

# Today

Nov/Dec 2023

refresh, refocus, renew

*God with Us*



ALSO: BIRDS OF THE AIR

Friends:

For many of us, birds are just birds, creatures we often take for granted as part of the landscape of daily life. But birds are beautiful creatures in themselves, and they are an important part of the world God has made. Throughout the Bible we see a variety of birds, and some of these play important roles or serve as images for God's plan of redemption for his people and for all creation.



In November, Pastor Julia Prins Vanderveen takes us through many Bible passages focusing on birds. In the wilderness, quails provide sustenance for God's Old Testament people. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit through a dove communicates an important truth about Jesus. For casual observers of birds or for serious birdwatchers, this month's devotions provide a unique perspective on God's love for us and for the world he has made.

In December, Pastor Joe Huizenga introduces us to some of the people in his church and community on Chicago's South Side. Through eye-opening stories of people struggling with difficult and painful circumstances, we can see how God's Spirit is at work in places that are often avoided and forgotten corners of our world. These stories also give us an opportunity to see God's love in Jesus Christ lived out in neighborhoods and communities that are connected to us all.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and stylized, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Kurt Selles

# Today

Nov/Dec 2023

**refresh, refocus, renew**



**“Birds of the Air”**  
**Julia Prins Vanderveen**



**“God with Us”**  
**Joe Huizenga**

**Managing Editor:** Jeff Bulthuis  
**Executive Editor:** Kurt Selles

TODAY (USPS 185-140),  
Volume 73, Number 6,  
published bimonthly by  
ReFrame Ministries, formerly  
Back to God Ministries  
International, at 1700 28th  
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI  
49508-1407. Periodicals postage  
paid at Grand Rapids, Michigan,  
and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes  
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,  
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2023, Reframe  
Ministries. Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture  
quotations in this publication  
are from The Holy Bible, New  
International Version®, NIV®.  
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,  
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by  
permission. All rights reserved  
worldwide.



**ReFrame**  
**Ministries**

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

# december

## God with Us

### Joe Huizenga

You are invited to enter into a community on Chicago's South Side—to meet some of the people there, listen to their stories, and witness where God's Spirit is at work in one corner of creation. My hope is that in doing so you may have an entry point to pause, slow down, and reflect on how the love of God in Christ Jesus is being lived out in the neighborhoods and communities that you are a part of.

*Joe Huizenga serves as pastor and executive director of Roseland Christian Ministries in Chicago, Illinois. He and his wife, Cate, have four children.*

## HIDDEN TREASURE

*"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."*  
—Matthew 13:44

Come to Chicago's Roseland neighborhood with me. Drive down Michigan Avenue, past Root Brothers Hardware. "Checks Cashed" blinks in neon from the Currency Exchange, and "\$2,300 – LIKE NEW!!" shines from the window of a red Chevy Cavalier. Snow falls on people outside Roseland Christian Ministries (RCM) as they wait for the food pantry to open.

Just inside the front door eight men and women are busy stacking cans and boxes of food. As they finish, RCM volunteer Ms. Arlene says, in a Jamaican accent, "OK, let us gather to pray. . . . Holy Spirit, fill us with the love of Jesus. May your gifts be given to your people. Amen." For the next two hours this group of employees and volunteers serves groceries to people coming in from the local community.

The corner of East 109th and Michigan in Chicago is a part of God's kingdom. Like a farmer who finds treasure in a field and then sells everything he has to purchase that field, I have had the privilege of seeing and working in a sliver of God's kingdom here on Chicago's South Side.

And as you meet some of the people here, my hope is that you may discover a deeper awareness of Christ's presence in the communities where you live.

Lord, open our eyes to see you and our ears to hear you. May we be surprised by the treasure that is your kingdom in the communities we are a part of. Amen.

## COMMUNION

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

—2 Corinthians 13:14

Anthony, wearing a black bomber jacket and aviator sunglasses, paces back and forth outside my office. I'm on the phone, but he gestures repeatedly that I should "hang up the phone." Now inside my office, he continues to pace, rips off his sunglasses, and blurts out, "I need communion. Now, Pastor. Sir. Now indeed. Indulge."

Anthony struggles with his mental health. He has no access to quality mental care, so he wanders the streets talking to voices in his head, and he self-medicates with cocaine, marijuana, and alcohol. Five years ago he tested positive for HIV. His outbursts have led to his being barred from shelters around the city. He sleeps on a mattress in his cousin's garage.

"Pastor, I need communion, sir, and I need it now." Mental,

physical, and emotional trauma have left him incapable of building trusting relationships. He needs to know he belongs—to God and neighbor.

Felisha and Raphael, church council members at Roseland Christian Ministries, are both present. We scrounge up some bread and grape juice and gather in a circle, the four of us in my office. "Anthony, the body of Christ, broken for you; the blood of Christ, shed for you."

Anthony breathes deeply and says, "The body of Christ for me. Indeed. Amen."

Lord God, move us into relationship with you, community, and creation. In Jesus, Amen.

**WALK WITH US, LORD**

*We are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

—2 Corinthians 6:16

Ms. Betty, 86, shuffles with her walker to the front of the sanctuary. She drops to her knees while singing the words of a spiritual: "Walk with me, Lord! Walk with me. While I'm on this tedious journey, I want Jesus to walk with me."

Thirteen years ago Ms. Betty's granddaughter Sabrina died in a car accident, leaving three young sons behind. Ms. Betty took in all three great-grandsons. After church one Sunday, one of those grandsons, Andre Taylor, was shot and killed.

Roseland Christian Ministries has been her refuge—she comes here four to five times a week. She's at worship and Sunday school on Sunday, prayer meeting on Tuesday, hospitality committee on Wednesday, and stops in at other times too. Some days

she needs prayer; some days she needs groceries.

Most of all, like the rest of us, she needs assurance that God is with her—that Jesus is still walking with her. Whether we are aware of it, feel it, acknowledge it, or not—we worship the God who, in Jesus and by his Spirit, walks with us.

God is with you. Christ is present with you on your journey today and every day.

Walk with us, Lord. While we are on this journey, please continue to walk with us, be our guide, and hold our hand. Amen.

## WE NEVER KNOW

*The Spirit told Phillip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”*

—Acts 8:29

Emotions ran high as we debated on social media the shooting of a teenage boy by a Chicago police officer. I took one side, and a former classmate, a Chicago police officer, took another. We both dug in deeper, and we were both convinced that our own individual viewpoint was the only way to see things.

A week later, following a friend's prompting, the officer and I sat across from each other in a Chicago diner. I stirred my coffee with a spoon. Then he finally said, “Can we pray?” We did. And then, for the next two hours, we listened to each other. We committed to meet again.

The next month, in the middle of the night, I received a text from a young man—a musical artist just released from prison on parole.

“Pastor, I need prayer. I look over my shoulder everywhere I go because of the life I live. Can you pray for me? I have no one to turn to. I’m despairing.” The next morning, I called, and we prayed together. We have texted and prayed together regularly since then.

Where is the Holy Spirit taking us, and into whose lives? A police officer? A musical artist on parole? An old friend? An enemy? We never know.

God, lead us to follow your way, no matter how far it may lead outside our own plans. Like Philip as he met with the Ethiopian official on a desert road, may we be in step with your Spirit and obedient to his call. For Jesus' sake, Amen.



## A TEXT AT MIDNIGHT

*"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."*  
—Luke 11:9

I received a text message late one night from the pastor of a large African American congregation in Chicago: "Sorry to bother you so late, but something hit my spirit. Do you have a family in your congregation that could use an anonymous financial blessing? They can use it however they want, but we want to bless them unexpectedly, with financial resources that have no strings."

Tracey has lived in the Roseland community nearly all of her life. She is raising three children while working an assortment of jobs. She also volunteers at the Roseland Christian Ministries food pantry, dropping off groceries to families who are physically unable to leave their homes.

Tracey was also saving money to purchase a house, and it would take a few more years before she would have enough

to be able to purchase a home. The pastor and congregation anonymously gifted Tracey \$15,000. When she heard about the gift, she silently mouthed, "Thank you, Lord."

I'm so glad this pastor texted me at the midnight hour with the news of this gift. And I'm glad Tracey was willing to receive it. She had been asking God to make a way where it seemed no way was possible.

Two months later Tracey was able to purchase and rehabilitate a boarded-up home. Her family has a home now. She knocked—and a door opened.

Teach us, Lord, to knock on your door, ask, and learn how to receive. Teach us to seek after you. Amen.

## ROLL THE WINDOW DOWN

*"When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?"*  
—Matthew 25:38-39

Driving to Roseland Christian Ministries on a busy morning, I sometimes feel discouraged with the never-ending line of people at the doors needing groceries, a meal, a bus pass, a utility bill paid, a friend, or a letter to a judge on behalf of a young person in legal trouble.

As I wait for the traffic light to turn green, I stare ahead, pretending to be on my phone while a man stands outside my car window asking for money. Sometimes I roll the car window down, make eye contact, and talk with the person outside. When I do, I'm reminded of my weaknesses, and I'm grateful for this community that embraces all people.

In Jesus' parable the goats are people who ignore neighbors that are imprisoned, hungry, and suffering. The sheep are people who offer a cup of cold water, shelter, and compassion

to neighbors that are hurting. The big reveal of the parable is that Christ is present with "the least of these," and we are called to serve hurting and humiliated people in Jesus' name.

We have the opportunity to serve Christ when we care for people who are hurting. If we think we are happy in our comfortable, safe lives, we are invited to let go of our illusions and enter community with others. This is the body of Christ. We need others, and others need us. We roll the window down and enter community, for Jesus' sake.

God, give us the strength to love and the will to enter community and let others in. Doing so, may we sense the very presence of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**MIKRON**

*"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. . . ."*

—Matthew 18:10

Both Annette and her son, Lloyd, were born with disabilities and were often ignored by others. They worshiped at Roseland Christian Ministries and worked in the food pantry, drop-in center, and thrift store for 30 years.

When Annette moved into a nursing home, Lloyd tried to manage without his mother. In an act of innocent hospitality, Lloyd allowed some shady men to move into their family home for shelter. Soon the men took over the house, and when Lloyd confronted them, they beat him to death.

In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches about having the trusting, dependent faith of little children, and of welcoming them into God's kingdom. He also warns against doing any harm to "these little ones." The Greek word for this term, *mikron*, means "small in significance or

size"—and while it could refer to children, it can also describe other people that we might consider little or insignificant. In the kingdom of God, however, everyone is significant.

A group of RCM members, including the former pastor and his wife and other friends, gathered around Annette. Unable to leave the nursing home, Annette was rolled in her medical bed into a community room where we celebrated Lloyd's life and the promises of God. A church member, Steve, sang, "Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong."

Father, thank you for your love and strength over all of us, for we are all *mikron*. Amen.

## WHERE WOULD I BE?

*If the LORD had not been on our side . . . if the LORD had not been on our side. . . .*  
—Psalm 124:1-2

“You remember me, Pastor?”

He stood outside the door of the church, a smile across his face. Squinting at him for a few seconds, I finally recognized him. Five years earlier, Terrell had been 50 pounds lighter and in the grip of an unforgiving substance addiction. He stood smiling, confident, with his arm outstretched and a 50-dollar bill in his hand.

“I know it’s not much, but if it had not been for God placing me in this ministry at that moment in my life, I don’t want to imagine where I would be. This place kept me going—meals, clothes, and a home for me. I thank God for you! Please use this to help somebody.”

Dr. Margaret Douroux wrote a song based on Psalm 124 that I often find myself humming: “If it had not been for the Lord on

my side, tell me, where would I be? Where would I be?”

I thank God for Terrell. I thank God for the gifts he came with that day—his spirit, his encouragement, and his monetary contribution. Trusting and allowing others to walk with and encourage him took great humility on his part. I struggle to have that level of humility. And yet that sort of vulnerability opens a way for Christ to draw us closer as his community.

If the Lord had not been on your side, where would you be?

Lord, give us the humility to look back and ask, “If you had not been on our side, where would we be?” Give us gratitude for your faithfulness. Amen.

## GENERAL REVELATION AND AWE

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*  
—Psalm 19:1

Once a week I meet with a friend early in the morning to run along the Chicago lakefront. When we begin, it is usually dark, and the city is quiet. Along the way we have seen a red fox that sleeps under bushes around Buckingham fountain, and we once came upon a handful of coyotes pacing the bike path, looking for rabbits.

By the time we head back, the sun is just beginning to peek over Lake Michigan. Before long, the sun's rays reflect off Chicago's silvery, mirrored downtown skyline. The sky begins to take on pink and orange hues, and the water can be so blue. It's breathtaking every single time. The sheer beauty is something to behold. It is one of the few moments that weekly puts me in a state of awe.

Maybe you have a favorite walk that you take, a favorite spot to watch the sun set, or a telescope to look at stars, planets, or the moon—something that creates in you a sense of awe.

Whatever does this for you, can you set aside a few moments today and take in the beauty and awe of God's creation?

Lord, there is so much beauty in your world. Open our senses to be aware of your beauty and power in your vast creation. Amen!

## BONE CARRIERS

*Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath.* —Exodus 13:19

A friend of mine loves carrying bones. Huh?

In the Bible, when God calls Moses to lead the people out of Egypt, they kept a promise by taking Joseph's bones with them to be buried in the promised land. So for over 40 years it was someone's job to carry the bones. Their names are not mentioned with Moses, Aaron, Miriam, or Joshua, and yet they helped to fulfill an important promise. And when the people got to the promised land, Joseph's bones were buried (Joshua 24:32).

Bone carriers are the people who do the unglamorous work that helps to hold faith communities together. At Roseland Christian Ministries we found a medical supply company and purchased a human femur replica. We passed around this bone to each other at staff meetings, recognizing people

who do the work that often gets overlooked.

Smoky picks up trash outside our building. Bone carrier. Bruce is always fixing whatever is broken. Bone carrier. Kisha puts in extra time in many areas that go unnoticed. Bone carrier. Tamika, DeWitt, Ty, David, Mary, Kadie, Steve, Sandra, Megan, Kayla—all bone carriers.

God's kingdom takes all kinds of people with a variety of gifts. I'm grateful for the carriers of Joseph's bones, and I'm grateful for the bone carriers here in Roseland. Who are the bone carriers in your community?

Lord, thank you for all the people who do the unseen work that keep communities thriving. May we honor and serve you in all we do. Amen.

## THE GOD WHO CRIES

*As [Jesus] approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it.*  
—Luke 19:41

God chooses not to turn away from human suffering. Instead, God chooses to identify with those who mourn, and, through Jesus, he has made suffering and humiliation his own—all for our sake.

Christ's coming and his crucifixion are the powerful bookends of a life filled with suffering, service, and identifying with "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40). Jesus had a humiliating birth in a barn or a stable where animals were sheltered (Luke 2:7). And he had an even more humiliating death, being publicly executed on a cross between two criminals (Luke 23:32-33). During his life among us, it wasn't much better—he was often homeless (Luke 9:58), mocked, tested, and threatened with death.

Recently a 17-year-old boy who grew up at Roseland Christian Ministries was shot

and killed walking to his home. His sisters and grandmother wept for days. Jesus did too.

Our shelter is filled with women and children who are displaced. Mothers have wept here over the humiliation and shame of being homeless. Jesus weeps with them.

Jesus weeps and identifies with all of us in our suffering.

Please know that in your tears, pain, and times of suffering, God is not far off. God in Christ Jesus weeps with you.

Lord, in our suffering, we are grateful that you are not far off. We are grateful that in Christ Jesus you weep with us. Give us the peace of knowing you are with us. Amen.

## TETHERS OF FREEDOM

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

—Galatians 5:1

The former pastor of Roseland Christian Ministries tells a story of a man addicted to cocaine who asked his wife to lock him in the basement when she left for work. Locked in, he was often free of the hunger that drove him to sell anything in the house to feed his addiction. Some days he would still beat down a door or smash a window. But other days his wife would return and find him sleeping peacefully on the couch.

I read somewhere that we tend to define freedom as an absence of restrictions. I read somewhere else that freedom is not an absence of restrictions so much as choosing the right ones.

If we never belonged to Christ, we would be free of many obligations. But I know that would not be freedom.

One of the privileges of serving a church is to officiate at baptisms. In baptism, three promises are made: God promises to be faithful, the family promises to disciple and raise the baptized child, and the covenant community promises encouragement and support. A friend of mine thinks of those promises as tethers that bind us to each other. And those tethers give us freedom.

In Christ you are free to belong to God and his community, and to be the person God has called you to be.

Lord, thank you for the freedom of belonging to you in Christ. We freely belong so that we can love you, our neighbors, and your creation. Amen.



## UNUSUAL KINDNESS

*The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. —Acts 28:2*

Have you ever been the recipient of unusual kindness?

The apostle Paul and 275 others lay on the shore of Malta after surviving a terrible storm and shipwreck (see Acts 27). I imagine that Paul lay coughing up salt water as the islanders surrounded him.

I'm sure both sides were fearful of the other's presence. And yet the Holy Spirit was already at work ahead of them, bringing the travelers and the Maltese people together. The islanders showed Paul and the others "unusual kindness" by building a fire to provide warmth. Later they would provide the shipwrecked crew and soldiers and prisoners with the supplies they needed to continue on their journey.

Think about someone who showed you unusual kindness.

I'm not just talking about someone whose doctrine is correct or whose beliefs line up with yours. I'm asking you to reflect on times when you were the recipient of an unusual kindness. Could those have been situations when God's Spirit was at work, bringing together people in a way that only God's Spirit could?

This is worth considering. When you were a stranger or an outsider, who treated you with unusual kindness (grace)?

Lord may we be open to your Spirit's work in and among people in situations that we might never expect or imagine. May we be gracious recipients and gracious givers of "unusual kindness." Amen.

## CAN WE PRAY AND LEARN TOGETHER?

*Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*  
—Hebrews 13:3

Each month, I try to write letters to young men who grew up in the neighborhood and are now in prison. I have seen lines of boys become young men, make mistakes, and end up in court with no advocate, sentenced to prison for decades. I am asking you to pray for African American men, particularly young ones, in prison. And I want to invite you to learn about the United States prison system, just as I am trying to learn more about it myself.

Over the past three decades, the U.S. prison population has exploded from 300,000 to 2 million. Twenty-five percent of these prisoners are African American, while only 13 percent of the U.S. population is African American.

The work of Bryan Stevenson at Equal Justice Initiative has

spotlighted the legacy of racism from slavery to incarceration.

It would be easier to judge and write off those who are in prison. But I urge you to "continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison." What might that look like to do so in your corner of the world?

I know we can do better, and I believe wholeheartedly that God wants better for us.

Lord, you created us full of potential, promise, and beauty. Corporate and individual sin and injustice corrupt what you have created for good. We pray for all who are in prison, and may we work to create institutions that bring justice. Amen.

## CRYING ON THE COUCH

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*  
—2 Corinthians 12:9

I came home one night after officiating at the funeral of a young man who had been shot and killed. I changed clothes and sat on the couch.

My wife, Cate, asked, "How are you doing?"

"I'm good. All good." This was my response 99.9 percent of the time to that question.

"Really?" she asked.

"I'm good." The room was quiet.

My eyes welled up, my nose got runny—and before I knew it, I began to sob. I shook and began to say the names of all the young Black men from Roseland who have been shot and killed in the past few years: Marqwell; Andre; Darnell, Sr.; Darnell, Jr.; Larry; and others.

I wept and shook for an hour. My wife wiped tears from my eyes. So much grief, violence, and injustice had to find ex-

pression. For 10 years I had kept putting one foot in front of the other and had ignored the pain. And then it all came out on that couch.

This was one of the most important interactions of my life. Letting go of being strong has strengthened relationships. I found that in weakness, tears, and brokenness, the power and grace of God expressed in community show up. Healing and restoration happen in this place.

God, help us to let go of whatever disconnects us from you and each other. Give us the strength to let go of being strong, being right, being correct. Teach us to let go and surrender to you. In Jesus, Amen.

## STILL

*"Be still, and know that I am God."*

—Psalm 46:10

Wednesdays are busy at Roseland Christian Ministries. The Greater Chicago Food Depository drops off several tons of food, medical professionals come to provide medical care to the community, and lunch is served to 70-90 men and women.

In a small classroom behind this hustle and bustle, a gathering of mostly older women sits in a circle. Nearly every week our meeting begins in the same way. One of us reads Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God." Then we sit in stillness and silence together for a few minutes.

I tend to want to fill the silence with noise. I want to break the stillness with movement. But when I surrender my desire to talk and move, and we simply sit in the still silence as brothers and sisters, I am surprised at

the peace and calm that come over us.

In our hearts and minds we say over and over again, "Be still, and know that I am God." Those few minutes each week, for all of us who gather in the circle, have become a sanctuary in the midst of chaos.

What about you? Do you have a place and time to sit with others in the stillness and silence of God's presence?

Lord, we can often get so busy and distracted. Help us to still our minds and bodies and to rest in the assurance that you are God and you are with us. Amen.

## KINTSUGI

*I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery. . . . But I trust in you, LORD; I say, "You are my God."*

—Psalm 31:12, 14

There is a form of Japanese pottery repair called kintsugi. When a pot is broken, the artist will repair the broken piece with gold to seal the break. The goal of the artist is not to restore it to its original condition but to draw attention and create beauty where the pottery is broken. There is new strength and beauty at the place of the breaks.

One of the great gifts I have appreciated from the Roseland Christian Ministries community is that beauty and strength are found in the places where we are weak. There's no faking it. Our motto is "Come as You Are"—and people come broken.

This doesn't mean we wallow in the broken places. But it does mean that we can live with an openness about our wounds and hurts. There is tremendous freedom in this. This

is a gift that God offers to anyone willing to accept it.

The places of brokenness, vulnerability, and shortcomings are the places where the presence of Christ heals, dwells, and brings about new life. Can we come to Scripture, prayer, fellowship, worship, and relationships with a willingness for Christ and Christian community to take those broken pieces and make our lives a strong, beautiful gift to the communities we are a part of?

Lord, thank you for reminding us that we aren't perfect and that we can't pretend to be. We come broken. Please make us a strong and beautiful instrument for your glory. Amen.

## WHEN GOD SHOWS UP

*"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."*

—Exodus 3:5

It wasn't fun anymore. The drinking. The late nights, late mornings, headaches, and excuses. So on December 22, 1990, Robert checked himself into the hospital to detox as he began what is now a decades-long journey of sobriety.

What stands out most when he tells his story is that he distinctly remembers looking out his hospital window on Christmas 1990, watching the snow gently fall. In that moment he knew—not just in his mind but in his whole body—that God was telling him that everything was going to change.

There are moments in the Bible when God shows up in a striking way and things change. God meets Moses at a burning bush. God reassures Elijah at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:7-18). God speaks and a dove appears at Jesus'

baptism (Mark 1:9-11). God speaks again at Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8). The Holy Spirit comes with the sound of wind and tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2).

Have you had a time when you sensed the powerful presence of God and your life changed? Let's ask God to help us be alert, aware, and awake to the ways he is working in us and in the people around us in his world.

Lord, your world is full of your glory, and sometimes you make us especially aware of your presence and what you are doing in our lives. There are times and places that can feel sanctified and especially holy. Give us eyes to see and wisdom to understand what you are doing. Amen.

## IMAGE OF GOD

*God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.*

—Genesis 1:27

John is the chair of the art department at Trinity Christian College. Seven years ago, when he heard that a teenage member of Roseland Christian Ministries was shot and killed, John initiated the Roseland Portrait Project as a way to honor the young man and to strengthen bonds in the community. John painted the young man's portrait on a wood panel. He then went on to paint 404 more portraits of Roseland community residents, and the project became a traveling exhibit.

Here are John's words:

"500 years ago, only kings had their portraits painted as a way of asserting their significance. The time and energy it takes to paint a portrait by hand is a way of paying concentrated attention to a single person. It is a way of valuing ordinary peo-

ple for *who* they are, not what they achieve or the money they make."

John's description of this process has been a helpful way for me to think about being made in God's image. Before we build a life, achieve, grow, get sick, make mistakes—before any of what becomes our life takes place—there is in us the same inherent value because all of us human beings bear the image of God.

You are created in God's image. Every person you come across today is also made in God's image.

God, we thank you for art and the beauty of your creation. Give us eyes to see your image in all people. Amen.

## RETREAT OR REFUGE?

*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.*

—Psalm 46:1

For most of my life I have either run through problems with my head down, or I have retreated. I'm learning the biblical practice of seeking refuge.

There is a difference between refuge and retreat. To retreat is to run from trouble with no hope or thought of returning to the crisis. Retreat is avoidance. To seek refuge in the Lord, no matter what trouble we may find ourselves in, is an act of pursuing safety with the goal of being restored so that we can enter back into relationships and community. We seek refuge in the Lord not to avoid trouble but to find strength for the journey.

Retreat involves throwing in the towel and saying "I'm done." Refuge involves going to God to catch your breath, to regain some strength and perspective, and to keep on the journey.

Retreat is a result of fear without hope. Refuge is a result of recognizing that the world can be a dark and scary place but that God's light shines brighter.

I am learning to take refuge in the Lord. I find refuge in the Lord through worship, silence, community, working out, running, relationships, and the beauty of creation.

In what ways do you find refuge in the Lord?

Lord, you are our refuge and our strength. So often we retreat, or we try to push through. Teach us to take refuge in you so that we can continue on the journey. Amen.



## BUT ARE YOU WORKING?

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*  
—Ephesians 2:8-9

Charlene sat in a chair in the Roseland Christian Ministries shelter. She stared straight ahead, her eyes grew heavy, and her head nodded as she dozed off. Earlier she had received a methadone treatment to push back the withdrawals from her addiction to heroin.

Across from Charlene was Kimberly, shuffling through a bag full of papers, envelopes, and legal pads. She suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. She talks to voices in her head, sleeps in abandoned buildings, and has trouble taking care of herself physically.

Visitors to Roseland Christian Ministries often ask whether or not the people who come there for services work for a living. “When will they get jobs?” we sometimes hear. Questions like that seem to imply that a person’s worth is based mainly

on the work they do. When people ask such questions, they probably don’t mean any harm, but it’s important to know that God sees the whole person, not just what they can do or whether they have a job.

I am grateful to have a good work ethic. But I am certain that God’s measure for us is not limited to our work ethic.

Charlene has since moved into a rehabilitation facility. She is three weeks clean and sober. We are grateful that the Spirit is raising her back to life after being nearly dead for so long.

Lord, we thank you for the gift of life and all the ways you care for us. Thank you for not basing salvation on our works. In Christ, you love us freely. Amen.

## ONE PHONE CALL

*"I have summoned you by name. You are mine."*

—Isaiah 43:1

"Alright, you can make one phone call."

Gary didn't know any of his family members' phone numbers, and the police officer was giving him one phone call to make. The night before, he drank too much, got into an argument with a stranger, and started yelling at the top of his lungs outside a liquor store. His phone fell and was lost in the melee. He was arrested for public disturbance, slept in a jail cell, and woke up in a daze.

Again the officer said, "You can make one phone call."

He rattled off the number of Roseland Christian Ministries by heart to the officer and said, "Ask for Kisha or Pastor Joe. They know me there. Tell them Gary is in trouble and needs some help."

I am grateful to be part of a church where the community

knows the phone number by heart. I am grateful to be part of a church where somebody in their lowest state, humiliated by bad decisions, disease, addiction, or trouble, can say, "Call them; they know me there." I'm grateful for the God who calls us and knows us by name.

No matter how badly you have messed up, or what you may have become—God knows you by name and claims you. You belong to God.

Lord, we are grateful that you call us by name and that you claim us. We are grateful that we belong to you, body and soul. Amen.

**WISDOM FROM HEAVEN**

*The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*  
—James 3:17

Five years ago the congregation of Roseland Christian Ministries gathered to worship with a partner church in a suburb of Chicago. A couple from Roseland arrived 45 minutes early at the partner church. The driver was nervous that if they were late, they would perpetuate a negative racial stereotype. So they arrived early, sat in their car, read the Bible, and drank coffee, with no music playing.

Before long, police squad cars showed up. They had received a call reporting a disturbance in the parking lot. The police unclipped their holstered guns and told the driver of the car that he was on private property. Soon the car was searched. Members from the host church began to arrive for worship as the officers finished searching the car. The police departed since nothing illegal was hap-

pening—just a black couple going to church in a white neighborhood.

I have a long way to go when it comes to issues about race; maybe you do too. What are the places in our hearts, society, and structures that need to be examined? In each of us and in the communities we serve, the wisdom from heaven is needed to form us into more “peace-loving, considerate . . . impartial,” and less fearful people. May we have the humility and strength to allow God’s wisdom to shape us and do his will on earth as it is done in heaven.

Lord, may your wisdom dwell in us, take away fear, and give us fruits of mercy, peace, and goodness. In Jesus, Amen.

**BOB THE BARBER**

*The grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.*

—2 Corinthians 4:15

Bob was from Chicago, and he ended up homeless in Seattle. With few resources, he did what he could for work. Bob met a barber who offered him a free haircut and a shave. Bob accepted, and when the barber was finished, Bob looked at himself in the mirror and couldn't believe what he saw. It was the first time in months that he had looked at his face with more than just a passing glance. He looked handsome and dignified. He didn't feel like a "bum." His feeling of self-worth was overwhelming.

Bob began to take more steps to take care of himself. He eventually became a licensed barber. He moved back to Chicago and reconnected with family members. He now sets up a barber chair twice a month at Roseland Christian Ministries and offers free haircuts and shaves to men in the

community, many of whom are homeless. Most of the men walk a foot taller as they leave, heads held high.

Something about being given the gift to be your best self is inspiring. Grace is the ignition for the motor of gratitude. Bob lives a life of gratitude, serving others in the same way he was served.

When you look back over your life, think about times when you experienced God's grace through the kindness of another person. In what ways can you share God's grace with others?

Lord, help us to remember the grace we have received, and guide us to show grace to the people around us, to your glory. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## WHAT'S YOUR SONG?

*Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. . . ."*  
—Luke 1:46-47

Lavelle tends to break into song at any given moment. Not like someone humming a favorite hymn from their childhood. Oh no. Lavelle will bellow and blast out a note of praise at the top of his lungs. He is a living testimony of God's grace and goodness.

Now, it's true that Lavelle likes having an audience. But even more so, he needs to praise God. He needs to express what is inside of him—belting out praise for who God is in his life. Lavelle has inside of him a song to sing.

In Luke 1 we read that Mary had a song to sing. And she sang, "My soul glorifies the Lord," because God had chosen her—of all people!—to carry the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

Other translations read, "My soul magnifies the Lord." To

magnify is to make bigger—like with a magnifying glass. For us, Mary became a model of a decreased self while Christ increased in her and in her life. As John the Baptist would later say, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30, NRSV).

Do you sing a song that puts life back into perspective—where you are reminded just how big God, creation, and the love of Jesus are? What are the songs that God has put in your soul to magnify the Lord?

Amazing God, you have given us a song to sing—like Mary and Lavelle—a song of victory, a song of praise. Today may we magnify you in all we do. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## GROWING UP

*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.*  
—1 Corinthians 13:11

Corey grew up a few blocks from Roseland Christian Ministries. His dad went to prison when Corey was a boy, but Corey and his father would often write letters and talk on the phone. Corey did well in grade school, avoided gangs and trouble, and his mother, aunts, and grandmother raised him. His broader community, schools, and churches all proudly claim investing in his life.

When Corey was a senior in high school, he became a Gates Scholar and was awarded a full scholarship to Morehouse College. After graduating from Morehouse, he earned a master's degree. He worked for the Chicago Public Schools, and now he works with a foundation serving at-risk youth around the world. Corey also serves on the board of directors of Roseland Christian Ministries.

One of the great joys of being part of a Christian community is being able to see young people grow into their gifts. There is great joy in watching boys and girls become men and women of character and integrity. Many young people who grew up in Roseland have come back and used their gifts by working in the women and children's shelter, youth programs, and church ministries.

Who are the children you have watched growing up to serve their communities and families? Who are the young people you can encourage today and lift up by name?

Lord, thank you for all who have grown up to care for your communities in faith. Amen.

## REV. RICK'S LAUGH

*A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*  
—Proverbs 17:22

Nobody has a better laugh than Rev. Rick. In addition to serving as the pastor of a nearby church for 35 years, he also served as the president of the board of Roseland Christian Ministries for more than a decade. While he has multiple talents and abilities, what I love most about Rev. Rick is his laugh.

There are all kinds of laughs: guttural, throaty, staccato, sinister. There are as many laughs as there are people.

Rev. Rick's laugh is pure joy. I've heard him laugh across a room at the face a baby made. Sheer unadulterated joy. There is a joyful kindness to Rev. Rick's laugh that changes the atmosphere in the room.

As Proverbs says, "a cheerful heart is good medicine," and I'm inclined to believe that there is something healing that

comes from laughter. Laughter is a gift from God.

There have been many times in my life when I have just needed to laugh. Or just to hear laughter.

Maybe you've heard the phrase "I had to laugh to keep from crying." We could all probably do a little bit more of both.

But today I want to laugh. As a gift from God, can we find pleasure in the fun, funny, silly, and even ridiculous? Maybe today we can find a moment to let out a cheerful laugh.

Lord, thank you for the gift of laughter. Thank you for the joy and gladness that come with shared laughter and humor in your name. Amen.

## TOUGH MINDS AND TENDER HEARTS

*"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."*

—Matthew 10:16

Officer Clayton grew up on the South Side of Chicago and was inspired to become a police officer to serve his community. He has arrested hardened criminals in life-threatening situations. He can be tough skinned and all business in situations where he needs to be. He also comes by Roseland Christian Ministries to bring bicycles for children, tickets to the circus, and school supplies for kids when the school year starts. He is both tough and tender. He is strong-willed and sensitive to the needs of others.

I am inspired by people who are a synthesis of gifts that we don't normally attribute together. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a sermon on this topic, titled, "Tough Minds and Tender Hearts." This sermon is a gift to anyone who

may feel like a square peg in a round hole at times.

Following Jesus requires that we not give into societal expectations if they diminish the fullness of who God made us to be. We have in us, as children of God, the capacity to be both as shrewd as a serpent and as innocent as a dove, tough and tender, creative and organized, thoughtful and action oriented.

In what ways are you a synthesis of attributes that may seem like contradictions but come together to form you?

Lord, bring together all the traits that make us who we are, even those that can seem contradictory. Make us whole by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.



**KERITH RAVINE**

*He went to the Kerith Ravine. . . . The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and . . . in the evening, and he drank from the brook.*

—1 Kings 17:5-6

Last spring Chanell sat on a bench in the vacant lot adjacent to the Roseland Christian Ministries parking lot. A few years ago, with the help of a supporting contractor, that vacant lot was excavated. Good topsoil was brought in. Grass seed was planted, and that lot has become a beautiful stretch of green between an abandoned building and our parking lot.

Chanell was sitting on a bench made by the Roseland Cadets boys club. She sat in the shade, staring at the community garden boxes, in which flowers and vegetables grow in abundance. A bird feeder invites goldfinches and other birds in. One morning I walked over to her and asked, "What are you doing out here every day?"

She smiled and said, "I like to see the flowers growing, watch

the birds come and eat. I've been through so much—abuse, domestic violence, addiction. You name it, I've lived it. I sit here and receive my little peace from God until I'm able to face the world again."

In a time of drought and famine, when the leaders and people of Israel had rebelled against God, Elijah went to the Kerith Ravine. Chanell sits on a bench at a community garden. In places like those, God provides safety, security, and a restoring of the soul. We all need a Kerith Ravine. Where is yours?

Lord, lead us to restoration and security as you care for us each day. Provide us a place where we can find peace in you. Amen.

## GOOD CHARACTER

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. . . . —Philippians 2:3-4*

I heard someone say recently, “What we need nowadays is people with good character.”

What is good character? Good morals? A firm handshake and a steady look in the eye?

Tina has good character. She’s a little rough around the edges—smokes Newport cigarettes, has faded tattoos, and can slip into colorful combinations of language that would make a sailor blush. But she lives a life committed to using every resource and gift at her disposal for the good of others.

Recently a young mom in the community died, leaving behind three young boys in the custody of their 18-year-old sister. These boys are fending for themselves in so many ways. Tina noticed them and began bringing them food and clothing. She takes the boys to a young men’s mentoring program at church, and when her

immediate family has a birthday party or somewhere fun to go, she includes the boys as if they are her own. I think character begins with emptying oneself for others.

David Brooks, who wrote a book on character, said in an interview: “People who really have character make deep, unshakable connections to something outside of themselves.” Character involves a commitment to service and community, outside of oneself. In Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan, for example, that is extended to include enemies (Luke 10:29-37).

How might we empty ourselves for others today?

Lord, you emptied yourself for us all. Fill us with your Spirit to live in humble service of others for your sake. Amen.

## LOOKING BACK (AND FORWARD)

*Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the LORD showed him the whole land. . . .*  
—Deuteronomy 34:1

Come with me down Michigan Avenue, past Root Brothers Hardware and the blinking neon sign at the Currency Exchange. As we leave the Roseland neighborhood, in the rearview mirror we can see the people and places we reflected on this month—Lloyd, Annette, Bob, Corey, Charlene, Kimberly, Tina, Terrell, and many more.

Before Moses died, God allowed him to go up Mount Nebo for a glimpse of the promised land. But what is looking forward if there is nowhere to look forward from? What is arrival with no memory of the journey? I imagine Moses looked not just toward the promised land but also back in the direction of the wilderness, the Red Sea, and Egypt (see Exodus 12-20). What a journey.

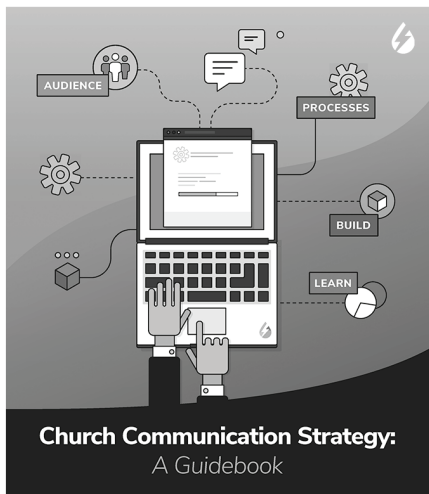
Pausing to look back gives us the gift of perspective to celebrate God's faithfulness over time. As we said earlier, "'If the LORD had not been on our side,' where would we be?" (Dec. 8).

As this year ends, look back on the journey that was 2023. Remember the wilderness moments, the mountaintops, the people we lost, the babies that were born, and the friendships that formed. Let's look back on the faithfulness of God in 2023 as we then look ahead to 2024. What a journey.

God is good!

Lord, thank you for your faithfulness this year and for your presence with us on the journey. Thank you for the gift of looking back—and for what lies ahead. Amen.

# Energize your church communications with **CHURCH JUICE**



Get our free ebook "Church Communication Strategy: A Guidebook" when you subscribe.

**Sign up at [ChurchJuice.com/StrategyGuidebook](https://ChurchJuice.com/StrategyGuidebook).**

Periodicals postage paid at  
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at  
additional mailing offices.

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew



**ReFrame**  
Ministries

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

---

1700 28th Street SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407  
800-626-3060  
[info@todaydevotional.com](mailto:info@todaydevotional.com)  
[www.todaydevotional.com](http://www.todaydevotional.com)  
[facebook.com/todaydevotional](https://facebook.com/todaydevotional)

---

CANADA



POSTES

POST

CANADA



Postage paid

Port payé

Personalized  
Mail

Courrier  
personnalisé

1946358

RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED  
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew



**ReFrame**  
Ministries

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

3475 Mainway  
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9  
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1  
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8

905-336-2920  
[info@todaydevotional.com](mailto:info@todaydevotional.com)  
[www.todaydevotional.com](http://www.todaydevotional.com)  
[facebook.com/todaydevotional](https://facebook.com/todaydevotional)