of Zechariah's prophecy matters, too. Zechariah prophesied an outpouring of a *"spirit of grace and supplication."* In other words, when people would look on Jesus, they would realize the undeserved grace of His death on their behalf, and would respond with repentance.

At this lonely scene of crucifixion, who is left to "look on" Jesus? The following verses describe how Joseph of Arimathea, together with Jesus' secret follower Nicodemus, took His body from the Cross and gave it a dignified burial. What must these two have been discussing? These two men with wealth, prestige, but until now, limited commitment to Jesus? Were they grieving lost opportunity?

What about us, who on this Holy Saturday, know full well the resurrection to come? Do we look on Jesus and mourn for our might-have-been? Instead, let's dwell in that spirit of grace, with deep gratitude for undeserved mercy, and respond to Jesus with repentance and love.

DIG DEEPER:

- What do you think it would have been like to be one of Jesus' disciples on the Saturday between the crucifixion and resurrection?
 - Which of their hopes or uncertainties do you think they had that you share?
-

THE VICTORY OF LOVE

Read Zephaniah 3:14-20 and Matthew 23:37

*"The Lord your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing." (Zephaniah 3:17)*

Here in Zephaniah, we encounter a powerful series of statements about God's powerful intervention and intimate love for His people in the midst of sin, evil and brokenness. This series of statements begins with a picture of God as *"the Mighty Warrior who saves."* This is a picture of power in battle that is sufficient to accomplish the task to which it applies itself. God will do what He says He will do.

But it is not only that God will accomplish something, but that He will do so toward a certain end. What is that end? Well, salvation is the expected answer, and that is correct. However, we do well to ask what salvation looks like? Zephaniah tells us that salvation is characterized by God delighting greatly in His people, bringing them into peace with His love, and rejoicing over them with singing. The strength of the image of victory in battle is matched by a strength of tenderness in care and love.

God's victory and love are brought into powerful focus through Jesus' death and resurrection. There we see the power of God to defeat the forces of evil and overcome the reality of our sin with forgiveness. There we also see just how far God will go to rescue humanity because of His great love and joy over us.

I don't know where you are right now when you are reading this. Perhaps racing through a day in the midst of a busy time of work or preparing for your day. Perhaps you are quietly reading it in your room. Perhaps catching it through a link on your smartphone as you have a moment between errands.

Stop for a moment. In our hectic world and restless interior lives, take a moment of peace and rest in these strong words about God's victory and love for His people.

DIG DEEPER:

- What does the victory of Jesus' death and resurrection mean to you?
 - How does Jesus' death and resurrection confirm the value of humanity to God and the joy of God in you specifically?
-

FAMILY TALK

FOR FAMILIES WITH
ELEMENTARY-AGE CHILDREN



INTRODUCTION

*"Remember what happened in the past.
Think about what took place long ago.
I am God. There is no other God.
I am God. There is no one like me.
Before something even happens, I announce how it will end.
In fact, from times long ago I announced what was still to come."
(Isaiah 46:9-10a NIV)¹²*

Did you know that mystery writers write their books backwards? From the very start, they know
the crime,
who did it,
where it happened,
how it happened, and
why it happened!

Then, the writers plot out a story board—a map to show how the action builds and where they should drop the clues. After all, the fun of reading a mystery is to figure it out before the end of the book!

You might say mystery writers know “the end from the beginning.” This is definitely true of God! He knew how sin and death would be dealt with, and how He would save His people. Throughout the Old Testament God spoke to the prophets and gave them clues about these things. The prophets had just enough information about Jesus, to give God’s people hope and to turn their hearts back to Him.

As you read through these Family Talk devotions, think of them as a great mystery being revealed! Look for the Old Testament clues, and see how they come true in the New Testament. Ask yourself: What do all these clues tell me about Jesus?

Laure Herlinger
NextGen Pastor, Eastbrook Church

WEEK 1

CLUES ABOUT JESUS' BIRTH

*"The Lord himself will give you a sign.
The virgin is going to have a baby.
She will give birth to a son.
And he will be called Immanuel."
(Isaiah 7:14)*

Christmas was just a couple of months ago, but how much do you remember about the story of Jesus' birth? Do you remember what city Jesus was born in? Do you remember who his mother was? How about the name of his cousin—the one who grew up to live in the wilderness, eat grasshoppers, and baptize people?

Clues about all of these things were given by the prophets hundreds of years before Jesus was born! So, when Jesus came to earth, people matched these clues with what they knew about Him. Then, they could be sure—this Jesus of Nazareth really is the Savior that God promised all along!

For us today, these clues show us that God always keeps His promises. And, you will see the great love God has for His people, in sending a Rescuer who would make a way for us to live with Him forever!

FAMILY TALK:

- Who were the people that had special messages from God to tell others?
- Why is it important to know that Jesus' birth was foretold long before it happened?
- What is a promise from God that you can remember this week? How can you remember it?



WEEK 2

CLUES ABOUT JESUS' MISSION

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world. He sent his Son to save the world through him." (John 3:16-17)

If you were on your way to the zoo, I might tell you to look for a "mystery animal" with these clues:

1. it normally lives in Australia
2. it hops on its powerful legs
3. it carries its young in a pouch

You would find . . . a **kangaroo**! You would know the "mystery animal" by the things the kangaroo does.

The Old Testament prophets gave clues about Jesus' mission, the things that He stood for, and the things He did. They gave clues like:

1. He believes that doing what is right is more important than looking holy (Amos 5:23-24)
2. He is full of compassion for people who are spiritually lost (Jonah 11, Micah 7:18)
3. He loves people of all nations and wants them to become part of His kingdom (Hosea 1:11, Micah 5:4-5a)

When Jesus came to earth and taught these things, some people began to understand who He was. After He died and rose again, His followers understood even more. They knew that Jesus' mission of dying for our sins was the way that He could bring peace between God and ourselves, peace in our hearts, and peace with others.

FAMILY TALK:

- What was Jesus' mission in becoming "Immanuel", God With Us?
- Why did Jesus' followers understand more about His mission after his death and resurrection?
- What are some parts of Jesus' mission that we can carry on?

CLUES ABOUT JESUS' WORK

"This stone is very valuable to you who believe. But to people who do not believe, 'The stone the builders did not accept has become the most important stone of all.' (Psalm 118:22) And, 'It is a stone that causes people to trip. It is a rock that makes them fall. (Isaiah 8:14) They trip and fall because they do not obey the message. That is also what God planned for them.' (1 Peter 2:7-8)

What if your parents told you, "Get in the car! We're going on vacation!" You might think that you were headed to the airport to stay at a fancy hotel on a warm, sunny beach. Instead, you arrive at a state park up north, where you put up a tent to sleep in! Camping up north can be just as much fun as a hotel on the beach, but it's waaaaay different!

This is what it was like for God's people, the Israelites. They **expect-ed** that God's promised Savior would come like a mighty warrior who would overthrow the Roman rulers, and instead, put **them** in charge! But, that's not what happened. Jesus' work on earth was to show people who His Father was. He did this by showing compassion, forgiving sins, healing illness and disease. Jesus was beginning to build a kingdom that was more important than just one nation. Instead, Jesus' forever-kingdom is made up of people from every nation who believe in Him and put their trust in Him.

Some people don't understand this about Jesus, and they "stumble" over Him; other people do understand, and they make Jesus the "capstone"—the most important part of their lives.

FAMILY TALK:

- Describe a time when something turned out differently from what you expected.
- What did God's people expect their promised Savior to do?
- How do you think the Israelites felt when Jesus was different from what they expected?
- What do you want Jesus to be in your life: a "stumbling stone" or a "capstone"?

CLUES ABOUT JESUS' FOREVER KINGDOM

"After this I looked, and there in front of me was a huge crowd of people. They stood in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb. There were so many that no one could count them. They came from every nation, tribe and people. That's true no matter what language they spoke.

They were wearing white robes. In their hands they were holding palm branches. They cried out in a loud voice,

"Salvation belongs to our God,

who sits on the throne.

Salvation also belongs to the Lamb.' "

(Revelation 7:9-10)

This summer, the Olympic games will be held in Tokyo, Japan. Athletes from all over the world will come to compete in their sports. During the Opening Ceremony, each nation will enter the arena behind their flag, dressed in national colors or a traditional costume. This is called the Parade of Nations. Two weeks later, at the Closing Ceremony, the athletes will all walk in together, showing their friendship and unity. Olympic ceremonies are exciting celebrations, and watching them gives us a glimpse of what it will be like when Jesus reigns in Heaven. There will be people from every nation, tribe, and language worshiping around the throne—together! ***And it will be so much bigger than one arena can hold!***

God has created all people in His image, and He loves them all, no matter where they are from or what language they speak. Jesus showed this when He lived on earth. His kingdom may have started with the Jews, but His plan was to open His kingdom wide, to welcome people from all nations who put their faith in Him!

FAMILY TALK:

- Who is welcome in Jesus' kingdom?
- What do you think will be the most exciting part of heaven?
- Jesus wants everyone to be part of His kingdom. How can we love others who are different from us?



CLUES ABOUT JESUS' NEW KINGDOM

"When anyone lives in Christ, the new creation has come. The old is gone! The new is here! All this is from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ's death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ." (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)

There's an old saying that goes, "March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb." This means that the month of March is all about change. It can start out with snow and cold wind, but end with rain puddles and warm temps!

Change isn't always pretty. Before spring comes, snow turns to gray slush, and the grass is more brown than green! This is how it is for us, as we wait for Jesus' return. Because of His death and resurrection, we know that Jesus has won over sin and death. We know that He will make old things new again, and make sad things happy again, but for now, there are still a lot of hard things in our world. We are living "in March"—not quite winter, but not the full beauty of spring. We look for signs of spring—signs that show God is at work, changing people's lives with His love and peace. We dream about the day when He will bring spring here to stay!

FAMILY TALK:

- How is life like "March as we wait for Jesus?"
- Why is it hard to wait for Jesus and for everything to be made new?
- How have you felt close to God recently? How is being close to Jesus like "springtime"?



CLUES ABOUT JESUS AS JUDGE

"The Lord is good. When people are in trouble, they can go to him for safety. He takes good care of those who trust in him. But he will destroy Nineveh with a powerful flood. He will chase his enemies into the place of darkness." (Nahum 1:7-8)

In just another month or so, many of us will be planting gardens—vegetables, flowers, or both! Good gardeners tend to their young plants everyday—they work the soil with fertilizer, water the plants, and wait for the blooms!

But then—the weeds! Along with the beautiful beans, broccoli, or zinnias, the bindweed comes! It wraps itself around other plants and sucks away the water and the nutrients that *should* be going into the plants! Gardeners have to battle bindweed all summer, cutting it back, pulling it up by its roots, making sure that it doesn't take over the entire garden!

What do you think would happen to the plants if the gardener just left the bindweed grow instead of cutting it away?

God is the best gardener ever! His "garden" is made up of His people, who He carefully nurtures and tends. But, because God is a good gardener, He must also cut off the evil. He has set a day to judge and to punish evildoers. He is a good and holy God, so He *must* punish wickedness. But, for those of us who call out to Him, Jesus will be our strong protector, our loving Gardener.

FAMILY TALK:

- Would a garden grow without anyone taking care of it?
- Why must God punish wickedness?
- What are some "weedy" things in our lives that keep us from loving God? (Think about things like bad attitudes, or bad habits.)

CLUES ABOUT JESUS' SUFFERING

"These things happened in order that Scripture would come true. It says, 'Not one of his bones will be broken.' Scripture also says, 'They will look to the one they have pierced.'" (John 19:36-37)

There are certain images so strong, that even just hearing them reminds us of what they are all about. If you hear, "manger" or "shepherds" or "wise men" you immediately think of Christmas—the story of Jesus' birth.

It's the same with the story of Jesus' death. These images—these **clues**—were written about, by the prophets, hundreds of years before they happened:

- ... Jesus would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey
- ... he would be hated by some people (think of Jesus' trials before the Jewish leaders)
- ... he would be mocked (think of the soldiers who put a crown of thorns on His head)
- ... he would be pierced (think of how His side was pierced as He hung on the cross)

The prophets wrote these clues, so that when these things really happened, people would understand that Jesus was the promised Rescuer. These terrible things didn't just happen to Jesus; He came to earth knowing all about His death on the Cross—it was His special rescue plan!. His death allows us to be declared "not guilty." It is His free gift to all who believe!

"Jesus gave his life for our sins. He set us free from this evil world. That was what our God and Father wanted. Give glory to God for ever and ever. Amen." (Galatians 1:4-5)

FAMILY TALK:

- What were some of the clues given about Jesus's death?
- Why did Jesus come, knowing that He was going to die?
- How can we be rescued by Jesus?

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO:

The photo on the cover of this devotional is from a journey the Lord graciously presented to me to go see many of the places where biblical history took place. The ruins pictured are from Gadara, which is modern day Umm Qias in Northern Jordan. This spot would have been near where Jesus cast the legion of demons into the pigs. The ruins overlook the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus walked on water, and the Golan Heights, where the tribe of Manasseh was assigned to live and where a few Kings of Israel fought in battle in 2 Kings, and Mount Hermon, where the Transfiguration may have taken place and the source of the Jordan River. All this is simply a taste of the vast history which took place in this region.

The photo contains a high amount of contrast, both in color and in light. This is intentional, as it plays with the emotions of deeper, dark blues in the shadows, and brighter yellows and oranges to give a sense of hope in the weariness. Often the messages of the prophets can read of only death and destruction, but they also tell of the hope of a coming Savior. This photo captures both messages, as the sunlight falls over the ruined places, creating long deep shadows.

As amazing as it was to walk amongst all this history and dream of what took place there, I couldn't help but feel during most of this trip that God didn't want me to spend my time exalting these places and their history. Instead, I felt motivated by their history to continue the story that was written in these places by spreading the Good News that I have been blessed to hear countless times in my life. Because the day when Jesus once again walks on earth is far more valuable than even these remnants of the days when He once did.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARTIST STATEMENT BY ZACK JOHNSON

SPECIAL THANKS

EDITING AND PROOFREADING

Jim Caler, Liz Carver, Matt Erickson, Amanda Kilponen, Angg Tucker

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Laure Herlinger and Joanna Pawlisch

COVER PHOTO

Zack Johnson

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Liz Carver

INQUIRIES

Eastbrook Church

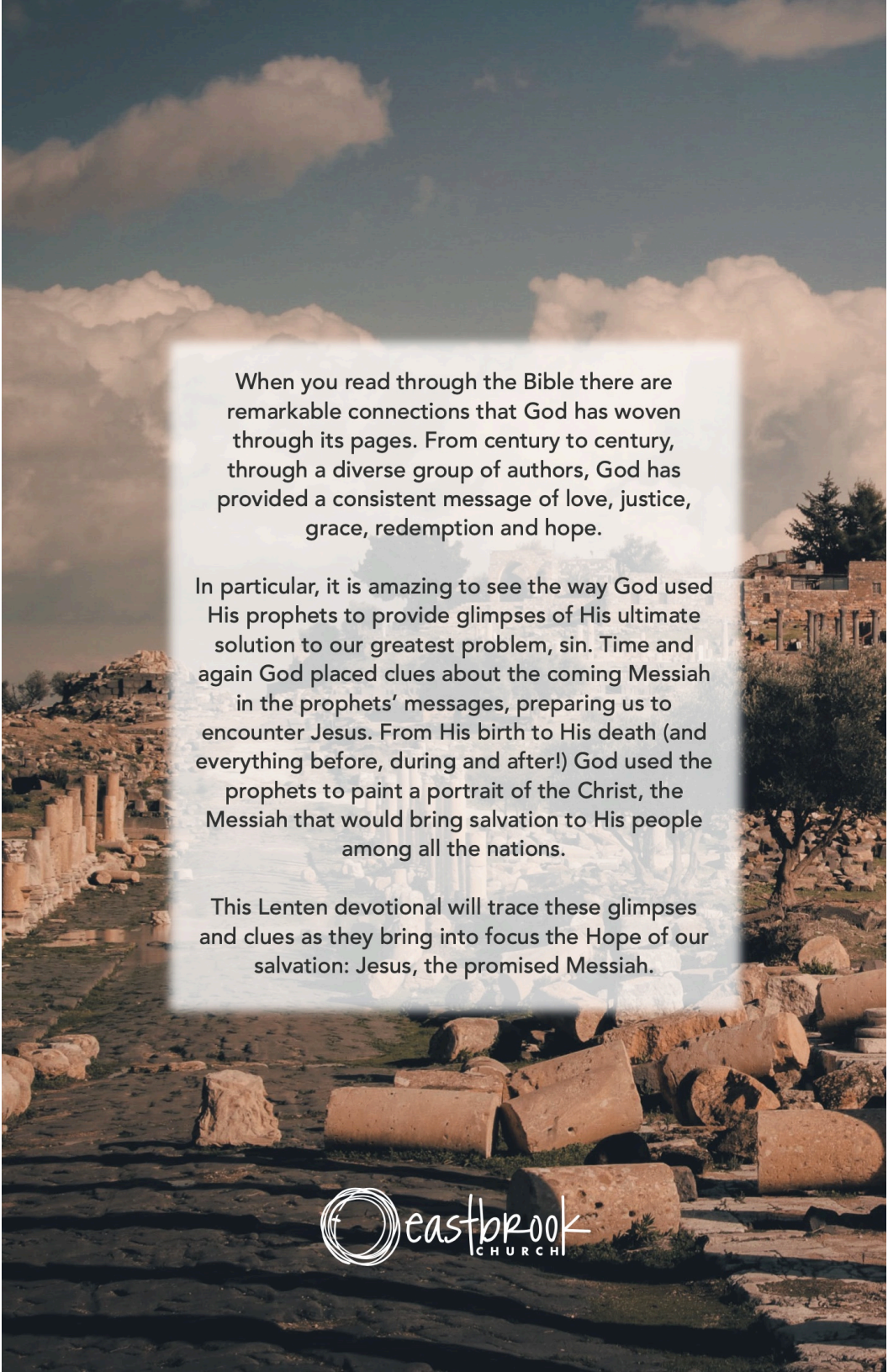
5385 N. Green Bay Ave. | Milwaukee, WI 53209

414.228.5220 | info@eastbrook.org

eastbrook.org

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The background of the entire page is a photograph of ancient ruins, likely in Jerusalem, featuring stone walls, columns, and a path leading into the distance under a sky with soft, white clouds.

When you read through the Bible there are remarkable connections that God has woven through its pages. From century to century, through a diverse group of authors, God has provided a consistent message of love, justice, grace, redemption and hope.

In particular, it is amazing to see the way God used His prophets to provide glimpses of His ultimate solution to our greatest problem, sin. Time and again God placed clues about the coming Messiah in the prophets' messages, preparing us to encounter Jesus. From His birth to His death (and everything before, during and after!) God used the prophets to paint a portrait of the Christ, the Messiah that would bring salvation to His people among all the nations.

This Lenten devotional will trace these glimpses and clues as they bring into focus the Hope of our salvation: Jesus, the promised Messiah.