

Today

Jan/Feb 2019

refresh, refocus, renew

JESUS ON
MAIN STREET



ALSO: KINGDOM LIVING

Friends:

Last Christmas, I saw an image on the Internet showing Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus sitting on the sidewalk in front of a convenience store. The image was intended to give us a sense of what the first-century family might look like as refugees today. We know they were travelers in Bethlehem and exiles in Egypt, but what would they look like in Denver or Vancouver?



As an adult, Jesus of Nazareth spent a lot of time in various towns and villages. He taught on the mountains and plains, but also on the streets among the crowds. What if that happened today? What would Jesus look like on Main Street in your town as he talked about the kingdom of God?

This January, Beth Fellingner examines the stories of Jesus on a number of city streets, reflecting on the ways he encountered and dealt with everyday people going about their business.

Then in February, Dale Melenberg explores with us one of Jesus' favorite topics: the kingdom of God. We'll consider what God's kingdom might look like in our contemporary world.

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

—Steven Koster

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**“Jesus on Main Street”
Beth Fellingner**



**“Kingdom Living”
Dale Melenberg**

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ReFrame
Media

january

Jesus on Main Street

Beth Fellingner

Today Jesus walked down Main Street. He looked at the people who were walking, driving cars, riding bikes, pushing strollers, sitting on the sidewalk, and heading into stores and businesses. He listened to people who needed help and people who needed to be helpers. He was there when the restaurant owner gave out a free meal and when someone bought a cup of coffee for a homeless person. Jesus was there when someone needed shelter from the cold and when the food bank opened its doors. He was there in the tears of people mourning the loss of a loved one. He was there in the beauty of the art gallery and the poverty of the welfare office. He was in the coffee shop and the downtown church where conversations about faith took place.

Many stories in the Bible take place as Jesus walks along a road or down a street. That's often where he encounters people and teaches lessons that still apply to us today. Jesus is still walking down Main Street today. I have often found him there. Will you come with me this month to find the Lord at work and join him?

Beth Fellingner is the pastor of Destination Church in St. Thomas, Ontario. She and her husband have been involved in ministry in large urban centers and small rural communities. Beth has served in three church plants and a church rebirth as well as in established churches. She loves her children, their spouses, and grandchildren. She is a cancer survivor twice over and celebrates life every day. She believes strongly in the local church and what a church committed to Christ, missions, and its community can accomplish. She has an enthusiastic vision of how the church can reach out and share the good news of Jesus with others.

JOUMOU SOUP

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

—Romans 12:15

A fold-out table holds nearly all the ingredients for Haitian Joumou soup: cabbage, carrots, turnips, scotch bonnet peppers, and green or yellow squash that must be just the right fleshy orange on the inside to be pureed for the base of the soup. Haitians traditionally serve and eat this soup on New Year's Day. It is a soup that represents freedom and independence, and it is enjoyed by Haitians everywhere.

A few years ago I had the honor of eating this soup in Haiti on New Year's Day. A group from across North America had landed in Haiti to help bring medical aid and supplies to several mountain communities during a cholera outbreak. We had also carried food with us so as not to be a burden to our hosts. As we entered the compound where we would be staying, the smell of Joumou

soup filled the air. In the midst of painful circumstances there was still celebration. The local director reminded us that even on the toughest days God is good, and he is faithful. We were reminded that there are days for tears and days for laughter and thanksgiving. That New Year's holiday was a day for celebration. What a fitting way to start a new year!

Are you celebrating God's goodness today?

Dear God, thank you for a new year in which we can be reminded to celebrate together, even in the midst of hard times. Help us always to remember your faithfulness to us. Amen.

FINDING JESUS

They began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him.
—Luke 2:44-45

One of the first stories about Jesus takes place when he and Joseph and Mary are visiting Jerusalem with some other families for the Feast of Passover. Mary and Joseph must have been frantic when they realized Jesus was missing. At first it is easy to think that your child is with other friends in the crowd, but then you realize you don't hear his laughter or see him anywhere near. The search began in earnest, and they had to travel back to Jerusalem to find him.

When they found Jesus in the temple, he was perfectly fine. In fact, he was astonishing people with his questions and answers. And he was a little surprised that his parents were so upset. Having had the experience years ago of losing our son for a few hours helps me understand the feelings of Mary and Joseph. So,

of course, when they realized Jesus wasn't there, they went searching for him.

That reminds me of something I often hear in mission conversations today: "Find where God is at work, and join him."

I wonder if we get so busy doing life that we sometimes stop experiencing God's presence and his interruptions. Perhaps the beginning of a new year is a good time to search out where Jesus is and to join him in conversation and in the important work he is doing. Where do you see Jesus at work?

Dear Jesus, at the start of this new year, help us find you and walk the journey of life with you. Help us to listen to you and follow you. Thanks for being here with us. Amen.

SINGING IN THE AIRPORT

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
—Matthew 11:28

As I was boarding a plane and going through customs before connecting to my next flight, I noticed the faces of so many people focusing on getting through the next line. Many wore frowns, and some were so intent on texts and tweets that all they did was take a few steps, drag their suitcase, stop, and send another message.

Then I noticed something changing. I could hear singing, and I saw faces begin to smile. Far ahead I saw that the baggage handler was thoroughly enjoying his day. He was singing to each traveler as they handed over their suitcases. He was ad-libbing words to familiar songs so that they connected with each person in front of him. Immediately smiles would break out, and cheerful conversations followed. He sang back his responses with a grin.

Somehow, as I watched and stepped closer to the singer, I realized I was curious what the song for me might be when I reached that part of the line.

Then it struck me that the way this man was engaging with people reminded me of Jesus. As Jesus encounters people who walk by with their baggage of life, he sings them a new song. He sings songs of hope, friendship, grace, and whatever else is needed to brighten their day and circumstances.

With every new day, we have the opportunity to let Jesus take our cares and sing to us.

Jesus, thank you for offering to carry my burdens. Please take them today and refresh my soul. Thank you for rest. Thank you for joy and peace of heart. In your name, Amen.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
—1 Corinthians 12:27

Have you ever stubbed or broken a toe, especially your little toe? It seems so small, but when it is not functioning well with the rest of the foot, it is very noticeable. This past week I have had a hand and wrist wrapped up in a splint; they are unusable and out of commission. As I have struggled to do even basic tasks, I realize how much I need that hand to function well. I realize how much longer it takes me to do things with only one hand—and some things I can't do at all.

Thinking about the parts of the body helps us understand the way spiritual gifts work in the church, the people who make up the body of Christ. This reminds us that working together, with everyone using their gifts and talents, makes the tasks to be accomplished much easier. It also means

that everyone is included in the project. Often we see only the more visible gifts and give them more value. But, as a pastor, I like to remind people that you may see a nose, but if the kidney and heart were not functioning well, the nose wouldn't be either.

When Jesus sent his disciples down the street, he never sent them alone (see Luke 10). He knew they would need to work together to do the tasks he called them to do. I am thankful that God made us all different so that working together would always be better.

Dear God, help us remember that each of us has a gift and a talent to offer and that we are equal in your sight. Help us to use our gifts well so that the body of Christ brings honor to you. Amen.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

—John 9:3

A few years ago we saw a local TV ad of a woman sitting in a car. She's minding her own business, and suddenly a man comes out of the blue, rips the door open, and pulls her out of the car roughly. It looks like he's attacking her, and we look on in horror. Then the camera pulls back, and we see that the car is on fire and the woman didn't know it. The man wasn't assaulting her; he was rescuing her. The ad finishes by saying, "You need the bigger picture. Channel 10 News gives you the bigger picture."

The ad makes a point—though it uses undue shock and surprise to get your attention. We often need to see the bigger picture.

In the story we have read about Jesus today, it's clear that the disciples and others need to see a bigger picture too. As

they ask Jesus about the blind man, they are only looking through the narrow lens of their own thinking. Jesus explains, though, that the bigger picture in this man's story is about bringing honor to God.

We need to remember that even though we are often quick to judge what we see, there is always more to the story.

In our own lives, how can we make sure that we see the bigger picture?

Dear God, help us to remember you are in control and know the bigger story. Help us to invite you to show us the bigger picture. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THERMAL UNDERWEAR AND KISSES

"I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion." —Hosea 2:19

A couple of years ago on a cold, wintry day, the radio station in our town invited couples of all ages to gather in a local park to renew their wedding vows. They asked if I would be willing to lead the renewal ceremony, and then together everyone could celebrate a reception indoors, where it was warm.

Everyone was excited and decked out in their finest. Couples who had been married a year were there, and so were couples who had been married for decades. They wore white dresses and suits, and because the temperature was way below freezing, many of them wore thermal underwear too. The couples repeated vows and smiled and reminded each other of the love at the center of their relationship. And they kissed.

This event celebrated the lasting love of all those couples,

and it reminded me of the Lord's deep, abiding love for his people. We find pictures of that portrayed in many passages of the Bible, like the one in Hosea that we have read today.

There is still a groom deeply in love, and a bride who is preparing for him. The groom has graciously shared his vows with her, and his words are repeated often as the bride reminds herself of the groom's amazing promises and love. That Groom is Jesus Christ, and his Bride is his church here in the world. As the people of his beloved church, will we be ready when Jesus comes to live with us and give us full life forever?

Thank you, Lord, for loving and caring for us. Help us to be faithful and to grow more deeply in love with you every day. Amen.

THROW AWAY THE STONE

"Where are [your accusers]? Has no one condemned you? . . . Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."
—John 8:10-11

We are often drawn in to life-like stories about tragedy, love, and heroism, and we tend to hope for a happy ending. Our imaginations fire up with the plot's twists and turns. We don't like it when a character is treated unfairly, and we smile when justice is served. We walk away satisfied when the tale has ended well.

Stories in real life, though, can work out a little differently. I don't know who the adulterous woman in this story was, or where her story started, but I am pretty sure she didn't want to be dragged into a public square and threatened with execution. Having your faults exposed for everyone to see is not something any of us wants in our life story. It is easy to judge others and find fault with them, but then Jesus, who is there listening, speaks up.

In that moment of telling those who are without sin to throw a stone, Jesus reminds us that we are all sinners and that this woman represents us. Only Jesus has the right to throw a stone, and he chooses not to. Instead, he chooses to use grace and forgiveness. Jesus asks that each of us throw away our stones and follow his example.

Dear God, remind us today that our task is not to judge others but instead to offer people your forgiveness. Help us all to accept your offer of forgiveness and begin living a new story. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

HOW TO RESIST

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

—Matthew 4:10

Have you ever been tempted to take something that didn't belong to you, or something that wasn't yours to have at the moment?

Maybe it was a piece of candy at the store, or a friend's toy, or someone else's jewelry. Maybe it was something that looked exciting and fun, but you also knew that it could be dangerous and hurt you. Maybe it was something you thought you deserved, or felt you just had to have, and you knew this might be your only chance to have it. After all, it looked so interesting and inviting—and even though you had been warned about it, you thought, "How could this possibly do any harm?"

As the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he used all kinds of reasoning and tricks to try to convince Jesus that he should have certain things or

do certain things. But, thankfully for us, Jesus never gave in to temptation. He saw through Satan's lies and pushed away those temptations by recalling God's words to us in Scripture.

We too can resist temptation—by the power of Christ's Spirit in us. We may be curious about what we see in front of us, but, like Jesus, we need to let it go and move on. He endured temptation so that he could pass the test for our sake, and now we have his example of how to resist. We can trust that God will always provide a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Lord, thank you for your example of how not to give in to temptations. Please give us the courage and power to resist, and please provide us a way out. In your name, Amen.

INFINITY SCARVES

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.
—Philippians 2:5

I am sitting on the front porch of a house in our town enjoying bacon butter tarts and watermelon with someone who inspires me. Her name is Natalia, and she is nine years old. She is a wonderful young lady with a big heart. She has the desire to help others.

Her eyes light up as she talks about her passion to help people. When I asked her why, she said, "Because God loves people and doesn't want them to go hungry—and I can help. I don't want people to go hungry either." Her donations from knitting and selling scarves reached over \$350 this year and helped a local food bank, our church's food programs, and an organization helping people with autism.

As I think of Natalia's generosity, I am reminded of the passage in Philippians about the generosity of Jesus.

Jesus, who had everything in heaven, was willing to come to our messy planet to live with imperfect, broken human beings like us. He was willing to share with us in abundance. He came without all the splendor of heaven so that he could relate to us in our common, everyday lives and give us hope and love.

What Jesus modeled to us, in giving himself, is what we can model to others as we walk similar streets to share his love with people today.

Thank you, Jesus, for being generous with us. Thank you for showing us how to be generous with others. Help us to see the needs of others and to respond in the ways that you have modeled for us. Amen.

CONTAINERS

"Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."
—John 4:14

"May I have a drink of water?" is a question that is asked every day. And the response will usually be like this: a parent or caregiver fills a cup or glass and hands it to the person who is thirsty. Or maybe they give the person a bottle of water. All this is done without thinking twice about needing a container to hold the liquid. Unless the water is bubbling from a water fountain, there is always a container.

When Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink, she noticed that he didn't have a container to draw water with. But it turned out that he wanted to give her the water of eternal life, and as she listened and grew to believe in him, she became the container for his life-giving message.

Similarly, when it comes to living water, we are the containers that Jesus wants to fill.

Often it is easy to ask God to fill us, but it is difficult to surrender our ideas and plans. Jesus shows up in places where we least expect to find him, and he shakes up our thinking just as he did for the Samaritan woman.

As she begins to trust Jesus, she realizes the truth about the new life he can fill us with. Her response is to run back to the streets of her town and tell everyone about Jesus.

Dear Jesus, may we be nourished by your water of eternal life. Give us the courage to let you fill us with your love, that we may understand the impact of living for you. In your name, Amen.

28 CENTS

"Truly I tell you," he said, this poor widow has put in more than all the others."
—Luke 21:3

Twenty-eight cents doesn't seem like much—something you could probably find on the street if you walked a couple of blocks. But one day last week 28 cents became quite a lot. I was given 28 cents by a gentleman who lives on very little. He had collected his change so that he could contribute to helping someone else eat a much-needed meal. I accepted the 28 cents and vowed to myself that it would make a difference.

As much as the man who gave me 28 cents caught my attention, the widow's offering at the temple may have caught the attention of Jesus even more. He watched everyone putting their offerings into the money box, but he stopped to comment on the widow. Perhaps what Jesus appreciated most was her attitude and her willingness to give.

Something else here should also catch our attention. Jesus made sure that everyone knew the widow's story because he wanted to remind us that everyone has something to give and that every gift matters.

Sometimes people feel that the amount they can give doesn't matter much and won't make a difference because it isn't very big.

What is important, though, is that Jesus notices—and that makes all the difference.

Dear God, thank you that we all have something to give. Help us to remember that you have designed us to work together and to share together to bring your love to the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TEARS ARE OKAY

Jesus wept.

—John 11:35

I had just come from the hospice facility where I had visited a member of our congregation. He was ready to die and make heaven his home. I knew that when he passed away, I would miss him and our conversations together.

What I didn't expect that day was to get a call from a young couple asking if I could meet with them at the hospital. The son they had been expecting would not be coming home with them. Complications with the pregnancy had led to a still birth, and the young parents were in shock and grieving. The nurses in the hallway were grieving too. There were also three little girls at home waiting to welcome their little brother. They needed to be told that he wasn't coming home.

"Reed was perfect in every way. He has gone to be with Jesus now. We know that our

heavenly Father will use this for good. Even though this isn't what we expected or what we wanted for our family, he is still good, and Reed's legacy will be a testament to his goodness." These words from the parents reminded me of the Scripture passage for today, showing that Jesus too had to deal with the death of people he loved. How comforting it is to know that just as Jesus wept over his friend Lazarus, he also weeps with us in our grief.

Dear Lord, thank you for showing us that tears are okay. Remind us that you are with us in our grief and that you are our comforter. Please heal our hurts and bring goodness into our lives, that we may share it with others. Amen.

CHEETAHS AND GOLDEN LABS

I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.
—John 15:15

During a trip to the zoo in Columbus, Ohio, I was fascinated to learn about companionship. I learned that cheetahs are naturally shy and anxious creatures. They are so shy, in fact, that when they get nervous, it is difficult for them even to breed— and they are becoming endangered because of it.

The zoo needed a solution to help the cheetahs, so they began pairing cheetahs with Golden Labrador puppies. Normally these animals would be enemies, but because they were introduced at a young age, the cheetahs and Labs became best friends. The dogs helped the cheetahs calm down and relax. It was fun watching them run together and put on a display.

I have been reminded over the years that if you want to go fast (like a cheetah), you go alone;

but if you want to go far, you go together (as friends).

Jesus was telling his disciples something similar. If we want to go far and grow the family of God, we need to love one another just as Jesus loves us. When he calls us friends, he removes the barriers we have created and becomes our companion. We no longer need to be anxious or fearful of anyone around us. Instead, we can learn to love one another.

Dear God, thanks for helping us see that sometimes the people we have thought were our enemies can really be our friends. Thank you that Jesus showed us how to be a friend. Help us become that same kind of friend to others. In your name, Amen.

JESUS ALWAYS HAS TIME

When Jesus returned, a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him.
—Luke 8:40

Patience is not my strong suit. I try really hard, but there are days when I am not very successful. I have an expectation in my mind, and I like to have things work out the way I have planned.

Perhaps the crowd in the street that day felt the same way. Everyone had come to see Jesus and was expecting something to happen.

More than likely, what happened that day was a lot more than they were expecting.

First, a religious leader was desperate for his daughter to be made well. She was dying, and the only hope that Jairus had left was for Jesus to come and heal her. After hearing about her, Jesus started down the road to where the little girl was. He planned to go there and change the situation.

Then, what no one else saw was the desperation of a woman who had been ill for over twelve years and who believed she would be well if only she could touch Jesus. And what no one expected was that Jesus would stop in the crowd to find the woman. Jairus was running out of time, and he needed Jesus to keep walking. The woman wasn't even expecting Jesus to stop and address her.

What I love about this story is that Jesus had time for both. Jesus always has time for us, whether we are patient or not.

Dear Lord, thank you that you are not limited by time or by our expectations of what should happen. Help us to trust your timing and your results for our lives. Amen.

GOD CONVERSATIONS

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"
—Luke 10:29

Every day at our church anyone can walk in the door and enjoy good conversation and an equally good cup of coffee. It is also not unusual for someone to enjoy a hot bowl of soup.

There is usually a gathering of people on any given day, so we call the conversations that happen "God conversations." Many of these conversations do not start off with talking about God, but then, usually partway through, the conversation changes. Something about struggles in life or belief in God comes up, and the conversation goes deeper. Some people share that they aren't sure if they believe in God, and others say they are trying to figure out what other people believe.

I think maybe Jesus inspired those same kinds of conversations in many of the places where he went. I love that

he told stories to illustrate his points rather than just giving a quick answer. This challenges us to think through his stories too. The people asking Jesus for answers didn't always understand, but Jesus always gave them something to think about.

Today's story in particular teaches us how to care for others equally and to think carefully about who our neighbor is. Perhaps this is a good day to begin a "God conversation" with your neighbor and see where it goes.

Dear God, thank you for conversations that lead us to thinking about you. Teach us to use your stories to help us gain understanding so that we will live our lives the way you call us to. Amen.

TABLE OF GRACE

They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.
—Luke 22:13

The house is noisy and filled with people of all ages and sizes. Wonderful aromas drift in from the kitchen, and celebration is in the air. The atmosphere is full of stories being told and memories being shared. There is always something familiar and always something new. I look forward to these shared family gatherings. (Family is anyone who arrives and shares in the gathering). Connections are made over birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and any other excuse to get together.

For the same reasons, I also look forward to communion at church. I look forward to sharing the story of Jesus walking down the street to the place where he and his disciples would share a meal. I imagine the disciples getting ready for the Passover Feast together. They would be reflecting on the first Passover, and they would be wondering

how things would go in the upper room Jesus had arranged for them.

At the table, as they remember God's deliverance from slavery long ago, there is a change in the conversation. Jesus introduces something new, offering a remembrance for the future. He says this meal will mark the beginning of a new covenant. They don't understand, but later they will see that the kingdom of God will include all kinds of people—all who believe in Jesus as Savior. This will be a table offering grace for all—and that's worth remembering!

Dear God, forgive us when we forget. Remind us today of your love and grace. Thank you for the sacrifice of Jesus that opens the way for us to come to your table. Amen.

BACK TO BASICS, WITH A TWIST

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."
—John 21:10

This story about Jesus standing on the beach always inspires me. When I feel like I have lost my way and need to refocus, I often turn to this passage.

It is interesting that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he first called his disciples, they had been fishing all night but had caught nothing. Then he told them to go back out to fish again. They took the risk, and they caught more fish than their boat could hold (Luke 5:1-11). For the next three years they followed and walked with him, learning what it means to fish for people instead.

Then, after Jesus was crucified and had risen from the grave, he told them to go and meet him in Galilee (Matthew 28:10), where they had first met him. While waiting for him there, they must have had some time on their hands and didn't know what else to do, so

they went back to basics. They went fishing.

That night, however, they caught nothing. Then, the next morning, Jesus called out from the shore, telling them to cast their net on the boat's other side. They took the risk, and before long, they knew exactly who it was on shore.

Do you hear Jesus calling you?

Notice too that although Jesus already had fish on the fire, he invited them to bring some of their fish too. He also invites us to bring what he has given so that we can join with him in the work of his kingdom.

Jesus, guide us to listen to you and to trust you to provide all we need—and more. Help us also to use what you have given us to share your love with others. In your name, Amen.

BOOTS AND FEET

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."
—Matthew 7:7

This seems like such a simple teaching: "Ask and it will be given to you." But its meaning is more mysterious than predictable, and its outcomes can be surprising.

I didn't even think of this passage on the day I asked Jesus whom he would meet if he was walking down the main street of our city. But within minutes of my asking that question and settling into my office, someone walked through my door in need of a new pair of shoes. It was cold and snowy, and the person's shoe had a large hole in the bottom. I asked for a pair of shoes to be delivered to the church. Just then the door opened again, and someone else said they had a problem. Their foot was in pain, and they had come to ask for prayer. The person who needed shoes offered to pray, and in very little time the two

people left my office. One had shoes, and the other had no more pain. Both were blessed, and so was I.

The door opened again, and someone asked for information about the church and how they might get involved.

The challenge for us all is that when we ask Jesus, we must be prepared to work with him and care for others. It is exciting to become aware of everyday miracles that can happen when we ask Jesus to walk Main Street with us.

Dear Jesus, when we pray, teach us to ask and look for your answers. Help us to become aware of the people we will meet and how you will connect our lives. Prepare us to find you in the midst of everyday life. In your name, Amen.

LOOK UP

He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.
—Luke 19:3

If you are short like me, you know that whenever a group photo is taken, you will end up in the front row. You also know that if there is something great to see, you will often be behind the tallest person at the event. Zacchaeus must have felt that way too. He was short, and the crowd was growing. The people wanted to see Jesus as he walked down the street. The only thing Zacchaeus could do was to run ahead and climb a tree.

He did not expect to be noticed. He really just wanted a glimpse of Jesus. What he didn't know was that Jesus could see him.

Jesus then invited himself to dinner and offered friendship. Zacchaeus came down from the tree and was no longer invisible in the crowd.

There may be times in our lives when we feel invisible, and we may hear about great things that Jesus is doing for others but have a hard time seeing or believing that he might notice us.

The story of Zacchaeus reminds us that no matter who we are or what we believe, Jesus can see us and wants to invite himself into our lives.

Today is a good day to go looking for Jesus and to prepare for him to come and see you.

Dear Jesus, thank you for seeing us wherever we are. Help us to know that you want to engage with us and share in our lives. May we be willing to stretch or climb a little higher so that we can see you coming. We pray in your name. Amen.

AMAZING

Jesus . . . was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

—Mark 10:14

I enjoy my grandchildren very much. They are precocious and sweet and full of energy. They can also be noisy and, as my young grandson says, "cheeky." They give me the ability to see old things with fresh eyes and to play again. To have marshmallow creations called "amazing" reminds me that sticky hands and eyes full of mischief have something to teach us.

They also tell it like it is. When we were standing at the graveside of one of our children, our four-year-old grandson reminded me that we didn't need to be sad. His reasoning: We knew Jesus, and so did Aunt Lindsay, and we would see her again in heaven. It was a profound moment.

Jesus knew that when children are invited to the table or any gathering, we lose sophistication and gain wisdom.

We experience newness of faith and enjoy a conversation that has not been stuffed and stifled with adult assumptions. We may also feel a little uncomfortable because children challenge our thinking. It is easy to push them aside and think they will understand when they are older.

When the disciples pushed children away, Jesus got upset. He invited the children to return and said, "Do not hinder them." Their deep dependency and trust, not to mention their precious worth, teach us a lot about life in God's kingdom.

Dear Jesus, thank you for showing us the value of little ones. When we are busy or distracted, remind us that they have lots to teach us. In your name, Amen.

PARACHUTES AND PERSPECTIVE

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.
—John 14:26

You are standing on a mountain in the Swiss Alps, and an instructor is helping you into your gear before you run off the mountain's edge and start to parasail down. It will take an hour to reach the bottom, and you are receiving your last instructions. When the wind is right, the instructor will yell, "Run!" So you listen for the instructor's voice, and then you run. You catch the wind under your sail, and your journey begins.

Jesus knew he would be ending his time on earth, and he wanted to make sure his disciples had their final instructions. He wanted them to know that they would never be alone. He wanted them to know that they would have everything they needed and that if they listened to the voice of the Spirit, their journey would

be everything God intended it to be.

Jesus still points us in the same direction. He reminds us that we have the guidance of the Holy Spirit. How we treat others, how we embrace love, and how we obey him are the equipment we need. Jesus points us in the direction of the Father, and now, guided by the Spirit, our task is to follow the directions, wait for the wind, and run.

Dear Jesus, thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thank you for equipping us to live out our journey of faith. Help us to listen to your instructions and to remember that, with your Spirit in us, we have everything we need. Amen.

DETOURS

When they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"
—Mark 1:37

In Ontario, where I live, there is lots of snow in January. One advantage to the snow is that it limits road construction. When the weather turns warmer, it seems we move right into a "Detour" season. When you leave your house in the morning, you have a plan and you think you know the roads you'll be taking. Then a "Detour" sign pops up and takes you a different way.

I wonder if that is how the disciples felt that morning when they woke up and Jesus wasn't in the house. They were probably planning on another day of walking with people and learning from Jesus as he interacted with them. A crowd had begun to gather in hopes of finding Jesus and asking him to help. Before long, it seemed everyone was looking for Jesus.

But Jesus had taken a detour. He knew that if you want to

help others, you must first be equipped and prepared with the help of the Father. He knew he needed time away to be with his Father. He needed to refresh and refocus. Jesus also knew that his mission extended beyond the local crowd, so he traveled throughout the region to the streets of other towns.

Have you taken time to be with God today, to be refreshed and refocused in his presence? Could he be pointing to a detour?

Dear God, sometimes we are so busy that we forget to take time to be with you. Guide us to put you first in our lives. Keep us listening to your direction, and help us to be willing to take detours. In Jesus' name, Amen.

HIGH WAVES

[Jesus] said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"
—Mark 4:40

There is something spectacular about watching a storm while you are safe inside your home. But what if you are out on the water?

A few years ago my husband and I were in a paddleboat half-way across a lake when a storm started to brew. As the wind and waves picked up, the boat's rudder broke, and we could barely steer. It took a long time to get back to shore and for our anxiety to settle down.

Imagine how the disciples felt in the midst of a furious squall! I am sure that life jackets, as we know them, didn't exist. Water was swamping their boat. And yet, in the midst of their exasperation and anxiety, they saw that Jesus was asleep. He was resting!

Have there been times in your life when you faced a storm and it seemed that Jesus

didn't even notice? Were there times when you were not sure whether you would survive?

The disciples decided to wake Jesus up. It wasn't enough to have him in the boat; they needed him to be involved. So they woke him, and he got up and calmed the storm. Then he challenged them to really trust in him.

Are you in the midst of a storm? Invite Jesus into your storm and trust in him to be with you and do what is best.

Dear Jesus, thank you that in the midst of the storms of life, you are there. Help us to involve you rather than worry or be afraid. Today we ask for the calming of our storms, in your name. Amen.

QUESTIONS IN MY MIND

When they had all had enough to eat . . . [the disciples] filled twelve baskets with the pieces . . . left over. . . . —John 6:12-13

On Thursday evenings our church hosts a community dinner called “Stone Soup.” It is based on the children’s story by the same name. The theory is that everyone brings an ingredient with them. We decide on a meal plan, and everyone pitches in. Depending on the numbers of people coming for dinner and the donations we receive, we have often prayed for a “loaves and fishes” blessing. No one ever goes away hungry.

I often wonder, *How do people match what to bring? And how do the people in the kitchen decide how to use the ingredients and make everything stretch to feed the crowd?*

I also have questions about Jesus’ feeding a huge crowd of many thousands. For example, how did they find the little boy in this huge crowd; what brought him to their attention? I also wonder what the disciples

were thinking when Jesus saw the five loaves and two fish and then just said, “Have the people sit down,” as if everything was already solved. The impossibility of the moment must have been on their minds.

But Jesus doesn’t seem troubled. He offers thanks and begins to distribute the food, more than enough for everyone.

Though I also have other questions—such as Where did they find the baskets?—I am more encouraged to know that when we bring our small amounts to Jesus, he uses them to be more than enough.

Dear Jesus, when we think we do not have enough, show us what we do have and help us to trust in you to make it enough by giving it to you. Amen.

JOB DESCRIPTIONS

"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

—Luke 4:21

Have you ever had a review of how well you have been doing in your job? Often we are assured that we are doing our job quite well, but we may also be encouraged to improve in certain areas. Most of us are relieved when the evaluation is done and we can go back to doing what we do—and trying to improve in those certain areas.

Jesus had traveled back to Galilee, and as word spread about the things he had been doing, people wanted to see if the stories they had heard were actually true. The people in his hometown knew him as Joseph's son, so they were really curious—and rather doubtful—about him.

Jesus goes to the synagogue, pulls out his job description from Isaiah, and begins to read. He outlines why he is going from place to place and sharing the good news—God's story of

grace, forgiveness, healing, and love. The description in Isaiah shows why he heals lepers, declares the good news of God's love, and invites others to follow him. It explains why people who were blind can now see, and why others can walk even though they were paralyzed. Jesus is accomplishing his mission.

When Jesus invites us to join him on the road, he calls us to do as he is doing. Are you serving him with the gifts he has given you? Are you ready for your job evaluation?

Dear Jesus, thank you for making your directions for our lives clear. Help us to serve you faithfully in all that we do. Amen.

THE SMALLEST LINE

He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."
—Mark 8:24

If you have ever had a vision test, you probably recall being asked to read the smallest line that you can see clearly on an eye chart. Then you may have received eyedrops and additional tests to determine the best optics for you. When you look through a series of lenses, you tell the doctor which ones are blurry or clear, and adjustments are made to achieve the right focus. The results will determine whether or not you need corrective lenses. But if you are not honest about what you see, you are not helping the doctor or yourself.

When Jesus walked along the street into Bethsaida, he was interrupted by the friends of a man who was blind, asking Jesus to heal him. Jesus spat and put his hands on the man's eyes. He asked the man what he could see. The man's response was honest, and he

talked about seeing people that looked like walking trees. There was vision, but it was not yet clear. Jesus touched the man a second time, and his vision became clear.

There are times when we do not see clearly, even though we know Jesus is making changes for us. Sometimes we stumble along with blurred vision. That is usually our problem. We need to follow Jesus carefully, and we need to ask him to continue working in our situations so that we too can see clearly.

Dear Jesus, thank you for continually working in us and helping us to see. Thank you for listening to the interruptions of friends. May our vision for following you be clear and bright. In your name, Amen.

THE STORYTELLER

His father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

—Luke 15:20

Nothing thrills our grandkids more than when they can curl up on the couch with their grandfather and read stories. Stories are something that help us all learn and imagine and wonder. Jesus told great stories, and many of them are parables about living as part of God's family in this world.

One of the best-known parables of Jesus is this story in Luke 15 about the lost son, often called the "prodigal son." But this story could also be called the parable of the loving Father.

A young man looking for adventure takes his dad's money (his inheritance) and leaves home. He wastes the money foolishly and loses everything. He learns that the adventure he wanted didn't really satisfy, and that people can be shallow and harsh. He also learns what it means to be hungry.

The young man turns toward home, not really believing anyone will want him. But he is willing to work as a hired servant. What he discovers is the love and forgiveness of his father and a genuine, gracious welcome.

There are times in our lives when we crave adventure. We jump into something that we think will bring us pleasure, only to find ourselves alone and afraid. As he tells this parable, Jesus invites us all to come home to God's forgiveness.

Have you experienced the Lord's love and forgiveness?

Dear God, thank you for forgiveness and for the reminder that you open your arms wide and run to us. Help us to turn around and come home. Amen.

MESSING WITH THE STATUS QUO

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.
—Luke 13:17

One of my favorite things to do is to ask probing questions and help people think. It may be a habit I have picked up from stories about Jesus. He asks lots of questions. He likes people to think about what they are doing in life. The religious leaders are often cocky and think they have done all of the people's thinking for them, but then Jesus asks them a question that shows they have a lot to learn. It's a good exercise to ponder Jesus' questions.

This story gives us an example. The community has certain rules and ways of doing things, and when Jesus steps in and interrupts the pattern by healing a woman on the Sabbath, the religious leaders are unhappy. Jesus isn't supposed to mess with the status quo.

I wonder how often we have assumed that we know all the

answers. We too might put Jesus in a box and figure that as long as he fits in our comfort zone, we are okay with him. But then Jesus, in true loving fashion, kicks the sides of the box out. He doesn't want us to miss the reality that outside of our comfort zone are the miracles he wants us to see and learn from.

It is easy to hang on to our own ideas. We can even get used to dysfunction and lose sight of the full life God wants for us. Could today be a good day for letting Jesus mess with our status quo?

Dear Jesus, today please surprise us with your joy. Teach us that it's okay outside of the box and that you have a big plan for our lives. Amen.

BLESSED ARE YOU

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
—Matthew 5:6

If you have ever read *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, you will know that Hobbits like to eat. They have breakfast, of course, but they also have second breakfast, then elevenses, luncheon, afternoon tea, dinner, supper, and maybe a nighttime snack. They have “an appetite.” We have often used this phrase to describe our teenagers and grandchildren. I sometimes wonder if the floor by our refrigerator will wear out first because of the foot traffic in front of it.

I have also been in countries where hunger is a daily problem. I have seen moms desperate to feed their children and willing to feed them mud cookies when there is nothing else. We all have a hunger for food to satisfy the grumblings in our stomachs.

When Jesus sat on a hillside and began teaching the crowds around him, the people were not physically hungry, so he could focus on their spiritual hunger. He wanted them to know that if they were hungry for God, there would be plenty to fill their souls. He wanted them to know that if they would change their thinking and search after God, the righteousness and peace (shalom) of God would fill their hearts.

How hungry are we for the things that God wants to fill us with?

Dear God, please make us hungry for you. Teach us and fill us with your truth and love and grace. Teach us to pray and experience your feeding and your filling. In Jesus, Amen.

WEDDINGS AND DETAILS

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

—John 2:5

I love weddings. I love the details and the drama. I love the planning and how every wedding is unique. Although there are often similar elements, such as the vows and promises and the family and friends joining the celebration, the bride and groom bring their own personal touches to the event as well. Whether grand or simple, there is also a party, and the guests join in the celebration.

Jesus attended a wedding celebration. Traditional Jewish wedding celebrations often lasted up to a week, and they usually took place after the harvest, when there was abundance. The whole village would attend, and the party would be enjoyed by everyone. There was plenty of talking, dancing, and feasting—unless the wine ran out.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, heard that this had happened,

and she knew this could lead to dishonor and disgrace for the bridegroom. She also knew her son. Jesus responded with a miracle, turning water into the best of wine. This sign pointed back to God's promises and ahead to the great celebration of Jesus with his bride, the church, in eternity (see Isaiah 25:6; Revelation 19:9). The wedding feast continued, and all was well.

Jesus was involved in the details. He cared about the family and guests, and he provided the best. The best news is that Jesus cares about you and me and has given his very life for us—so we can have new life in abundance. Let's celebrate!

Dear Jesus, thank you for being in the details and providing what is best. May we celebrate with you today! Amen.

ENCOUNTERS OF A PERSONAL KIND

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" —Luke 24:32

Have you ever met someone you haven't seen in a long time and can't remember their name? You begin a conversation with them, hoping your memory will kick in before they realize you can't remember. The conversation can be awkward. If you have encountered the person in a place far from home or out of your usual context, it can be even harder to remember.

When the two followers of Jesus were walking home to Emmaus, they were not in a place where they would usually have encountered Jesus. In fact, as they were walking, they were talking about all the events that had just happened around Jesus' crucifixion, and they were trying to make sense of it all. Then suddenly Jesus stepped into their conversation, and "they were kept from recognizing him." They began

to tell him the events of the past few days, and they invited him to dinner as they arrived at home. That's when everything changed.

Jesus became the host and broke bread with them. He brought back to them a memory of what he had said and taught earlier. They had a personal encounter and an "Aha!" moment in which they realized they were sitting with Jesus!

How often have we begun a conversation, only to have Jesus show up? Remember that he shows up in unexpected places. Where have you met him today? Did you recognize him and listen to his words?

Dear Jesus, help us to recognize you each day as we walk down the road with you and when we break bread together. Amen.



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