



NEW WESTMINSTER
CHRISTIAN REFORMED
CHURCH



A Fragrant Incense

A 40-DAY DEVOTIONAL

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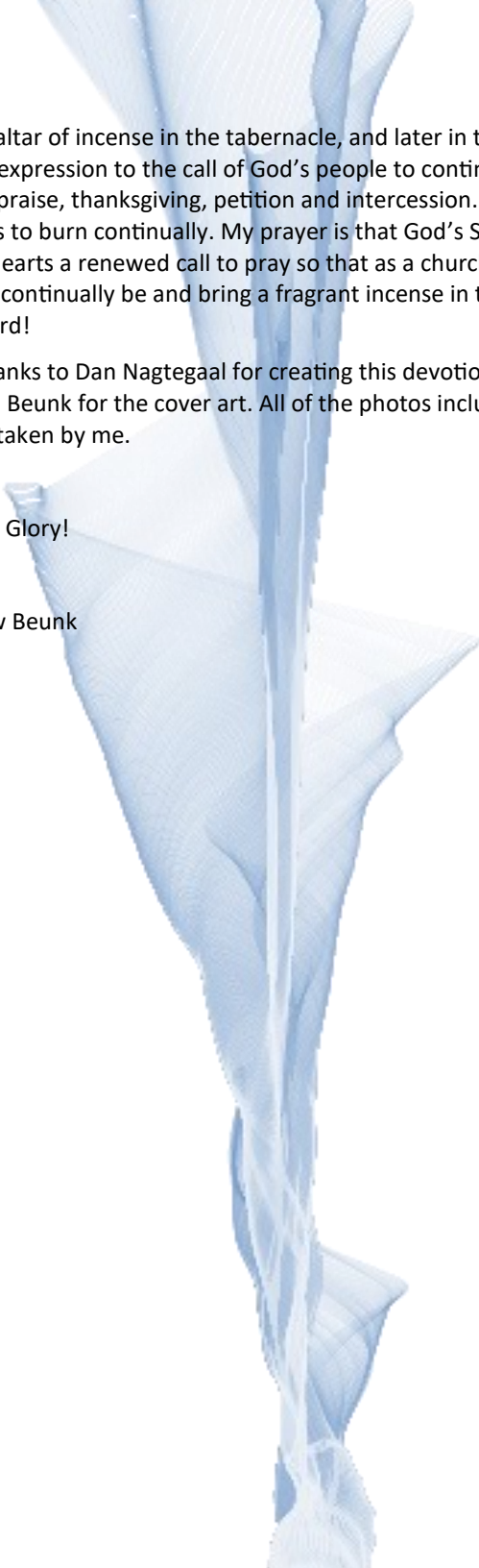
Acknowledgments

I am very thankful that New West CRC graciously provided me with a four month sabbatical that I was able to take in two parts, November 2017 and June – August 2018. This devotional, which is intended to accompany an 8-week sermon series on prayer, includes many of my sabbatical reflections and experiences.

In 2010 our congregation participated in a ministry planning process that we called, “A Season of Prayerful Discernment.” One of the four “ministry priorities” that we discerned God calling us towards was a greater focus on our church as a praying community. During part one of my sabbatical, particularly my time spent with a church in Zahle, Lebanon, I felt convicted that I had not given this priority sufficient attention in my pastoral leadership since 2010. During Feb. – Apr. 2018 I had the opportunity to participate in a coaching relationship with Dr. Daniel Henderson, Director of Strategic Renewal Ministries. This was a season in which I felt encouraged and strengthened to provide more intentional pastoral leadership towards a growing culture of prayer within our congregation.

As we begin a new church season we also look forward to a renewed focus on prayer and our calling to be a praying community. I hope this devotional will be a source of encouragement for our church family.

Not only does this devotional encourage us to pray it also captures some of my experiences and reflections during my time away. During these four months, I visited eight countries (Oman, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Vietnam, The Netherlands, Germany and France) and in each of these countries I worshipped and prayed with brothers and sisters in Christ and had the privilege of listening to their stories and hearing about how the Lord is at work in their context. So many times I felt deeply encouraged and grateful to God for how Jesus Christ and his Kingdom are bringing hope, healing, and transformation to people, churches, and communities. I also was blessed to visit many ancient sites and be reminded of how God works in history and moves it forward to accomplish his purpose.



In the OT the altar of incense in the tabernacle, and later in the temple, gave tangible expression to the call of God's people to continually offer up prayers of praise, thanksgiving, petition and intercession. The altar of incense was to burn continually. My prayer is that God's Spirit will kindle in our hearts a renewed call to pray so that as a church community we might continually be and bring a fragrant incense in the presence of the Lord!

My sincere thanks to Dan Nagtegaal for creating this devotional booklet and to Andrea Beunk for the cover art. All of the photos included in this booklet were taken by me.

To God be the Glory!

Pastor Andrew Beunk

SERMON

“How the Holy Spirit Helps Us Pray”

Romans 8:18-27

Sermon notes:

Key Theme or Take-Away:

September 9

The Call to Prayer

Read Romans 12: 1-4

Around 5:00 AM, that first morning in Muscat, Oman, I was stirred awake by a sound that I immediately recognized. Around the Muslim world, five times each day, from minarets and doorways that mark every large and small mosque across the landscape, a call is heard. In Oman the call may not be pre-recorded but must be sung by an actual person, one chosen for the special task of calling the *ummah*, the community, to pray. The prayer is a rote prayer, no extemporaneous calls to prayer are allowed! The call heard throughout the countryside, every day, at dawn, noon, afternoon, evening, and night is: *God is most great; I witness that there is no God but God; I witness that Mohammed is the messenger of God; Come to prayer; Come to success/prosperity; God is most great; There is no God but God.* (And one line is added during the pre-dawn prayer for a little extra motivation: *Prayer is better than sleep!*)

On one particular day, along the coast of Muscat this daily ritual moved me. I happened to be in a watchtower constructed by the Portuguese in the 16th century, one of many used to keep watch for enemy invaders. It was in this tower that I had a clear view of an enormous sculpted incense burner atop a large rock. As I reminded myself of what burning incense symbolized, the prayers of God's people rising up to heaven, I heard that unmistakable call ringing one and all to come to afternoon prayer. And I pictured in my mind the whole community streaming from their homes through the streets of the city to their shared places of prayer, joining in one heart and voice, lifting up prayers to heaven as fragrant incense to God.

Now it's true, many Muslims do not attend daily prayers with the exception of noon-day prayers on Friday. But it's not hard to imagine the way in which the sounds and the practices of *salat*, "prayer" unifies the community both culturally and religiously. Five times each day everyone is



The Call to Prayer

reminded that life is lived before the face of God and urged to bring before him a fragrant incense.

It would be easy for me to write off this tradition as rote legalism. And perhaps for many it is. But how might our day be punctuated with practices and customs that remind us to daily offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, which Paul writes, is our true and proper worship?

Prior to my sabbatical I was introduced to a prayer book called *Common Worship: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals**. It was an invitation for me to recover the monastic practice of morning, midday, and evening prayer rooted deeply in the Christian tradition, yet, contextualized for living in today's world. It has invited me to allow Christ, through repeated prayers, liturgies, and confessions taken from Scripture and the Christian tradition, to form and shape my heart and mind, reminding me several times each day that life is lived before the face of God and he urges me to offer myself as a fragrant incense. I highly recommend it!



September 10

Prayer / Reflection

Take a few moments to reflect on what you will be doing today. How might you punctuate your day with moments or practices that remind you that you are living before the face of God?

Paul writes that we are to be the aroma of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14-15). Pray that in all that you will be doing today (and every day) that in some way the aroma of Christ will be manifest; a fragrant incense pleasing to God that blesses those you connect with today.

*The book is available as an app or online. The app is called "Common Prayer" and the website is commonprayer.net.

“Seeking the Kingdom of God”

Read: Mark 1: 14-20

“The time has come,” Jesus said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” The announcement that the Kingdom has come is the central message of Jesus’ life and ministry.

As we begin this season of growing in prayer I’m reminded of something that has been observed about prayer: “As we come to Him—seeking His face, He comes to us—bringing the Kingdom.” Through the living Christ the Kingdom has been ushered in and His people receive the reality of that Kingdom as they offer themselves to Christ and take up the posture of prayerful obedience. Although there are many events and circumstances in our world that suggest God’s gracious rule in our world is absent, with the eyes of faith we can see how God continues to bring the blessings of the Kingdom into the lives of His people and the events of our world.

Notice the response of Simon, Andrew, James and John to Jesus’ invitation to “Come!” “At once they left their nets,” and “without delay he called them, and they left...” At once. Without delay.

Each one left behind what they knew, what was secure; their livelihood, their family, and followed the One announcing that a new Kingdom was at hand. Does Jesus still call people to follow Him that way? If so, how is this call experienced in our own lives? How might He be calling us as a congregation to “come follow me?”

- Pray that we will hear Jesus’ invitation in our own lives.
- Pray for God’s Spirit to give us an undivided heart. May we too respond “at once” and “without delay.”
- As we seek to grow in prayer, pray that God will use us to be His channels of Kingdom blessing for others.
- Pray that the Light of Christ will shine with greater brightness through our congregation.
- Pray that the neighbours of our church will see something of the Kingdom displayed in our communal life together.

September 11

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

Read Luke 11:1

“Lord, teach us to pray...” Perhaps it was something they saw in Jesus’ praying that particular occasion that prompted them to bring this request. Or maybe it was something they saw on many occasions. Jesus praying. I recall many years ago, in my early 20’s when I first noticed in the Gospels that before Jesus called His disciples to follow Him, He prayed. (Luke 4:42) Then I noticed the many other times when Jesus prayed. In fact, Luke writes that Jesus *often* withdrew to lonely places and prayed. Perhaps the disciples began to realize that the heartbeat of Jesus’ life and ministry was found in prayer. And so they brought their request, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

If I’m not mistaken, according to the record of Scripture, this is the only thing that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them. They didn’t ask Him to teach them about preaching, leading worship, teaching, or working miracles. They asked about prayer.

Why prayer? Well, perhaps as the disciples realized that prayer was the heartbeat of Jesus’ life and ministry they knew it must become the heartbeat of their own life as well.

In the sovereign plan of God to carry out the work of His Kingdom on earth He has determined to move in response to the prayers of His people. This was true for Jesus when He ministered among us and it remains true for the church today. Jesus modeled the necessity of prayer.

And on that particular occasion long ago His disciples saw it!

May we as a congregation see it too! May we see it afresh, as though for the first time, so that we might be moved in our spirits, as Jesus’ disciples were, to call upon the Master and bring our one communal request to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

September 12

“Digging Up By Prayer”

Read: Psalm 116: 12-19

In John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he writes, “we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.” He goes on to write, “words fail to explain how necessary prayer is.”

It is as though the treasures of the Kingdom are waiting to be opened up for God’s people and the world, but God chooses to unearth those treasures with prayer. Michael Goheen has shared that in this sense prayer is like a shovel. “All of the facets and benefits of Christ’s salvation are given to us—individually and communally—by the work of the Spirit as we dig them up in response to prayer.”

In the Psalm that we read, four times the psalmist says he “will call upon the Name of the Lord”. The psalmist acknowledges that from God alone comes mercy, salvation, rest, life itself, and each of these “treasures” are opened up as he “calls upon the Lord.”

Consider these treasures: marital fidelity, the lifting of depression, companionship, children who follow the Lord, freedom from addiction, meaningful employment, unbelievers turning to Christ in faith, Christians “on-fire” with the Holy Spirit, a community where the Gospel is faithfully proclaimed AND lived, of course the list is endless. We must take hold of our shovels! Make no mistake. This is not a taking hold of God’s blessings in a “health and wealth”, “prosperity gospel” kind of way! Absolutely not! This is simply digging up the treasures of Christ’s own words to His people: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

As you pray, what promises of God can you “dig up”?

“Let Us Go to the House of the Lord”

Read Psalm 122:1

An experience that most all of us have had is that of anticipating a long awaited family vacation. Plans had to be made—perhaps airline tickets were purchased, hotel rooms or campsites were booked, excursions were set up—and as plans came into place the family started to live into the anticipated experiences. It’s a time set apart. A time for refreshment, rest, reconnection, and restoration.

The opening verse of this Psalm captures the sense of joy and anticipation the people of Israel felt as they journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate a festival. A festival that included worship, prayer, meals, festivities; a time set apart for spiritual and physical refreshment, rest, reconnection and restoration.

Our family’s week in Taizé, France had this sense of festival or sacred assembly. From more than 35 countries around the world, 3500 youth and young adults as well as 500 adults came together to worship, pray, reflect, share meals, make friends and enjoy and celebrate the goodness and grace of God come to us in Christ and the Holy Spirit. I experienced a strong sense of God’s people coming together for this time apart to seek the face of Christ and be open to the work of His Spirit.

Some months ago, early in the year I wondered about the possibility of experiencing something like this together as a church. Might we as a congregation share in a kind of festival experience? A time apart where we join together for worship, prayer, meals, and festivity; a time for refreshment and reconnection.

As we go through this season of sermons and devotions called “A Fragrant Incense” let’s prayerfully and eagerly anticipate a kind of culmination week, a Sacred Assembly week that begins on Oct. 21 and concludes on Oct. 28. Though the week is still being planned, let’s look forward to a time set apart to meet with the Lord in worship, prayer, meals, and festivity, a time to seek His face together, delight in His goodness, applaud His faithfulness, celebrate our varied cultures, and grow in our communal obedience.

With a sense of reverent enthusiasm, let’s have a party!

September 14

SERMON

“The Value of Repentant Prayer”

2 Chronicles 7:13-16

Sermon notes:

Key Theme or Take-Away:

September 16

“A Call to Sincere Repentance”

Read: Ezekiel 35:16-37

Yesterday the sermon encouraged us by reminding us of the value of repentant prayer. As we pray in the “name of Jesus,” it’s as though we are entering the temple of the Lord, as the people of Israel did long ago. Jesus Christ is the Temple of God and when we pray in His name we must pray with a pure heart.

Consider the words of Ezekiel, “Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions.” (Ezekiel 36:17) The prophet Isaiah calls God’s people to be rid of their sin. “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.” (Isaiah 55:6-8)

Ezek. 36:21 calls our attention to the holy name of God. God has chosen to lay His name upon His people. Because of this sin has no place in the people upon whom God rests His name. In Nehemiah 9, we read how the Israelites confessed their sins to God so that once again He might complete a work of renewal and new beginning for them. Through the prophet Ezekiel God extends a call to repentance for He wishes to cleanse His people from all unrighteousness. He seeks to begin a fresh work among us for the sake of His holy name.

- Pray that God will stir among us so that we will confess our sins and repent.
- Ask the Spirit to search your heart and reveal any areas of unconfessed sin. Acknowledge these to the Lord and thank Him for His forgiveness.
- Ask the Spirit to search the heart of our congregation and reveal any areas of communal, unconfessed sin so that together we can acknowledge these to the Lord.
- Pray for God to give us a burden to magnify the holy name of the Lord in how we live out our daily lives.

September 17

Worshipping Idols

Read Isaiah 44:6-20

On two occasions during my sabbatical travels I was reminded of this passage in Isaiah. Both times it was when I visited a temple. The first a Hindu temple in Muscat, Oman, and the second a temple in Hanoi where people practice traditional Vietnamese folk religion and worship ancestral spirits. In each temple, though the religion being observed was distinctly different, people brought gifts of food or money, laid it before an ornately constructed idol of stone or wood, then prostrated themselves before the idol as though it were a god, praying for blessing and good fortune.



Idol worship is quite prevalent in Vietnam. Vietnamese folk religion combines beliefs and practices from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Many Vietnamese homes and business have a small altar where prayers can be offered to ancestors asking for blessing or protection or success. On one occasion while walking the streets of Hanoi, our group took shelter under an awning in front of a store window to avoid a sudden deluge of rain. After standing for a couple of minutes the store owner came outside and asked me to move because I happened to be standing in front of the altar that was situated behind the window. Perhaps with my disrespecting the altar he feared misfortune or bad luck for his business.

There are few passages in the Bible that are as saturated with sarcasm as this one from Isaiah. With scorn and derision he mocks those who use wood from the same tree to build a fire and construct a god. Worshipping as god that which human hands have constructed or human minds have imagined is one of the gravest of sins in the Bible. In this text the practice is depicted as utter foolishness, indeed, laughable. One day, in my wife's kindergarten class, as she was going through a particular Bible story that mentioned idols, she took a moment to explain what an idol

Worshipping Idols

was; a carving or a statue that people prayed to and worshiped. One of the students, aghast and perplexed asked, “You mean, some people actually pray to statues?” When my wife said “yes”, most of the children starting laughing out loud as if to say, “that’s hilarious!” Indeed.

Laughable, in fact.

The real rub from this text comes from knowing the fact that Isaiah is writing to God’s people! We might expect that those who do not know the Living God and His Christ will worship idols, but God’s people? Placing their trust and their hope in idols or in ideas that cannot save? How might Christians in the West put their trust in idols?

Writing about our modern context in which many people feel they have moved beyond the need for trusting a god, James Hollis writes, “We are not absent the gods. Quite the contrary. We have too many of them. Too many surrogates with which the ego seeks to resist the spiritual vacuum of modernism. Besieged by pseudo-deities such as Power, Wealth, Health, Pleasure, Progress, we grow more and more alienated from nature, from each other, and from ourselves.”* As we examine our own lives, our own pursuits and priorities, our own loyalties and affections, do we find ourselves bending the knee to the pseudo-deities of Power, Wealth, Health, Pleasure, Progress? They are not carved out of wood or stone, but trusting in them, Isaiah rightly infers, is nothing short of “laughable.”

September 18

Prayer / Reflection

During a time of extended quiet reflection ask Jesus to expose the idols of your own heart. Pray for forgiveness and for an undivided heart.

*Quoted in <http://quillette.com/2018/02/21/search-meaning-dangers-possession/>

The Line Dividing Good and Evil

Read Psalm 14:1-3

Five hours of our family's first day in Berlin was spent with a group of about 20 others on a guided walking tour called "The Third Reich Walking Tour". Our tour guide told the story of the Third Reich's rise to power with passion and humility. I got the sense that not only did he feel passionate about studying history, but he also felt passionate about telling this particular story about a very dark chapter in his country's history. His "day job," as he said, was practicing law, particularly in the area of finance and economics, and guiding tours is something he did "on the side." To me this side job felt like a bit of a calling—making sure people hear the story told without all the typical "History Channel hype." He was not a big fan of the History Channel!

A point that our guide made repeatedly throughout the tour was to emphasize the tendency for most people to demonize the Nazi party and the German people. By demonizing them we distance ourselves from them and convince ourselves that the same atrocities could never happen in our day. "How could the leaders of the Nazi party, Hitler's inner circle, as they are often called, be so malevolent? How could the German people be so blind?"

To take on this posture is to condemn ourselves to repeat the atrocity. Paul holds before us what the Old Testament held before God's people long ago, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), restating passages like this one from Psalm 14:3, "All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one."

At one point our guide shared a quote with us from a British historian named Sir Ian Kershaw: "the road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference." The average German had some idea, heard some rumors, even heard some first or second hand reports. But, "What can I do?" many said to themselves. "Maybe the Jews *are* to blame!" After all, many thought, the Nazi party had done much to "make Germany great again"—a line used occasionally by Hitler (and Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and others when running for leadership in their respective countries).

Indifference—a typically passive kind of response—is something we're all susceptible to. I can think of numerous initiatives in our own country where, in the name of equity, diversity, and inclusivity, people accept a variety of decisions that personally they might take issue with. And over time it's easy to become indifferent. "What can I do about, really?" we say to ourselves.

The Line Dividing Good and Evil

As our guide shared that quote from Kershaw I was reminded of what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously wrote in his *Gulag Archipelago*, “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

And this is why atrocities like Auschwitz, and countless others in human history can happen. Evil is not out there, it’s in here, your heart and mine. Thanks be to God that in Christ the human heart can be healed, cleansed, renewed. Ezekiel writes, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezekiel 36:25–27)

By the end of the tour, I found myself praying that Christ would continue to awaken me to my own sin that I might be cleansed and healed and increasingly live on the good side of that dividing line. And I prayed that I might never grow indifferent to anything that displeases the Lord.

Today, let’s make that our prayer.

September 19

"He Will Take..."

Read 1 Samuel 8: 1-20

Three places that my family visited had an interesting connection and got me thinking about this passage from 1 Samuel 8, one I'm reminded of quite often in my travels. The three places are: Castle Amerongen, House Doorn, both in the Netherlands, and the Palace of Potsdam, just west of Berlin. If you know some German/Dutch history you'll know the connection.

Following WWI, the Kaiser of Germany, Wilhelm II, was forced to abdicate his role as German Emperor and King of Prussia. More than that, he had to leave the Palace of Potsdam, his main residence, and flee the country. Because of his ancestral connection to the House of Orange (Dutch royalty), the Dutch agreed that he stay in their country. He stayed for 1 ½ years with the Bentinck family at their home, Castle Amerongen, and then lived in his own home, Huis Doorn, a 9th century home that he purchased and refurbished. Though it was expected that his stay be temporary, he died in the Netherlands and his remains are in a mausoleum on the property of House Doorn.

When Wilhelm II was forced to leave Germany and leave the enormous and majestic palace of Potsdam, he was allowed to take with him some of his personal belongings... 59 railcars of personal belongings...yes, you read that correctly, 59 railcars! Needless to say, only a very small amount fit into his new home as it was less than 1/20th (by my estimation) the size of his former palace. Talk about downsizing!!



September 20

“He Will Take...”

Whenever I visit the majestic homes, palaces, tombs, cathedrals, or temples constructed by the wealthy kings, emperors, popes, and pharaohs of the world, I’m always reminded of 1 Samuel 8. Places that I’ve visited like Al Alam Palace and the Grand Mosque in Oman, the majestic pyramids of Giza, the great tombs in Luxor, the Terra Cotta warriors in Xian, the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Palace of Potsdam, and the Dome of Berlin (Berlin Cathedral) are all displays of enormous wealth and opulence. Often slave labour, exorbitant taxes, or conscripted service was used for their construction, not to mention the money and people needed to maintain them!

Many centuries ago God warned his people about what a future king would demand: taxes, soldiers, slaves, children, and livestock. He warned them about kings that would *take!* In some parts of the world that’s still a reality under the rule of dictatorial leaders. In other parts, closer to home perhaps, it can happen through greedy multinational corporations that routinely put profit above people.

Philippians 2 teaches us our King does not take, but gives; He gives a beautiful world for us to live in, a community to belong to, and He gives Himself to secure our salvation. What a mighty King we serve!

September 20

“Following Jesus”

Read Luke 10:1-4

On this particular afternoon I had the privilege of meeting with four students in their final year of study at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Beirut. Each came from a Muslim majority country in the MENA region (Middle East, North Africa). Each of them were Muslim background believers (MBBs as they are called). As I write this, it is quite possible that each of them have returned to their home countries to begin the work of sharing the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Two of them said that in the region to which they plan to return there is open hostility towards Christianity. We hear Jesus saying to them and to us, “Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.”

It’s hard for most of us living comfortably in North America to think about serving in a region where there is open hostility towards Christ and His Kingdom. Does God call us to put ourselves in harm’s way for the sake of His Message?

Saying yes to that question is only possible if we deeply believe at least two things. First, Jesus only calls us to what He has already done Himself. He is the Great Shepherd who lay down His life for the sheep. He is the Lamb of God who gave Himself over to the “Wolf” of sin and evil so that He might take away the sins of the world.

The second thing we must believe is found in the easily overlooked phrase of v.1, “where he was about to go.” Did you catch that? In this story, Jesus physically sends others, the 72, and from what we can tell, in person He does not seem to go anywhere. And yet, the text clearly says, “where he was about to go.” Jesus never sends us to places where he himself is not about to go. He goes ahead of us and with us. It was true for the 72 and remains true for us today.

Lord Jesus, where are you about to go today? Let me follow you, even if it is among the wolves.

SERMON

“Getting What We Ask for in Prayer”

1 John 5:14-15

Sermon notes:

Key Theme or Take-Away:

September 23

“God is Attracted to Weakness”

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 12:10

In 2004, Kim and I had the opportunity, along with about 10 other pastoral colleagues and their wives, to meet with Rev. Jim Cymbala, pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle in Brooklyn, New York. A highlight of our visit was attending their Tuesday night prayer meeting, a weekly meeting attended by approximately 3000 people. At that time, Pastor Cymbala had been leading the congregation for about 30 years seeing the church grow from 20 members to almost 10,000.

In his book “Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire” he tells a significant story about how from the very beginning of his ministry prayer was the DNA of church life.

Rev. Cymbala came to this “dying” little church in the 1970’s. There were 20 members in this congregation in the heart of Brooklyn at a time when all the white folks were leaving because of rising crime. He shares a story which he said was kind of symbolic of what this church was going through.

At first he came to preach as a guest pastor because his father-in-law had invited him to preach there a couple of times. One Sunday he could sense that the community was filled with people that had a lot of despair and many of them were just empty and broken. One time while he was preaching one of the pews cracked and fell on the floor, and several people with it. He said that was just a picture for him of what this congregation was experiencing. He felt God’s call to pastor this church full-time and that call came at one point shortly after he was there again as a guest. After the service the pastor of that church, who was already there, said to Cymbala, “I’m resigning, I’m quitting, tell your father-in-law” —he was a kind of bishop in that area—“tell him that I’m done”. He basically said, “I’m leaving tonight. I can’t be here anymore. And by the way you need to know that I’m pretty sure that one of the ushers is helping himself to some of the money in the collection plate, because the money that comes in every Sunday never matches what is written on people’s tithing envelope.”

So, Cymbala did begin preaching there and pastored this church and another church in Newark for about a year. In his book he describes how hectic his work schedule had become. After about a year into his ministry, after feeling completely deflated and defeated and not knowing what to do with this congregation, he writes,

On one of those Sunday night’s early on, I was so depressed by what I saw and even more by what I felt in my spirit, that I literally could not preach, five minutes into my sermon I

“God is Attracted to Weakness”

began choking on the words, tears filled my eyes, gloom engulfed me. All I could say to the people was I’m sorry, I can’t preach in this atmosphere. Something is terribly wrong, I don’t know what to say, I can’t go on. Carol, [his wife] would you play something on the piano and would the rest of you just come to the altar here? If we don’t see God help us, I don’t know.” And with that I just quit, it was embarrassing but I couldn’t do anything else. The people did as I asked, I leaned into the pulpit with my face planted in my hands and I sobbed. Things were quiet at first, but soon the Spirit of God came down upon us. People began to call upon the Lord, their words motivated by the spirit within, “God, help us!” Carol played the old hymn, “I need You, Oh, I need you.” And we sang along. A tide of intercession arose, suddenly a young usher came running down the center of the aisle and threw himself on the altar. He began to cry as he prayed. When I placed my hand upon his shoulder he looked up, the tears just streaming down his face as he said “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I won’t do it again, please forgive me.” Instantly I realized that he was apologizing for taking money from the offering plate. I stood speechless for a moment bewildered by his unexpected confession. It was our first spiritual breakthrough. I had not had to play detective, confront the culprit with his misdeed or pressure him to confess. Here in a single night, during a season of prayer, Problem No 1 (out of seemingly thousands) was solved. That evening, when I was at my lowest, confounded by obstacles, bewildered by the darkness that surrounded us, unable to even continue preaching. I discovered an astonishing truth: God is attracted to weakness. He can’t resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him. Our weakness, in fact makes room for his power.*

I have often thought about this story throughout my ministry and in my own life personally. God is attracted to weakness. Yet in the West we have so much strength! How can I, how can we together as a church, cultivate a spirit of weakness, of humility, of dependence on God so that increasingly we might make room for his power at work among us?

In some moments of quiet reflection bring that question to the Lord and pray for a spirit of weakness.

* Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1997) 18-19.

“Remembering That We Were Slaves”

Read Deuteronomy 24:17-22

The community of Taizé was founded by Brother Roger Schutz in 1940. Over the years it has evolved into an ecumenical monastic community that welcomes approximately 100,000 guests, of all ages and from around the world, that come to pray, study, serve and share. From the very beginning Brother Roger envisioned Taizé to be a place where the most discouraged and those deprived of livelihood or community could come and find a warm embrace and a place to belong.

Brother Emile shared with us a beautiful story about the power of love and genuine welcome during a meeting we had with him.

By March 2015 many refugees were streaming through Europe and since the UK was one of the more desirable places for them to go, many found their way to Calais, France. Calais is on the northern coast of France and is connected to the UK by the Chunnel. By this time however, travel for refugees from Calais to Britain was severely restricted. Calais was overwhelmed with large numbers of refugees.

The brothers at Taizé decided they needed to help. They contacted the French government and told them they would be willing to receive up to 30 people and provide them with necessary food, shelter, and clothing, and help them integrate and settle into the French countryside. The government had received similar offers of help from various French communities and decided to relocate the refugees from Calais to various places around France. The people were put on buses and driven to different communities and given the choice of which community they would like to live in.

When the bus arrived in Taizé, a very small rural community, with little employment opportunities, none of the refugees wanted to get off the bus. This was not the kind of place they wanted to settle in. The folks at Taizé were discouraged by this, especially since they had worked hard in a short period of time to get places ready for 30 people to live in. So they decided to invite the folks on the bus to at least stay for lunch before the bus took them to their next destination.

What happened during that lunch hour was a wonderful testimony to the power of a warm welcome. The refugees received such a kind welcome at the lunch—warm smiles, encouraging words, and genuine compassion—that by the end of the lunch 15 people decided to stay and call Taizé their new home for the foreseeable future!

Although some have left for other locations, to this day, some of those 15 have stayed in Taizé to build a new life.

September 25

“Remembering That We Were Slaves”

In Hebrews 13:1-2 we are reminded of our call to welcome strangers; a reminder given long ago to the people of Israel in Deut. 24 as well as in many other places. God says to us, “Remember you were slaves”; remember you once were dis-located people, owned by others, and entirely dependent on the compassion of Yahweh for life. Remember this so that you will show the same kind of welcome and embrace to others. Care for the “foreigner”, says the Lord, a word in Hebrew that could easily be translated “refugee”. Care for the foreigner, the refugee, the stranger, because God’s people do to others what the Lord has done for them.

Brother Emile’s encouraging story testifies to the power of a warm embrace. Let us thank the Lord together for the opportunities that He has given us to welcome foreigners and embrace them in the name of Christ.

September 25

“The Behind-the-Scenes Weapon”

Read: Exodus 17:8-16

An important motif in the Bible that describes the context in which God’s purposes in our world are carried out is the motif of battlefield. Even the creation account of Gen. 1 alludes to the good order of God overcoming—doing battle against—the chaotic order of darkness.

Prayer is a channel through which God pours out strength and power so that His people can secure a “strategic position” in the ongoing battle of Light over darkness.

In today’s reading God’s people are attacked by an enemy nation, the Amalekites. Some are dispatched to engage the battle with physical weapons. But the narrator draws our attention to a “behind the scenes” weapon. It’s clear that victory on the ground does not depend solely on the skill and strength of the soldiers in combat. Hands raised in prayer are an essential part of the battle. Victory on the ground is contingent on the power of God that hands lifted in prayer secures.

In the large church building in London that Charles Spurgeon preached in, was located, what he called, a “boiler room”. This wasn’t a room with a physical boiler that we might expect. Under the large sanctuary, it was a basement room that would be filled each Sunday morning with upwards of a 100 people in prayer; fervently calling upon the Lord during the morning worship service while Spurgeon was preaching to thousands upstairs. As the power of the Gospel was being announced—as the sword of the Spirit (Eph.6:17) was wielded in battle—the upraised hands of the boiler-room “pray-ers” called on the Host of Heaven to secure victory.

This is the life of prayer in the Kingdom.

Pray for a white-hot boiler room!

September 26

Achieving God's Purposes

Read Isaiah 55:11

At this time in their history, God's people find themselves threatened by the formidable world power of the Assyrians. Isaiah has warned them, rebuked them, and humbled them. "Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me" (Isaiah 1:2), is how the prophet begins his word from the Lord. And the pronouncements of judgement that come in the subsequent chapters are God's public indictment that Israel has broken covenant with the Lord.

But the Lord, in His mercy, comes once again to bring hope. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." (Isaiah 40:1-2).

The ways of the Lord are higher than our ways and beyond our understanding (Isaiah 55:8-9). The promise of deliverance that would come initially through the defeat of the Assyrian empire was but a sign of a much greater defeat of the powers of sin and death that would come through Jesus Christ. Full and complete deliverance for God's people through Christ had long been secured by the steadfast word of the Lord. The Old Testament is a documented witness that the power of God's Word—promises made to Abraham, Isaac, Moses, and David—would accomplish the purposes that God intended.

More than 100 years ago, the Reformed Church of America established a presence in Oman to bring the love of Christ through education and health care. Dr. Thomas, an RCA doctor, is famous in Oman for his work in helping to institute quality health care in Oman. More than education and healthcare, the RCA continues to work closely with the Ministry of Religious Affairs to ensure good interfaith relationships between various religious groups in Oman. As one of the more moderate and



September 27

Achieving God's Purposes

peaceful, officially Muslim, countries in the Gulf / Middle East region, Oman has allowed for diverse faith expression, with some restrictions, while avoiding the often violent sectarianism that has been present in the neighboring region. God has used the church as a quiet, faithful presence in Oman that has helped to promote peace and goodwill between religions.

The words of Isaiah 55:11 came to mind when I saw an old Bible in the National Museum of Oman. It belonged to one of the first RCA missionaries to Oman who helped to establish one of the first hospitals. It wasn't a stethoscope that they put in their museum, but a Bible. God's Word will not return empty. Rather, it accomplishes the purposes God desires; in Oman, in our world, in our church, and in each one of our lives.

Prayer / Reflection

- Thank the Lord for the Living Word of Jesus who has come to us fulfilling all of God's promises for us and all of God's people!
- Pray that the church in Oman, and especially the Al-Amana Centre in Muscat, a ministry of the RCA, would continue to be a faithful presence that promotes peaceful dialogue and goodwill between religions and with the government.
- Pray to the Lord that His Word will live more fully in you so that His purposes can be accomplished in your life.

September 27

Houses Made By Human Hands

Read Acts 7:48-50

It's hard not to be impressed when you set foot inside the great architectural wonders of the world built for the purpose of worship. The Grand Mosque of Oman is one such wonder. Completed in 2001, costing



more than \$10 Billion USD to construct, it boasts of having the world's largest chandelier and the world's second largest Persian carpet. And, as our guide said, "If what you see looks like gold, it is gold!"

Christians have their own architectural wonders. Whether its St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, or the Notre Dame in Paris, Christians, along with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists have each prioritized "houses made by human hands." The OT Temple itself was one such project and in this portion of Stephen's sermon that we read, he seems to suggest that God reluctantly permitted its construction. "What kind of house will you build for me?" God cannot be contained in bricks and mortar. The earth itself, in all its majesty and wonder, cannot contain the Lord—it's simply a footstool!

It's true, God created humankind with creativity. We love building beautiful things. That's well and good when done out of love for the glory of God but too often in history it's done through oppressive fundraising schemes for the glory of man. Perhaps God, while accommodating our impure motives, at the same time arouses our creativity so that these wonders might be constructed to inspire generations of worshippers whose hearts are drawn heavenward.

I still marvel at these architectural wonders. They move my heart and lift my eyes to the heavens to consider the glorious majesty of the God I love, even as I'm reminded that God does not dwell in houses made by human hands.

And that brings us to the uniquely Christian corrective. The Church, the people of God, the baptized community of Christ, is the Temple of the Living God! We are the living stones that God is building on Jesus, the cornerstone, into a glorious Temple (1 Peter 2:5) that one day will fully and completely cover the face of the earth.

28
September

Houses Made By Human Hands

Prayer / Reflection

- Have you visited a majestic church or cathedral? What's been your experience?
- If cathedrals are intended to draw our attention towards the majesty and glory of God, pray that the Church, God's people, would live such lives that others are drawn towards the love and glory of Christ.
- Pray that our congregation would increasingly be that kind of community.

September 28

SERMON

"A Friend in the Middle"

Luke 11: 5-10

Sermon notes:

Key Theme or Take-Away:

September 30

“God’s Entering In”

Read Mark 1:9-13



The Dom Berlin (Berlin Cathedral) is delightful and disturbing at the same time. Delightful because of its magnificence that lifts the spirit heavenward; disturbing because of the way in which historically it fed the idolatry of German nationalism. A particular delight for me was found at the very apex of the dome, the highest point in the cathedral. Looking heavenward the congregation sees the stained glass image of a dove coming down.

In his day the prophet Isaiah uttered a longing that he hoped all Israel would pray with him, “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” (Isaiah 64:1). That cry of the heart captured a reality that we find in the Bible from beginning to end; the hope of humanity for shalom is found in God. We need the Lord God of heaven and earth to tear open the barrier and begin a work in us and our world that we cannot.

Mark begins and ends his Gospel showing us how God ultimately answered the longing of Isaiah—indeed, the longing of every human heart.

He only uses this word twice in his Gospel, the first time is in the text we just read. As Jesus begins his earthly ministry and is baptized by John, Mark writes that he saw “heaven being torn open”. The Greek word is *scidzomenos* and literally means to break open, tear apart, or split (it’s where our word “schism” comes from). Mark wants us to be certain of the cosmic significance of who Jesus is and what He came to do. Quite literally a new age broke into history that moment. God’s reality broke into time and space in the flesh and blood person of Jesus Christ.

We might imagine a triumphant and victorious moment when Mark uses that word a second time, like an occasion for dancing and celebration. Rather, it comes for what Mark would describe as the climactic moment of glory and power in Jesus’ ministry. It comes at his crucifixion. As Jesus dies on the cross, and the centurion soldier confesses Him as the Son of God, the temple curtain is *scidzomenos*. (Mark 15:38-39) The barrier that God’s holiness had erected in the presence of human rebellion and pride was torn open. God, in Christ, broke into our reality to defeat the power of sin and death. In Jesus, the Messiah, God united Himself with humanity so that the human rebellion which separated humanity from God could be destroyed. The new age had begun!

One word, used strategically at the beginning and ending of Mark’s good news story, and the hope for humanity is revealed. The Dove of Peace has come down and done for us what we could never do for ourselves. Thanks be to God!

“The Wind Blows Wherever it Pleases”

Read John 3:5-8

Perhaps more than any other the iconic image of The Netherlands is the windmill. Machines that at one time converted wind energy to grind grain and pump water now, for the most part, sit idle. But yesterday’s windmill has become today’s wind turbine. About 3000 wind turbines dot the land and sea scape of the country providing useful electric energy harnessed from the wind.



The Hebrew word for *spirit* is the same word used for *wind*. More than once in the Bible the Holy Spirit is depicted as a wind.

I wonder if in some sense local congregations are like windmills or wind turbines. All the energy we need for effective Kingdom service comes from outside us. Wind turbines are carefully engineered and strategically located for one specific purpose, to harness the energy of the wind. They are only useful when the wind is blowing. By themselves they can do nothing.

In this season of growing in prayer let us communally seek at least three things: first, to allow deep spiritual formation to take place in our lives, like the careful engineering of a wind turbine; second, to prayerfully discern in an ongoing way how to move in response to the Holy Spirit, like the strategic location of a wind turbine; and third, to continually pray for the Spirit’s power to energize our daily callings, recognizing that in ourselves we can do nothing.

"The Hiding Place"

Read Psalm 91

The tour guide at the Ten Boom Museum in Haarlem, The Netherlands, made sure that our group of 20 knew what kind of Christian family the Ten Booms were. "They were Christians," he said, "but for them their faith was a vibrant, living faith that impacted all aspects of their lives." Moreover, he went on to say, "the Ten Booms would never consider themselves heroic, they just did what they believed their faith in God compelled them to do." Before the family was arrested in 1944 they had helped more than 800 Jews find safe hiding from the German Gestapo and from Nazi sympathizers among the Dutch police.

Towards the beginning of the war, just after they had constructed the now infamous "hiding place" in Corrie Ten Boom's bedroom, chosen because it was the furthest from the front door and would give people the most time to hide if danger came knocking, Corrie's father, Casper, read about a different hiding place. The hiding place



in the bedroom was a carefully constructed 2' x 9' area hidden behind a brick wall accessible through a small trap door in the back of a cupboard. When the Ten Boom family was arrested, six people hid there for about 2 days.

The hiding place that Casper Ten Boom read about was found under the wings of the Almighty LORD. That evening towards the beginning of the war, he read with his family from Psalm 91. "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." And their living faith in God's sure promise compelled them day after day, week after week, month after month, to put themselves in harm's way for the sake of Jews who were being gathered up and taken to concentration camps to work and eventually to die.

Has there ever been a time in your own life when you've had to trust completely in the "shelter of the Most High" for security and protection? If so, reflect on that time and thank God for His promise. If not, pray that God will fill you with a deep trust in Him so that you can take hold of this sure promise when that time comes.

“We Cannot Help Speaking”

Read Acts 4: 1-22

If you held the cure that would heal all those infected by a terminal illness, what would you do? Sometimes people have compared this to sharing the message of the Gospel. The first disciples seemed to express this in the story from Acts 4. When their silence was demanded and their lives threatened, they said to themselves, “As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:20) More must hear the message of salvation in Jesus Christ; we cannot be silent.

On February 28, 1944 the Ten Boom home was raided after their family was betrayed and exposed to the German Gestapo. The family, along with numerous others were arrested and imprisoned in Scheveningen, close to Den Haag. Casper Ten Boom was now 84 years old. While in prison he contracted a severe pneumonia. When Casper was interrogated in prison, the Gestapo told him they would release him because of his age so that he could "die in his own bed". He replied: "If I go home today, tomorrow I will open my door to anyone who knocks for help". When asked if he knew he could die for helping Jews, he replied, "It would be an honor to give my life for God's chosen people." On March 9 Casper died at the Hague Municipal Hospital, after nine days in prison.

“Tomorrow I will open my door.”

“We cannot help speaking about what we’ve seen and heard.”

These confessions come from the hearts of those who have met the living Christ and found in Him the announcement of forgiveness and new life that all must hear and know to be saved.

October 4

“The Faith of an ‘Outsider’”

Read Matthew 15:21-28

“Did Jesus just say what I think he said?” It is easy for us to get bogged down in the way that Jesus addresses this woman. “Did he just call her a dog?” Today’s reflection does not intend to address that question, at least not comprehensively. The broad testimony of the Gospels is that Jesus cared deeply for women, even “outsiders” like Samaritans. We can be sure that Jesus meant no disdain towards this Canaanite, rather used language that she would be familiar with to make a point that we must not miss. The punch of this story comes in the response of Jesus to this “outsider”, “Woman, you have great faith!”, especially in contrast to the faith, or lack thereof, of the “insiders”—the Pharisees—in the story immediately preceding this one.

This outsider understood something about Jesus and His Kingdom that even the insiders, because of their *place* and *pride*, missed completely! The truth of this encounter is still played out today.

A woman we’ll call Aleyna, a leader within a significant Christian ministry in Lebanon, shared this story with my wife and I. She had attended several Bible studies that a growing church in Zahle was offering for women. Almost all in attendance were Syrian refugees who were now living in camps. The group that gathered each week was growing rapidly, now around 150 in number. About 75% of the women had become Christians in the last 2 years or less, the remainder identified themselves as Muslims. The Muslim women were coming to find community and to call out to *Issa* (Jesus) in prayer as they and their displaced families had many needs. They had heard that *Issa* is powerful and continues to answer prayer.

It was in one of those Bible studies where Aleyna had the opportunity to listen to Muslim women praying together to Jesus that she found her own faith deeply impacted. “As I listened to these Muslim women praying together—outsiders—I found myself saying, ‘These women have great faith! Do I pray with the same fervency and expectation? Do I trust Jesus like they do? Lord, are you using these women to teach *me* how to pray?’”

“The Faith of an ‘Outsider’”

Each week the women shared stories of how Jesus had responded to their prayers. For several weeks they had been praying for the request that a Muslim mother shared. Her son had left their home in the camp to join the extremists back in Syria. Each week they prayed that Jesus would protect him and bring him home. Remarkably, she shared during this particular gathering, her son was encountered by Jesus in a dream, he secretly left the extremists, returned home, and told his family he wanted to visit a church and talk to a pastor. Within a few weeks the son committed his life to Jesus, received baptism... along with his mother, father, and siblings!!

The pastor of this particular church shared with me, “What we’ve been experiencing here over the last couple of years is like the New Testament all over again!”

Let us together pray, with humility and expectancy, that the faith of “outsiders” would compel us to trust more deeply in Christ and pursue His Kingdom.

October 5

SERMON

“Prayer As a Way of Life”

Ephesians 6:18

Sermon notes:

Key Theme or Take-Away:

October 7

Assurance about What We Do Not See

Read Hebrews 11:1-16

On a Thursday in June, my son Jake and I decided to embark on a one day hike up to the peak of Golden Ears mountain and back; a 12 ½ hour journey, “for experienced back country climbers and hikers” as one website noted. The one day journey is not for the faint of heart. Truthfully, it was the most demanding hike I have ever completed!

The forecast that day was mostly sunny, partly cloudy, but as anyone who lives on the west coast knows, weather forecasts can quickly change. As we drove early that morning to the West Canyon Trail parking lot, the sun shone brightly, but some cloud cover was accumulating in the distance. Nevertheless, we arrived—no turning back now!

By the time we arrived at Alder Flats, about 6km in along the 22km round-trip hike to the peak and back, the cloud ceiling was quite solid and appeared to be at the same elevation as what we thought was Panorama Ridge. Do we continue and risk seeing nothing at the top? Or do we turn back? Hoping the cloud cover would lift, we plodded onward and upward—did I mention the trail ascends more than 1700 meters? By the time we were 5 hours into the climb we were hiking on snowpack, and 30 min. later we were in thick cloud cover.

I do not recommend hiking on snowpack in running shoes (no crampons) with only one hiking pole (we only had one set with us so Jake and I each used one pole), but since that is all the equipment we had with us, we had to make do. We did take lots of water and food in case anyone reading this thinks we were complete fools!

Remember, with heavy snowpack all the ribbons and blazes tied to trees and rocks are buried. What we were trying to follow were footprints in the snow. We had met some folks who were coming down from the peak earlier in the morning. As best we could, we tried following the footprints of those who had gone before.

At one point, as we sat on an outcrop of rocks surrounded by thick cloud and heavy snowpack, we



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October

Assurance about What We Do Not See

seriously wondered if we should continue. I said to Jake, “Let’s pray and ask for the Lord’s protection and guidance,” and that’s what we did. After I prayed, we just sat in silence taking in the sense of blindness we felt about what was around us and whether we should continue.

It was in that silence that I felt like this intense hike was for me a real-life experience of what the journey of faith can be like for us during the challenging times that we face in life. As a pastor I’ve come alongside many people in their own challenging times and been deeply encouraged by their testimonies of trusting Jesus in the midst of difficulty and uncertainty. In my spirit I felt like this hike might be God’s way of saying, “Keep stepping forward in faith, and trust me.” That said, if it became too risky or one of us became too tired or discouraged, I had every intention of turning back.

The first mini affirmation from God came about 15 minutes later as we were still sitting on that rock outcropping. We heard voices in the distance; likely the two guys we passed a few kilometers ago. At one point we could hear them clearly but still couldn’t see them because of the thick cloud cover. When their silhouettes finally appeared in the cloud and we could talk with them, we were so happy to see them if for no other reason than that their presence seemed to confirm that we were on the right trail! Keep trusting the footprints! Not long after these two guys arrived, four more people came! We weren’t the only two crazy ones! We were joined by six others!

I call this my first mini affirmation because it showed me two important lessons for pilgrims who journey by faith: first, we need community to guide and encourage us, and second, God gives us those who have gone before and we may need to simply trust in their “footprints” so to speak.

One of the young men in the group of four had a GPS app loaded on his phone. According to the app, we were about 1.5km away from the emergency shelter; a shelter located about one kilometer away from the peak. As a group we decided we wanted to hike as far as the shelter and decide then whether to continue to the peak. Having been at the rock for some time, Jake and I continued the hike as the others wanted to eat and rest.

Visibility did not improve. Between cloud and snow everything looked white and gray. But we still did our best to follow the footprints!

The boost we felt from meeting the others and realizing that we were getting close to the shelter was a real encouragement but, truthfully, the thick clouds made it pretty certain we’d have no views when we arrived there. I continued praying quietly in my spirit asking God for protection

Assurance about What We Do Not See

and guidance. At some point along this part of the journey I felt some confidence in my heart that we would see the sunshine. I can't explain exactly how or why I felt that but somehow it seemed like God was saying, "The sun will come out, trust me."

Well, we arrived at the shelter. Hooray! But no sunshine. Should we continue? At this point I'm thinking to myself, "Andrew, was that feeling really from the Lord or are you just being optimistic?" I said to Jake, "Let's go up to that next ridge in the snow." At that point we saw some more rocks so we went there. Still, thick clouds. We went a little further, then a little further, then finally found some rocks over which a heavy rush of water was flowing. We were getting ready to turn back.

The second mini affirmation from God came around this time. As we were sitting on these rocks, another large outcrop of rocks revealed themselves, then hid themselves, then revealed themselves again. Could the cloud cover be breaking up? There was no blue sky yet, but I was quite certain we must be nearing the top of the cloud ceiling. "Let's hike there Jake. If still no blue sky, we turn back." And so we continued.

The second mini affirmation affirmed two more lessons: first, trust in the prompting of the Holy Spirit; and second, look for signs along the way that the Lord may provide. I continued to feel like the sun was going to shine, and the exposed-then-hidden rocks seemed to be a sign.

When we hiked to the top of that next large outcrop of rock we saw the first sign of blue sky! As we went a little higher and sat down on a flat portion, right before our very eyes, the clouds moved away and the peak of Golden Ears was right there in front of us! I was elated! Not only could we see Golden Ears peak but we saw Mt. Baker peak and a host of other mountain peaks all peeking their heads through a fluffy white cloud ceiling. Spectacular! Thank you, Lord!



Assurance about What We Do Not See

It's true, I did not know with certainty that we'd see the sun. But in the journey of *faith*, our destination *is* certain. A resurrection body on a renewed Earth in the presence of the Living Christ, eternally, with all the saints, where Goodness, Justice, and Righteousness prevails, and tears, suffering and death are no more.

May the Lord give us all faith that is confident in what we hope for and certain of what we do not yet see! He will sustain us in life's journey, even through the most difficult of circumstances.

October 8

Thinking about the Future

Read Isaiah 65:17-25

My reflections yesterday about the confidence we can have in a certain destination that God has in store for all of His people—a renewed earth joined together with a reality the Bible calls heaven—often makes me wonder: What will the renewed earth be like? What will we do there (here?) for eternity?

I want to linger with you over some of these questions during the next few days.

Perhaps I thought about these questions a little more on my sabbatical because for parts of my four months apart my daily routine had changed significantly. Of course, some of my trips and travels were full and extremely busy and tiring, but I also had stretches of “free” time. I purposely did not fill my calendar with constant busyness; I had time to walk, cycle, write, rest, do nothing. Many people find it hard to do nothing. I do.

And yet many great spiritual writers in the Christian tradition have written about the importance of practicing silence and solitude, experiencing a stillness with the Lord that resists accomplishing or learning or doing, a stillness that simply allows us to enjoy the presence of the Lord.

I took time for this kind of stillness and realized again the need to incorporate that stillness into my regular weekly rhythms.

Well, back to the questions. It was on some of those days when I woke up and said, “I have nothing to do today, no plans, no obligations, no commitments,” that I would wonder, “What will we do for eternity?! Will there be deadlines on the new earth? Will people take sabbaticals in heaven? Or will they no longer be necessary? When “Sabbath” finally becomes a 24/7 reality, what will that be like?” (Hebrews 4:9-11)

I’m sure I’m not alone in wondering about questions like these.

Let me pause here. What do you think the renewed earth united to heaven will be like? What will we do there? Reflect on these questions during a time of extended silence. Consider writing some thoughts down.

9
October

The Renewed Earth is *This* Earth, Renewed!

Read 2 Peter 3:10-13

I think it's important for me to be clear about what I believe the Bible teaches because not all Christians believe this to be true. I believe our eternal home is THIS earth, renewed, made right, restored, cleansed from the impurity of all that is not the way it's supposed to be. This earth. Complete with the Grouse Grind, Golden Ears Mountain, False Creek, the Grand Canyon, Halong Bay in Vietnam; the Great Pyramids of Egypt, Parliament Hill in Ottawa, the Dome of Berlin in Germany, Notre Dame in Paris—you get the picture.

What about the remains of Dachau or Auschwitz? Or the mass graves in Cambodia or Rwanda?

At this point some might say, "what about the fire of 2 Peter 3:7-12?" Or what about the words of Jesus that "heaven and earth with disappear" (Matthew 5:18). Won't all be destroyed? No. The fire and destruction written about in 2 Peter is a consuming or purifying or cleansing fire, not an obliterating fire. God's consuming and purifying judgement will fall upon all that is not the way it's supposed to be. Moreover, the word Peter uses for new, *kainos*, denotes new in nature, the same word that is used to describe the new life that we have in Christ (Rom. 6:4). Our new life in Christ does not obliterate the old but renews and restores it to that which it was always meant to be. Thus, sin and all its effects will be destroyed. In this sense, all within the earth infected and corrupted by sin will disappear.

My sense is that much of this world as we know it will be preserved. Perhaps even the remains of places like Auschwitz and Ground Zero. Remember, Jesus' resurrected body maintained the scars of His crucifixion. Might not the renewed earth also maintain the scars of its rebellion and corruption?

Will there be weeds on the new earth? I doubt it, they came with the curse. What about mosquitoes? Perhaps. Although mosquitoes don't really do anything useful besides making more mosquitoes, they and their larvae are a significant source of food. Maybe they will continue to draw blood from living creatures like us, but without any of the swelling and itching!

Whatever the answers might be to these sorts of questions, we have good reason to believe that much of the world as we know it will remain. And that means there will be lots of things for us to see and lots of places for us to explore and enjoy.

October 10

The Renewed Earth is *This* Earth, Renewed!

If I'm not able to visit the great ancient Mayan ruins in Mexico before I die, perhaps I'll visit them on the renewed earth. Or hike Everest, if I'm so inclined? Or explore the Amazon rain forest? Who needs a "bucket list" when, at least for those made alive in Christ, there is really no bucket to kick. For all those who humble themselves before the Lord and commit their lives to Him, the earth is their inheritance (Matthew 5:5)!

I was pondering that very thought one day when I was hiking a trail on Sun Mountain near Winthrop, WA, a splendid trail with lovely vistas overlooking the Methow Valley. It took me about 2 hrs. to hike this short but delightful trail and see up close a tiny fraction of our glorious planet.

How long, I wondered, might it take to see the entire planet, up close? 100 years? 1,000 years? Eternity? Imagine being able to live long enough to hike the entire planet? Climb all its

mountains, cycle all its trails, explore all its caves, see all its buildings and architectural wonders, plummet all its vast oceans, canoe all its magnificent rivers, streams, and lakes. That would be a long life, yes, an eternal one!

And if the impetus within humankind that we already see continues, the longing to explore the vast reaches of outer space, we'll have an ever expanding universe of galaxy upon galaxy to explore and perhaps even inhabit. It appears that God used a few billion years to form the planet which we now inhabit. Maybe He'll invite us to join Him over a few billion more years to terraform other planets, in distant solar systems. We'll have eternity, after all.

We certainly won't be bored!



October 10

From a Garden to a City: Part I

Read Revelation 22:1-5

The Bible begins with the story of the first human pair in a garden and ends with a story of multiplied humanity—all nations, languages, and cultures—in a city. That progression suggests a great deal for us about what the united heaven and renewed earth might be like.

There's progression. Not the kind of progression where the old is bad and the new is good, but rather, a kind where the old is good and remains good, and the new requires ingenuity, thoughtfulness, and a kind of work that results in more and more small acts of new creation. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and our mandate includes the task of continuing to create, discover and utilize the rich resources of the garden to make something new.

Why does God articulate the trajectory of the Biblical story as a movement from a garden to a city? A story that Tim Keller has told, Emeritus Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, may help us think about why. He was having a conversation with someone and they wondered together whether God loves the countryside more than cities. His friend shared the fact that he feels much closer to God when he is in the peacefulness of the countryside than he does when he's in the hustle and bustle of a city. "I think that the new earth will mainly consist of natural beauty, rolling hillsides, sparkling rivers, majestic mountains, flowers, fruits, and fields without end. I think God loves the natural beauty of the countryside more." This is how Keller responded, "Does God love trees more than people or people more than trees?" "People, of course," his friend replied. "Well, since cities have lots of people and the countryside has lots of trees, and since God loves people more than trees, he must love the city more than the country!" The trajectory of the Biblical story as a movement from a garden to a city is precisely what we might expect. God loves people! He loves community, people working together, serving each other, welcoming the stranger. Where do we find Jesus in the Gospel stories? At weddings, banquets, festivals, feasts, meals, funerals, with crowds—with people.

Of course, this is no slam against the countryside and those who live there and love it. That's not the point. But there does seem to be an overall progression in the Biblical story towards a setting in which more and more people are able to live and work and serve together.

Because God loves people!

From a Garden to a City: Part II

Read Genesis 1:27-31

So, if the Biblical story describes a progression from a garden to a city, what might be the implications of that for us who live on the renewed earth? First, let's remind ourselves of something we noted yesterday, "There's progression. Not the kind of progression where the old is bad and the new is good, but rather, a kind where the old is good and remains good, and the new requires ingenuity, thoughtfulness, and a kind of work that results in more and more small acts of new creation."

Over the millennia of history, humanity has evolved from being a primarily nomadic people living in tents or caves to being a located people living in cities. And essential to this progression was the development of technology. For cities to function well, even the most ancient ones, water delivery systems, sewage transport systems, and social, organizational, and communication systems were vital. Developing the technology of ink on papyrus was no less groundbreaking than manipulating bits and bytes in a computer chip today.

Now think about all the technology that people have developed over the millennia in order that people can flourish and live well together. Shovels, steam engines, stethoscopes, and smartphones. And remember, all the resources necessary for these technological advances were already present in the world God made for us! Silica to make silicon microchips, ore to make steel, bauxite to make aluminum, even the crude oil that powers planes, trains and automobiles, and is used to manufacture a myriad of everyday products, is the product of plant life that has been decaying underground for millions of years.

God moves us on the trajectory towards cities and gives us a plethora of resources that we might need in order for huge amounts of people to flourish together in close community. It's very difficult for me to imagine that all we have learned and discovered together throughout human history will not be carried over into the new earth.

The Biblical narrative moves us toward a city. In our own day we see that movement happening right before our eyes; huge amounts of people are moving from rural areas to cities. Why cities? Because it's there that culture is developed and advanced; in universities, theatres, art galleries, and media centers. Institutions of influence and power are located in cities. Cities are where most of the jobs are. In a variety of different ways cities are those places in the world where large amounts of people are intentionally required to work together for the common good.

October 12

From a Garden to a City: Part II

So, if the closing picture in the Bible of the new earth is a city, all the activities that happen in cities and all the resources required to maintain cities will still be required. We'll need engineers, city planners, clerks, accountants, teachers, researchers, writers, musicians, curators, and factory employees. Some of us will need to find new employment: undertakers, police officers, security guards, weapons manufacturers, doctors?, preachers? But many of us are already doing what conceivably we might continue doing on the new earth.

Why do I think this is important? Because sometimes people live with a huge disconnect between this life and the next. They live as though this life is all there is or they have some sense that life after death will be boring; the caricature of people floating on clouds playing harps into eternity comes to mind. Nothing can be further from the truth. Living eternally in the presence of God, learning, working, serving together with all the redeemed, in an infinite cosmos, freed of sin and evil... well, that's something to look forward to and be eternally grateful for!

October 12

SERMON

“How to Pray for Family and Friends”

Colossians 1:9-12

Sermon notes:

Key Theme or Take-Away:

October 14

“I Have Not Stopped...”

Read: Ephesians 1: 15-23

I think this text is one of Paul’s most beautiful prayers. Occasionally I will “borrow” it and apply the prayer personally to someone that I am praying for. The prayer might go something like this: “Heavenly Father, I pray that you will fill Michael with your wisdom and revelation so that he will know you better. May the eyes of his heart be enlightened so that he might know deep within his heart the hope that you have called him towards and the riches of his glorious inheritance...” What a beautiful way to pray for a friend, spouse, son or daughter!

Towards the end of this prayer Paul makes a remarkable claim. As he considers the unsurpassable power and authority of Christ he writes, “God placed all things under [Jesus’] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (Eph. 1:22-23) The little phrase “for the church” can be translated in a variety of ways. The ESV and NASB render it “to the church”, the NLT “for the benefit of the church” and *The Message* interprets the phrase with this lengthy paraphrase, “The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.”

In the ESV and NASB, God gave Christ, as head over all things, to the church, in the NIV Christ is appointed as head over all things for the *sake of* the church, in the NLT Christ is made head over all things for the benefit of the church. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* adds an entire sentence that isn’t found in the original to try and flesh out the idea that he thinks Paul is getting at, “The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church.” Paul writes that Christ is head over all things—all spheres of society—for the church, for the benefit of the church, for the sake of the church. The church, his body, is the “fullness of [Christ] who fills everything in every way.”

Paul is saying that Christ, as Head, is ruling over all things in the world in, through, and with the church. The church is an instrument through which Christ rules the world and all that Christ is doing in the world is, in some way, being done for the sake of the church. As Peterson writes, “the world is peripheral to the church.”

That is a remarkable claim! The church is at the centre of all that Christ is doing in our world.

“I Have Not Stopped...”

This makes prayer foundational in the life of God’s people. As the church is led and empowered by the Spirit of Christ, prayer is to the church as breathing is to human life. How else can the fullness of Christ fill the church? Prayer unites us to Christ and his will for us and our world.

Al Vandergriend, a CRC pastor and author, has written, ““God has sovereignly determined to move in response to our prayers. God rules the world through the prayers of his people.”* As I read Paul in Ephesians 1, I think this is exactly right. God’s rule over the world is intimately connected to the prayers of His people!

In this season of growing in prayer let us offer ourselves more and more to the Holy Spirit in prayer so that His rule in our lives, in our families, in our community, and in our world might be more fully manifest.

October 15

* Al Vandergriend, The Prayer Church Sourcebook, p. ??

“The Last Shall Be First”

Read Mark 10:29-31



The waste management system in Cairo, Egypt is not a corporation but a community. They are called the zabbaleen, an Arabic word that literally means the “garbage people”. Spread out among seven different settlements throughout greater Cairo, it is estimated that they number between 50 – 70,000 in total. The largest of these seven settlements, the one that I visited, is called Mokattum Village.

It’s home to about 20 – 30,000 people and is nicknamed “garbage city” because the city’s garbage is collected at night, on carts pulled by donkeys or in pickup trucks, and brought into Mokattum where people live alongside the garbage they collect.

Remarkably, their garbage collection “system” is one of the most efficient in the world. The Zabbaleen recycle up to 80% of the city’s waste (compared to 20-25% for most Western garbage companies; Metro Vancouver’s rate is much higher—around 60%). The income for the Zabbaleen comes from sorted garbage. Some of it is used to make new products like bags or jewelry, but most of it is sold to recyclers. Much of the organic waste is fed to pigs that are sold and used for food.

As you might imagine, living conditions are poor and mortality rates are high. They offer a free service to the city as they receive no government income for the service they provide in removing the garbage that the population of 19.5 million (Greater Cairo) produces. In a very real sense they suffer for the sake of city sanitation.

Ninety percent of the people living in Mokattum Village are Coptic Christians; our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I wonder if Jesus had people like this in mind when, in the Kingdom of God, He said, “The last shall become first.”

“The Last Shall Be First”

Prayer / Reflection

- Pray for the Zabbaleen: for better living conditions, for greater recognition and compensation for the public service they provide, and for a continued strong witness to the broader community.
- Reflect on how God is calling you to cultivate a posture of service and sacrifice for the sake of others.

October 16

Finding the Kingdom is the Most Unlikely of Places

Scripture Reading: Luke 6:20-22; 7:21-23

Mokattam Village, or “garbage city”, in many ways lives up to its name. It is a densely packed community where garbage is literally everywhere. Bundles of bagged up plastics are stored next to the place where a woman cooks the next meal for her family on a busy street corner. Skids of sorted waste line the streets and the stench of a garbage dump fills the air. As one would expect, health conditions are poor, resulting in higher rates of disease and infant mortality.



It would be easy for most people to overlook the garbage city dwellers.

But in the Lord’s eyes, they are blessed! And one of the ways God has blessed these people is by providing them with a most beautiful sanctuary for worship.

Over the years I have seen many beautiful places of worship. In fact many would agree that the churches and cathedrals in Europe are some of the most beautiful buildings in the world.

I wasn’t prepared for the place of worship that I visited in “garbage city”. It’s properly called St. Simon Church but more popularly known as “The Cave Church”. Constructed inside a huge cave this sanctuary seats about 15,000 people and is shaped like a large amphitheater. It has no stained glass but instead contains beautiful rock carvings in the walls that tell different chapters of the Biblical story. The back of the cave opens to the heavens. It is simply magnificent.

No one could have prepared me for a sanctuary as beautiful as this one in the middle of a place known as garbage city. I suspect no one expected to see the beauty of Christ’s Kingdom among the blind, the lame, the deaf, the leprous, the dead, and the poor, but that is precisely where it seemed to be most evident. At the Cave Church, I was reminded how so often the Lord reveals the magnificence and beauty of His kingdom in the most unlikely of places.

October 17

Desert Hospitality

Read Hebrews 13:1-2; John 6: 32-40

It was the first time I had ever been in this kind of desert. The Okanagan has its own desert quality, as does the Arizona desert and the Mohave desert in California, but I had never experienced the desert of the Arabian peninsula—a desert much like the Sahara. Endless dunes of barren shifting sand.

On this particular afternoon in Oman we drove into the desert to spend the evening at a desert “resort.” As we neared the resort our host Justin drew our attention to the nomadic people that still call this desert their home; the Bedouin tribe that lives in tents and travels on camels. As I sat atop a dune watching a sunset and taking in all my surroundings, I was reminded of something my Seminary professor, Neil Plantinga, wrote some years ago in the Calvin Seminary *Forum*:

“An issue of *The Unesco Courier* reminds us that for most of human history, travelers have needed the food, drink, and shelter of strangers. They couldn’t travel any distance without it, and in hard climates it often “meant the difference between life and death.”

“The *Courier* tells of one culture after another whose rituals of hospitality go back for centuries. For instance, to this day Bedouin people in the Arabian desert keep a campfire going all night in order to attract travelers to it. A generous host might even light a second fire on a

nearby hilltop so that travelers can see it for miles. When a visitor arrives, the host doesn’t offend him by prying into the purpose of his journey. He doesn’t even ask how long his guest means to stay. He simply offers him a place by the fire, and maybe a mat, but in any case food and drink.”



Over the last number of years it has become the custom at our church to offer guests who worship with us on Sunday mornings the opportunity to join others for lunch. MOSAIC lunches, Soup Sunday gatherings, and more recently, monthly district lunches, are some of the ways in which our congregation shows hospitality with food. As Plantinga writes:

*Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Calvin Seminary Forum*, Spring 2007, vol. 14, no. 2., p.2.

Desert Hospitality

“Always food and drink. Handing food to a guest is momentous. When you pass food to another person you are saying, “I want you to live.” In fact, handing food to another is a sacramental act. It binds you together as giver and receiver of life.”

Yes, we want our guests to live! We want them to meet Christ in our worship, but also to know the presence of the Bread of Life in the food that we share. In a very real sense all people are pilgrims on a journey. We are all wanderers who need food in order to live. And in the Bible God often centers His presence within a meal or a feast. Plantinga concludes:

“At the center of all this is God, giver and host. God keeps providing for all of us pilgrims in the desert because he wants us to live. In fact, he wants us to thrive. In the mystery of communion with God, Jesus Christ not only gives and hosts, but in fact offers himself as our meal so that we spiritually eat and drink our God. The point is that for us travelers, such hospitality may mean the difference between life and death.”

Let us continue to be quick to show hospitality with food, remembering that the living Christ is present to offer himself as the Bread and Water of life.

October 18

“Belonging”

Read Psalm 100

Kim and I had just visited my last surviving uncle. Of my dad’s six siblings and my mother’s five all of them and their spouses have died, except Oom Jan. At 90 years of age, though physically quite frail, mentally he was still sharp as a tack. He lives by himself in the home my mother lived in as a teenager while growing up in her hometown of Naaldwijk.

After our visit Kim and I had lunch on the *Wilhelminaplein* just outside the *Oude Kerk*. As I saw some young children playing I imagined my mom as a young girl playing with her friends or walking on the *plein* (square), perhaps right where we were sitting! Since her family ran a well-known store in town, I wondered how many of the elderly folks I saw that day remembered the Petri family and their store. Maybe I was sitting close to a childhood friend of my mom?!



As I shared this with Kim she captured exactly what I was thinking, “I bet you want to stand up right now and ask if anyone here remembers the Petri family, don’t you?” Yes, I did! “Why is that?” I asked Kim. “Because we all want to belong. We all need to have roots.”

That’s exactly what I felt. I sensed my roots were there in Naaldwijk but I didn’t know anyone (except Oom Jan) and they didn’t know me.

Since leaving my birth town, Oakville, ON, at the age of 24, any sense of rootedness connected to that place has mostly gone. In fact, having moved to a variety of places since then, often quite far from home, I’ve never felt rooted to a place. I sometimes envy those who do. People who’ve lived in the same town all their lives and known the same people enjoy something that our family has never had.

But the need for rootedness and belonging doesn’t go away.

By God’s grace our church family is the community where we experience belonging. Our roots are found primarily in a people.

There in that moment on the town square of Naaldwijk I was reminded of how important it is for our church family to be that kind of community where people feel belonging and rootedness. As we continue to welcome individuals and families from different places and cultures, let’s pray that not only will they feel welcomed, but that in short order they will also experience a strong sense of belonging.

October 19

SERMON

“The Priority of Praying Together”

Acts 6:1-7

Sermon notes:

Key Theme or Take-Away:

October 21

“Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Our Congregation”

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

In one of his books George Bullard invites congregations to pursue their “full Kingdom potential”. He asserts that this means more than congregations being “healthy” or “faithful” or “successful”. He writes, “I am interested in your congregation being reimagined in the image of God. All too often we find congregations being reimagined in the image of the latest church growth, health faithfulness, success, or transformation process of humankind. I am interested in helping your congregation understand the context in which you find yourself and then to fully, sacrificially, lovingly, and unconditionally minister among the people in that context.” *

In the passage that we read Paul invites us to “live by faith and not by sight” (v.7) and make it our goal to “please God.”(v.9) During this season of growing in prayer we are seeking to communally “live by faith.” As we humbly, prayerfully, and sincerely, seek His face together, God will continue to reveal His Kingdom purposes to us. God knows us—our passions, gifts, talents and resources—God knows our community—our neighbourhood, their longings, needs, and struggles—and as we communally take up the posture of listening and obeying, He will surely move us forward in pursuing our “full Kingdom potential” for the glory of Jesus Christ. Bullard writes that this focus comes when we make it our priority to follow the leadership of God. “Kingdom potentials pull congregations forward rather than pushing them forward.”

As we grow in prayer we look forward to responding to the pull of the Holy Spirit and being led and empowered by Him for the ministries He entrusts to us!

October 22

“The Formative Power of Music and Singing”

Read Psalm 100

Shortly after visiting a historic church in Schwerin, Germany*, I read an insightful article by Marilyn McEntyre called “Choosing Church”[◇]. She helped me appreciate what I experienced for just a few moments when I was sitting in the pews of that Schwerin church.

We happened to enter towards the end of a short midday service. As the service was ending the organist played a lovely postlude on the magnificent organ with a melody that filled the church. I felt myself deeply moved.

I’m sure my emotion had something to do with the beautiful acoustics of the sanctuary and the thought of being in an 800 year old building with saints that have been worshipping here for centuries. But I think something more was going on too, something that McEntyre captures in her article.

At one point in her article she lists a number of things that she observes take place in vibrant, life-giving church communities. One of them is the observation that “healthy churches are places of divine encounter”. And one of the ways we encounter God is through music and singing. She writes,

“Singing is one way to “enter into God’s courts.” Few places are left where people gather and sing. Yet neuroscientists say that singing together promotes integration of brain functions, alleviates depression, and promotes mental health. When we sing we learn viscerally and audibly what it means to be “one in the Spirit.”

As I often do in regular Sunday worship, that afternoon in Schwerin I felt viscerally and audibly what it means to be one in the Spirit.

Let us thank God for gifted musicians, Spirit led worship teams, and vibrant congregational singing that each week leads us into the courts of God!

*Evangelisch-Lutherische Domgemeinde Schwerin

[◇]<https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/choosing-church/>

A Most Significant Prayer Service

Read 2 Chronicles 7:13-16

One of the reasons that the Cave Church was so moving for me is because I remembered the significant prayer service that took place here almost 6 years to the day of our visit. This past June I took a class titled "Christianity and Islam" with Dr. Wafik Wahba at Regent College. Here is how he describes the significance of that prayer event:

"An estimated 70,000 Egyptian Christians gathered on November 11, 2011 for praise, worship, and prayer at St. Simon Church in Cairo while millions around the globe followed the event live on TV and the Internet. This was a significant event: It was the largest Christian gathering in the modern history of Egypt; it brought together, for the first time, all Christian denominations: Coptic Orthodox, Catholics, and all branches of Protestant and Evangelical Christians. The prayer meeting that started at 6:00 PM continued uninterrupted till 6:00 AM the following day!

"The focal point of the gathering was repentance and forgiveness. The leaders of all churches came together in unprecedented unity to lead thousands of people in worship and prayer for Egypt: "We are here to rend our hearts before the Lord and repent for all our sins," said one priest as he reflected on Joel chapter 2. Before leading the people in prayers of repentance he reminded all church leaders, Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" - Joel 2:17. Another priest prayed for the healing of the land and for God's intervention to save the country from a disastrous famine as the Nile is drying up at alarming rate. The powerful time of praise and worship focused on God's glory being declared, once again, over the land of Egypt with several songs on the theme of "Blessing Egypt". One of the highlights of the event was a prayer of dedication, wherein the country and its people were covenanted to the Lord to live a consecrated life.

"The 70,000 Christians who gathered in St. Simon Church (also known as the Cave Church, at the foothill of the Mokاتم Mountain overlooking the city of Cairo) have a different way of looking to the future. They are very aware of the fact that

October 24

A Most Significant Prayer Service

they were praying at the exact location where one-thousand years ago God answered the prayers of Egyptian Christians and miraculously intervened to spare their lives against the aggressions of the Caliph of the time. The prayer movement that started several years ago in churches like Kasr El-Dobara Church (which is located in Tahrir Square—the birthplace of January 25, 2011 revolution) and many others, is now spreading to churches across Egypt. The spark that was lit by the prayer movement cannot be quenched. During the last month or so, Egyptian Christians have come to realize that no government in the world, nor the United Nations and its commissions, truly care about their plight. Their hope and trust is not in earthly powers and systems but in the power of the resurrected Christ who is given all power and authority in heaven and on earth. Whatever the future holds for the Christians of Egypt, they know that they are heirs of one of the richest histories of the Christian faith. Egyptian Christians, who gave to world Christianity the first organized theological school in Alexandria, the deepest sense of spirituality in the monastic movement, and one of the largest numbers of Christian martyrs, will continue to be a blessing to the nations through lives of dedicated prayer, humility, and service. However the text of Isaiah 19:25 is interpreted, Egyptian Christians are fervently praying that, The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people...”*

As I sat in the Cave Church, thinking about the historical prayer event that took place I marveled at how God brought together 70,000 people to pray for Egypt in the middle of “garbage city”.

As the hymn writer reminds us, “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.”

*<https://www.tyndale.ca/news/egypts-remarkable-prayer-gathering>. November 18, 2012.

Worship as Public Witness

Read Acts 8:26-40

So, on this particular day a Canadian family (mine) gathered together with a group of 40-50 Eritreans at the side of a lake just west of Berlin (Tegeler See). There, in the presence of many Germans, some cycling by, others walking, still others swimming, we joined with these Eritrean brothers and sisters to witness seven from their community be baptized.

In recent history the Eritrean government has been one of the more oppressive on the planet and most all of these Christians had fled their homes as refugees. Most from this small community had been in Germany less than 3 years. Refugees of African descent have been among those who have found it most difficult to integrate into the German context.



I wondered what all these Germans thought about us that afternoon. We weren't too loud, but the clapping, singing, praying and speaking was certainly heard by most within a 25m radius. How did they feel about these foreigners singing and clapping on "their" beach that Sunday afternoon? Annoyed? Curious? Thankful?

Well, I know how one German lady felt.

She had been cycling along the lake and when she saw our group singing, she stopped to observe. Within a few minutes she parked her bike and stood with us just outside the circle of worshipping Eritreans. Several minutes later I saw her move to the rhythm of the music and join in with the clapping. When the sermon started and the Canadian guests were given a front row seat on a large log, she sat down with us right next to me. Thankfully, the preacher spoke some English so he graciously translated parts of his sermon for us. The German lady sitting next to me knew some English and listened with rapt attention. Think about that picture for a moment; a German listening to an Eritrean preach the Gospel translated into broken English!

When she had to leave she politely said something to me in German to let me know she had to go. I replied in English and happily found out her English was quite good.

October 25

Worship as Public Witness

“So, do you know this group of people?” I asked. And that’s when I heard what God was doing in her heart that afternoon.

She began by telling me how special this experience had been for her. She told me about an “energy” and a “peace” that she experienced right from the moment she stopped to observe. “It’s hard for me to explain,” she said, “but I feel very peaceful, and good, and happy. Something special is happening here.” I said to her, “I think that’s the work of Jesus speaking to your heart.” She nodded her head. “I think I was supposed to be here today. The last few days have been very difficult for me. This morning I thought I should get on my bike and go around the lake. Hopefully that would make me feel better. And then I came here! This has been very special. I feel peaceful and happy. I’m so glad I came here.”

The text that afternoon was from Acts 8. A story about how God spontaneously brought Philip to encounter an Ethiopian who was coming to faith. On this day, God used Ethiopian background Eritreans to spontaneously encounter a German woman with a moving experience of God’s Spirit.

That brief conversation left me feeling deeply grateful for how God might be using vibrant Christian immigrants to renew and refresh an increasingly secular German (and Canadian) population. And I prayed more earnestly that in our own church context, God would use our public worship and witness to touch the hearts of those around us.

October 25

“A Great Multitude”

Read Revelation 7:9-12

At New West these verses from Revelation have been quoted often during the last number of years. As a congregation located in a culturally diverse neighborhood we have regularly been praying that we would be a church family that increasingly reflects the cultural diversity of our surrounding community; not for the sake of diversity, but out of a genuine desire to see the vision of Rev. 7 embodied in our own congregation. And the Lord has been hearing our prayers! We continue to welcome students and families from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

All of us know that the Church of Jesus Christ is a community of many nations, tribes and languages. Christians are found in almost every country of the world! And in every place the church gathers something of their culture is expressed in their worship, fellowship and prayer.

I think many of us wonder what the heavenly worship scene of Rev. 7 will be like. In one sense it is a vision of something that is already happening. John sees it; present tense. But it's also a vision of what is to come. On the renewed earth God's people will offer worship and prayer that reflects all the varied cultures and nationalities that make up the whole people of God.

During my sabbatical I've had the privilege of gathering with a large variety of churches in a number of different countries:

- Expat Christians in Oman
- Coptics in Egypt
- Egyptian Presbyterians
- Lebanese, Syrians, Iranians in Lebanon
- Expats in Istanbul
- Hmong Christians in Northern Vietnam
- Vietnamese in Saigon
- Dutch Reformed in the Netherlands
- Eritreans in Berlin
- Iranians in Berlin
- Expat Anglicans in the Netherlands

Each worship experience was uniquely beautiful in its own way. In some instances language prevented me from fully understanding what was being shared but in every instance, whether it was a blessing, or a tune, or a prayer, I could connect with something that was happening such that I knew I was with brothers and sisters in Christ.

October 26

"A Great Multitude"

A kind of culminating experience for me was our time in Taizé, France. Each day as we gathered with about 4000 people coming from 35+ countries to sing and pray it felt like a tiny foretaste of Rev. 7. In terms of people and languages now we were all together! Now we sang and heard Scripture read in each other's languages. With one voice we lifted short songs of praise or prayers of intercessions to the throne of the Lamb. In unison we would sing, "Salvation belongs to our God", sometimes in Latin, or English or Swahili. It was an experience I'll not soon forget.

And all this affirmed for me the great blessing we experience in our own church as God brings us together as one family from many different cultures. Let's continue to pray that God would strengthen and multiply our multicultural church family at New West CRC!

October 26

SERMON

“The Disciple’s Prayer”

Matthew 6:9-13

Sermon notes:

Key Theme or Take-Away:

October 28