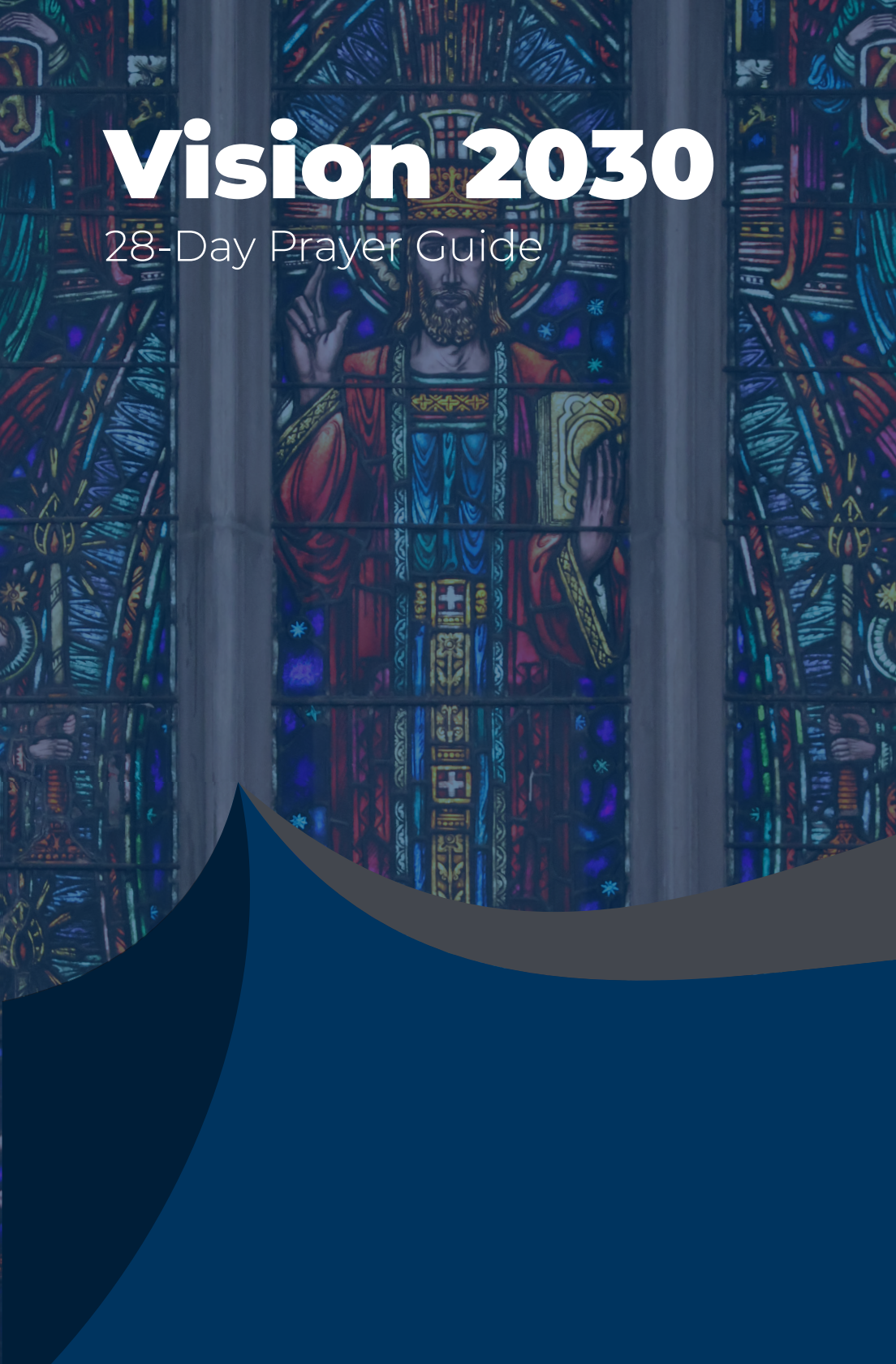


Vision 2030

28-Day Prayer Guide



God is calling First Methodist Church into a bold new season through the Vision 2030 Campaign movement that energizes and equips our congregation to bear lasting fruit for Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. Guided by prayerful discernment and the faithful input of our lay leadership and pastoral team, Vision 2030 positions our church for the next season of life together as we step fully into a new country of ministry and mission. This vision centers on three clear areas of focus:

- **RENEW** discipleship by asking God to lead us deeper into places—in our lives, our city, and our world—that we have never gone before.
- **RELEASE** our potential for evangelism right where we live, amid the unique challenges and opportunities of today's cultural moment.
- **RESTORE** our physical facilities so they remain a vital resource for ministry for generations to come.

During the course of the next thirty days, you are invited to join together with the whole church to pray. We believe that God is cultivating for himself a people who pray. God is inviting us to be partners in His ministry in Tulsa and around the world. We join together in prayer for this campaign because we want it to be successful in renewing our discipleship, releasing our evangelistic potential, and restoring our facilities, which are our base of mission in this city.

The following 28-day guide is meant to help you focus your prayers for this campaign on God—his character and love—in a way that helps everyone grab onto the vision God has planted in our hearts. But even more, we want to see that vision come to fruition. This will only happen if we pray with open hearts and open hands.

DAY 1

OCTOBER 26

JOHN 3:16-18

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Every good work begins with God moving first. Why did Jesus come to us? You might answer that by saying, “so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” That is true, but it’s not the primary reason Jesus came into this world. The reason Jesus came is right there in the very first words of this passage: Jesus came to save us because God loves us.

It is always important for us to keep the main thing the main thing. Sometimes we move past the main thing into other good and important things, and when we do that, we lose sight of the true purposes of God for us and for the salvation that he brought. We should never lose sight of the fact that God loves us, and that is the reason Jesus came into the world. It’s a love we can’t comprehend. We get glimpses of understanding, but we still do not fully understand. Every definition of what love is must begin with God. It is God’s deep and sacrificial love for us that creates the purpose of Jesus’ coming. That is something to rejoice in and never forget. God loves you, and that’s why he wants to save you.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for loving me so well. All that I know of salvation and love finds its source and purpose in you. Help me to live out of that source with a purpose to show others the love you have given me. AMEN.

GENESIS 1:1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

As we pray through this campaign, we ought to recognize that Advent is just over the horizon. The Advent season begins with a focus on the hope we have in God and His faithfulness to keep His promises. Advent is a Latin word that means “to come.” The season before Christmas is a season of preparation before Jesus comes to us on Christmas Day. This time of the year is driven by what will make corporations the most money, and because Christmas is so lucrative, the sale of Christmas-related things begins earlier and earlier each year. But even they don’t go far enough! We begin our preparations by going all the way back to the beginning, before any of us were here. We go back before anything was here. The Bible tells us that in the beginning, there was nothing: nothing except God, that is. Our Triune Creator God has existed for eternity past and will exist throughout all eternity future. Because God is Triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Jesus, the one who arrived in human flesh, has always been. The Nicene Creed reminds us that Jesus is “eternally begotten of the Father,” which is to say, there’s never been a time when he hasn’t existed.

The eternal Son of God comes to us in human flesh. This was not a last-minute decision, but one that was decided before the foundation of the world. Long before Starbucks could roll out its red and green holiday cups, God was making preparations for the coming of the Son for our salvation. He is inviting us to prepare, not just for Advent and Christmas, but for what he is about to do in us and through us to renew, release, and restore. What a generous and loving God he is!

PRAYER

Gracious God, always remind me that before you were given the title of creator, you were Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are a person who, out of love, created us and loved us. Help me to remember that today as I do what I was created to do. AMEN.

DAY 3

OCTOBER 28

1 SAMUEL 7:3-4

And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, “If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only.

The context for this passage is that the Philistines had had the Ark of the Covenant for a while, but the Israelites were able to recover it. It stayed with the people of Kirjath Jearim “for a long time; it was there twenty years.” During that time, it says that the house of Israel lamented after the Lord, but in order for the people of Israel to bring the ark back to the tabernacle, Samuel demanded that they purify themselves through a fast. Verse four says, “the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth and they served the Lord only.”

In serving the Lord, they discovered that they had sinned against God. This realization came as a result of their fast. Repentance and fasting. These are two important acts in the life of every believer. Oftentimes, when we deny ourselves, we discover what is truly inside of us. We discover the places where we ought to repent. This comes from the gracious character of God. As we pray during this lead-up to commitment Sunday, let us ask the Lord to reveal in our hearts the places where we are turned away from him and then graciously receive the forgiveness and restoration that he offers.

PRAYER

God, look inside of me, and see what I need to let go of. I want to live in your presence as a tabernacle in the same way that your presence rested on the ark in the tabernacle. Purify me and make me holy that I might honor you. AMEN.

1 PETER 1:22-25

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because “All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the LORD endures forever.” Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.

Isn't it great when something gets stuck to your soul in such a way that it changes everything about the way you see the world? Martin Luther was translating Romans 1:17, which says that the righteous live by faith, when the Holy Spirit opened him up to understand what Paul was saying in Ephesians 2:8-9 that we are saved by grace through faith. It completely upended his life and led him to seek out reforms in the church, which resulted in what we know as the Protestant Reformation. Dennis Kinlaw tells a story about a Bible professor he had at Princeton in the 1950s, Otto Piper, who said, “There is enough undiscovered truth in the Scriptures to produce a Reformation and an evangelical awakening in every generation.” What I think Dr. Piper meant (and what Dr. Kinlaw was getting at) is that in the Bible, there is enough truth about God to completely gobsmack us into a revival over and over until Jesus returns. The word of the Lord endures forever.

Well, that's great, you may be thinking. But what does that mean for me? Obeying the truth, the everlasting word, results in love. It results in a love for God and a love for neighbor that has the potential to completely change the world. That power is in you through the Spirit and by the Word. What an amazing gift if we'll heed God's voice!

PRAYER

Lord, help me to love Your Word. As I bring my life into line with the Scriptures, I pray for an increase of love for you and for the world, especially my brothers and sisters in Christ. Help me to love fervently and with a pure heart. AMEN.

DAY 5

OCTOBER 30

1 JOHN 5:3

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

The way that we know we love God is whether we keep his commandments. This seems a frightening proposition until you consider that the foundation of God's commands and our ability to follow them are made of the same stuff: love. This is nothing new to us. John Wesley says in his sermon *On Zeal*, "But of all holy tempers, and above all others, see that you be most zealous for love. Count all things loss in comparison of this,—the love of God and all mankind. It is most sure, that if you give all your goods to feed the poor, yea, and your body to be burned, and have not humble, gentle, patient love, it profiteth you nothing. O let this be deep engraved upon your heart: 'All is nothing without love!'" Love is the source of our ability to keep God's commandments. If we let God's love consume us, we won't be able to steal from a person or lie to them because that would be contrary to what's going on in us by God's grace.

So, Wesley says be zealous for love! When we look at the commandments, we come to realize that in the love of God, they aren't burdensome because he helps us in our weaknesses. Wesley also said that every command of God is a covered promise which means that if God tells us to do something, he'll give us the help and the power to do it. All we have to do is trust him and the overcoming power of God's love.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to see that there is no burden in your commands. They are freedom for my soul. I pray that you would renew my desire for you, to trust you to help me to keep your commandments. That's where the lightness of obedience comes from. You are so good to me. AMEN.

ISAIAH 45:19

*I have not spoken in secret,
In a dark place of the earth;
I did not say to the seed of Jacob,
“Seek Me in vain”;
I, the LORD, speak righteousness,
I declare things that are right.*

Sometimes we make Christianity out to be harder than it actually is. Our human propensity is to make things more complex than they need to be. In reality, growing in faithfulness and love for God and for our neighbor is simple. But too often we think that the people who really get it are the people who have the knowledge that we need. They have some secret to life that makes their Christian life seem so much better than our own. So, we buy their products. We read their books. We watch their videos. What is it that they have that I don't? And how do I get it?

God has not spoken in secret, says the prophet Isaiah. You can go to pretty much any bookstore and find a copy of the Scriptures for yourself. He's not hiding anything from you. He also didn't try to trick us into seeking him, only to find out that he made it impossible for us to do. That's what God means when he says that he didn't tell Israel to seek him in vain. When Jeremiah tells his people that God says they will find him if they seek him with all of their hearts, that's exactly what he meant. Seeking God with your whole heart is not an exercise in vanity and meaninglessness; it's a guarantee that the one who is pursuing you will be found by you.

Isaiah speaks for God in saying that He speaks righteous things, that which is good. We don't have to seek God in vain (or the vain things of this world). The Lord has spoken clearly about what is right, so we can seek him and his ways through His Spirit and His word.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to trust you. So many times I read things in the Bible that seem so difficult and far off. But I want to follow you, and I know you will help me to do just that. Will you help me today? AMEN.

DAY 7

NOVEMBER 1

ISAIAH 48:16

*“Come near to Me, hear this:
I have not spoken in secret from the beginning;
From the time that it was, I was there.
And now the Lord GOD and His Spirit
Have sent Me.”*

This passage is remarkably similar to the reading from yesterday, even though it occurs four chapters later. While the similarities are clear, one contrast may not be as clear. The astounding thing about this passage is that the speaker is different than the one that comes before it. Yahweh is speaking up until the beginning of this passage, when there is a shift. The one speaking now is the Servant whom God sends to deliver them from their captivity to sin. That person is Jesus himself. The even cooler thing is that here in Isaiah, written seven hundred years before Jesus died for our sins, the whole Trinity shows up. The speaker at the beginning was the Father, then there is the Spirit cooperating with the Father to send the Servant, the Son, to help his people who are desperately trying to live in the middle of exile.

And what God does, He does loud. What God does isn't in secret. You don't have to get a degree to figure it out. He sent Jesus not only to speak the truth but also to demonstrate it. This is good news for people who cannot save, rescue, or deliver themselves from bondage and slavery. God's not hiding all of this from the world. He wants us to know about it and to share it with the whole world. What better way to end the week than by praying for God to help us see him clearly and to share what we've received, grace upon grace, with the world.

PRAYER

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, fill me with your love and joy. Help me to receive what you offer to me and to give it away to others, just as you intended.
AMEN.

HEBREWS 12:1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

You've probably heard this passage a number of times before. It is a reminder that our life and the life of faith is similar to a race. There is a start and there's an end. There is cramping, and there are aid stations. There is pain, frustration, and joy. There are moments in which we wonder if we can keep on going. There's also a cheering section, a cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. These aren't just people from the Bible or our Methodist history, but also people from our families whom we have lost, who have been faithful to Christ down through the years and received their reward by being with him. They are cheering us on to run with endurance the race set before us.

We've got a race to run and in order to finish well, we are to keep our eyes upon Jesus. He is the one who authored it and finished it. He pioneered this race for us. With joy Jesus set aside the shame of the cross and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. He is calling us to run the race that he has pioneered. It's hard but worth it. Imagine the cheering section with Jesus there, leading the people in encouraging you to finish. There's nothing like hearing the roar and applause from a group of people watching a race as you cross the finish line. All of them want to see you make it. They're invested in you. Run the race! With Jesus, there's no chance you won't make it.

PRAYER

Lord, may that great cloud of witnesses cheer me on today as I follow Jesus, who pioneered the way that leads to life eternal. I want you more than anything else that could get my attention. Keep your vision for me and the church always in front of me so that I always see what you are leading us into. AMEN.

DAY 9

NOVEMBER 3

MICAH 4:3-7

He shall judge between many peoples, And rebuke strong nations afar off; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, And no one shall make them afraid; For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. For all people walk each in the name of his god, But we will walk in the name of the LORD our God Forever and ever. "In that day," says the LORD, "I will assemble the lame, I will gather the outcast And those whom I have afflicted; I will make the lame a remnant, And the outcast a strong nation; So the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion From now on, even forever.

In this passage from the prophet Micah, we find a prophecy about the future time when God will bring the people of Israel from wherever they have been scattered and repair them. God will also re-establish his rule over them and judge the surrounding nations for what they have done to the people of Israel. This prophecy comes at a time when Israel was faithless. It's important to remember that even when God's people are unfaithful, God is faithful.

A day of judgment will come, but in the meantime, there's no denying that the thing that God is on the lookout for is faithfulness. In verse five, he says, "For all people walk each in the name of his God, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever." That is the hope. It's a future-oriented hope. The interesting thing is that this hope is a hope that can be fulfilled today among us. We don't have to waste any time wondering what will happen as a result of current world events or anything like that. What we can focus on is walking in the name of the Lord. Being obedient to his commandments, loving our neighbors, and being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We don't have to wait for a future day of the Lord. We can be a light and a joy now through our faithfulness to God so that those who are now broken and far off can rejoice.

PRAYER

Lord, keep me focused on you today. I want to be faithful to your call and your vision. Help me to walk in the hope that you are going to make all things right. Help me to walk in your name forever and ever. AMEN.

GALATIANS 5:1-3

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law.

In Christ, there is freedom. In one sense, he frees us from our chains. He frees us from the bondage of sin and our slavery to it. There's also another sense in which we have freedom in Christ. And that freedom is that we don't have to stand under the crushing burden of the law. This isn't to say that there isn't a commandment to keep, only that God is the one doing the heavy lifting.

Bob Tuttle used to say that every religion in the world, including my own, is like a 50-ton block of concrete on top of us. We're not going to be able to lift it ourselves and move it. To move a 50-ton block of concrete, you need a crane, and the Holy Spirit is that crane doing that heavy lifting. We are helpless to fulfill the demands of the law. That is a mental and emotional burden so great that many people crumble underneath it. How many times have we had the thought, "I just can't do this. I cannot measure up."? It's a crushing defeat to know we're not perfect enough. But! The freedom comes from Christ, who has given us the Holy Spirit, who does the heavy lifting! He is the one leading and shaping us, especially through this campaign. The Spirit helps and transforms us. Knowing this also, Paul calls us to hold fast to the freedom that Christ has given us. Don't get tangled up in things that don't matter, but seek God and ask the Holy Spirit to help you. This is how we stay free and how we stay faithful

PRAYER

Father, I want to please you. I know that this desire makes you smile. Thank you for giving me the power through the Holy Spirit to walk faithfully with you and to walk in the freedom that Christ offers. AMEN.

DAY 11

NOVEMBER 5

1 JOHN 3:2

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

Sometimes, to maintain focus and commitment to something, we can't see the whole picture. This is why so many people give up on dreams, careers, marriages, and projects. Part of the motivation for working on something comes from being able to picture and pursue that which could be. When our hearts and imaginations are captivated by that picture, we'll endure no small amount of frustration and pain to see it come to fruition.

Stephen Covey used to exhort his disciples to "begin with the end in mind." If we don't have a clear picture of what the end looks like, it's hard to keep that in mind as we move through time and space. What we as Jesus's disciples know today, though, is that what we shall be is totally unlike anything we can imagine. When Jesus is fully and completely revealed at the end and we see him in his glorious manifest presence with us, "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." Can you imagine what that will feel like? What will that look like? It's our hope that on that day when we see Jesus clearly and completely, we'll be able to look back and see how all the pieces have fit together. We may not be able to see the whole thing now as clearly as we would like, but following him right now, in this moment, prepares us for what will be revealed. Pray that right now God would give us a vision so vivid that we live with excitement and anticipation of what that glorious day will be like.

PRAYER

Oh gracious God, sometimes I can't see far enough ahead to keep one foot in front of the other. It seems I only have enough light to move one step at a time. I pray that, though this may be the reality of life until I finish my race, you would give me a vision and a picture of what you are doing in me so that I may stay motivated to the end. AMEN.

EPHESIANS 1:3-6

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

As Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians, he has a rapturous view of what is currently going on in the heavenly realm. It's almost as if he can see it in his mind, and he longs for it moment by moment. To me, the interesting thing about this passage is that the only place where Paul uses the word “glory” is to describe the grace of God.

“The glory of His grace by which he made us accepted in the Beloved.” You may recall that when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, the heavens parted and a voice boomed from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” So it should be clear to us that the Beloved Paul refers to is Jesus Christ. Since Jesus is the Beloved, our acceptance by God comes through Jesus Christ and the grace that he has given to us. There is glory there. Indescribable glory. Up to this point, we haven't even talked about what glory is. But suffice it to say that glory is the real, tangible presence of God among us. In other words, God's grace to us through Jesus Christ is his glory in us. It is God present in us. This is a gift that we receive by faith and a gift that transforms us from what we were into what we will be. It's a beautiful picture of love and embrace by God. Not just a picture, but a reality that we can count on as we endure the ups and downs of this life.

PRAYER

Beloved Savior, it is hard to imagine that you dwell at me through the presence of your Spirit. But because Scripture is true I know that this is a reality. I pray that you would continue to pour out your glorious grace in me that I might be transformed. Help me to give away this grace that I have been given so that all people may come to know you. AMEN.

DAY 13

NOVEMBER 7

EXODUS 34:6

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness

After the people of Israel turned to idolatry with the golden calf and Moses destroyed the first two tablets of the Ten Commandments, God made two new ones. Instead of destroying the people, he allowed them to come and try again. Isn't that the picture we have of God from beginning to end? His heart isn't set on destroying us, but it is set on bringing us along and giving us opportunity after opportunity to love him and follow him, just like a good Father.

Moses did as he was commanded; he made two new tablets for the commandments, and when that was done, the Lord passed before him and reminded Moses, who was to remind the people, that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. This is the same God who passes before you, who regularly reminds you of this truth. Thanks be to God for his gracious faithfulness that never ends.

He makes all things new, including you and me. This comes to us from a never-ending well of love and grace, and God is always ready to give our souls exactly what we need: more of him!

PRAYER

Loving Father, thank you for your steadfast love, for your mercy, and for your grace. Without your gifts, I'd be stuck. But, you give and give out of your endless abundance, and today I need it. AMEN.

JOHN 6:37-38

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

What a wonderful reminder that if we come to Jesus, we'll not be cast out. This is a stunning contrast to the rest of the world and most of our relationships. We sometimes walk on eggshells because we know if we make one wrong move or write the wrong thing on a social media account, we'll become a social pariah, abandoned by many who once called us friends. But when you come to Jesus, no matter what we've done or how we may feel our neglect is justified, he will never cast you out.

Jesus is always on the lookout for people to come to him, never turning any away. The stark truth of this sentence makes me wonder why we turn to others, even those we've never met before, for acceptance and consolation, instead of the open-armed messiah who gave his life so that we will never know the sting of eternal abandonment. Even better, when we come to Jesus and are formed by him, we are made into instruments through which he reaches those who feel like they've been abandoned and neglected as well. Thanks be to God that he does this work in us!

PRAYER

Jesus, it is in the confidence I have in your love that I come to you today. I know that you won't abandon me, and I want to be so filled with your Spirit and love that I may be useful to fulfill the will of him who sent you, just like you did in this passage. Release me to share the love of God in a way that draws people to you. AMEN.

PHILIPPIANS 2:3-8

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Before Jesus was abandoned by his three closest disciples and arrested by the group led by the one who betrayed him, he prayed this prayer to the Father, “nevertheless, not my will but your will be done.” This means that Jesus was fully submitted to the Father even in the middle of the worst case of neglect and abandonment we could imagine. Jesus was surrendered to the will of God. And what came out of his yieldedness? Our salvation.

It was because Jesus fully trusted God that he was able to endure neglect and everything else that followed through to his crucifixion. He humbled himself and became obedient to the will of the Father and not his own will. One of the difficulties of human life is realizing that the more of our hearts that belong to God, the more we are able to endure some of the greatest pains the world can throw at us. In Jesus, we can clearly see that the greatest gifts and the greatest joys we can ever know come through a life yielded to God.

When we find ourselves in great distress, it might be that the path out of that internal suffering is to turn to God and tell him that we know we don’t have the agency to change circumstances, but we can say, “Nevertheless, not my will but your will be done.” Great good can come out of this.

PRAYER

Father, when I find it difficult to walk through this life feeling abandoned and neglected, will you help me to yield myself to you? Will you receive the offering of my whole heart and, in turn, make my heart whole? AMEN.

1 PETER 4:7

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

One of the most difficult things to do in the middle of great trauma and stress is to keep our minds about us. I recently heard a story about a man who froze when a grizzly bear came through their camp. One of his companions, who had bear spray and a gun, threw his walking poles at the bear instead of using one of the tools he had at his disposal. Their emotions and the stress chemicals in their bodies kept them from using their cognitive abilities to make a good decision. This is why the military spends so much time putting its people through stressful training. It helps people figure out how to take a step back and make a sober and logical decision in the middle of great stress.

There really isn't such training for the Christian. Our training helps us become sober-minded and self-controlled in the middle of great stress. The difficulties caused by feeling abandoned and neglected are to remind ourselves to turn to the Lord. When Peter writes "the end of all things is at hand," he is doing so from a place of great stress because of the persecution he and the church are facing. What they learned was to trust God so that they could be self-controlled and sober-minded and pray exactly what they needed to pray at any given moment. Our training is really an exercise of fully trusting God, no matter what the circumstances might be.

PRAYER

Gracious God, train my soul to trust in you so that my prayers may be focused and effective in the spiritual battle I find myself fighting through the power of your Holy Spirit. AMEN.

DAY 17

NOVEMBER 11

GENESIS 11:27-12:3

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot (the son of Haran), and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and with them he set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. When they came to Haran, they settled there.

The start of this passage begins with a Hebrew word that one finds all over the book of Genesis. Every time you see the phrase “these are the generations of” or “the account of,” it’s just one word, and it indicates to the reader that an important listing of descendants is about to take place. We see it a lot in the early chapters of Genesis, but maybe the most significant one occurs in chapter 11 when we get a peek at Abram’s (later called Abraham) family tree. Why is this significant? Because of all the people who came forth out of the line of Noah’s son Shem, the son of Terah, Abram, was the one God chose to be the start of the events that climax in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and fully culminate when he returns again.

Terah left Ur of the Chaldeans with an eye toward Canaan. But, he stopped in Haran and stayed there until he died. This unrealized desire wasn’t the end, though. It was God’s desire to get Terah’s son, Abram, to Canaan so that he could “bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” This is the first of God’s promises to Abram, that he will be blessed in order to be a blessing. We who have been redeemed by Abram’s Offspring, Jesus Christ, carry that promise with us. We have been blessed with salvation in order to give it away to others. We never run out of it. It’s not a scarce resource because the Infinite One never lacks what he can give. Our choice, like Abram’s, is whether we’ll follow where God leads and bless like he has blessed us.

PRAYER

Father, I pray today that you will help me to see and understand how you have blessed me. I want to bless others out of the abundance of your love for me.
AMEN.

GENESIS 15:8

But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”

Do you struggle to believe when people say, “I promise”? When we’re young and haven’t yet run into the problem of failed promises, it’s easy to trust and to believe. As we age and gain more experience living with other human beings, we learn to be suspicious and sometimes become so jaded that we just cannot trust another human being.

The ups and downs of relationships mean that there’s always a doubt in our minds when people say, “I promise.” Ever since Cain and Abel, we’ve been suspicious of each other. So, even though God had wowed Abram in some pretty amazing ways—ways so great that chapter 15 says that he believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness!—there was still a lingering doubt when God promised Abram descendants and a place to dwell. “How will I know?” The question beneath the question is a lot like Zechariah in Luke 1:18: “How can I be sure of this?” Abram wants confidence. So what does God do? He creates a covenant with Abram, promising that if he fails to live up to the stipulations, he would become like the sacrifices used to ratify the covenant. The interesting thing is, God was faithful the whole way through, yet chose to become a sacrifice so this promise would be fulfilled in ways Abram couldn’t possibly imagine. That’s how good God is at keeping promises.

PRAYER

Father, I pray that you would bear with my trust issues and remind me over and over that you are good at keeping promises. Today, I cling to the hope of your promise to return and make all things new through Jesus Christ. May that hope and trust sustain me. AMEN.

GENESIS 17:1-22

“I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”

God is a person, and personhood means relationship. This means that because of who God is, he is interested in relationships. With Abraham (he gets a new name in this chapter), God wants Abraham to walk before him. The root of the Hebrew word for “before” is the same one for “face.” God wants Abraham to walk with him in his presence, like we would talk to someone face to face. This is an incredible gift in and of itself, but God goes even further. He says to Abraham, “I know you’re 99 years old, but remember the promise I made to you? Well, by this time next year, your wife, with a new name, Sarah, will give you a son.” Abraham’s response was laughter. It wasn’t a derisive laugh; it was a laugh of shock. “Are you kidding me?” Have you ever laughed like that when someone surprised you?

Abraham may not have been willing to admit it, but it seems to me his reaction denotes an attitude of one who has given up. “Well, if God hasn’t fulfilled his promise by now, He’s not going to.” God had other things in mind, though. He had Isaac, a Hebrew name meaning “he laughs.” I think God is the subject here because he’s the one who gets the last laugh at despair, pain, and even death. “You’ll see,” he’s saying. That’s a promise you and I ought to cling to. We pray that God will say, “You’ll see.” When he does it, we’ll laugh and say, “What an amazing God!”

PRAYER

Father, I pray today that you wow me by your power and grace. I want to laugh at the almost unreal nature of your love and ability to make a way where there is no way. AMEN.

GENESIS 21:1-7

The LORD visited Sarah just as he had said he would and did for Sarah what he had promised. So Sarah became pregnant and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the appointed time that God had told him. Abraham named his son—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him just as God had commanded him to do. (Now Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him.)

We live at a time when we want to schedule our visits. We don't like hearing the doorbell ring unless we know that someone we've invited has arrived at precisely the right time. Any other time the bell rings, we are annoyed because it's an interruption of our day. When God decides to pay an unannounced visit, however, we'd better be prepared for it.

Sarah had heard God. She had laughed. But now she has given birth. The text tells us that God visited Sarah just as He had said he would. He did precisely what he said he would do. Are we ready for God to show up and do precisely what he promised he would do? Are you ready for the full salvation God promises? What would happen if God filled you with the fullness of the Holy Spirit right now? Would you be ready? Would you even be expecting it?

One of our great needs at this hour is to expect God to show up. Maybe one of the reasons we don't see him move the way he has promised is because we don't expect him to.

PRAYER

God, I pray that you would help me to expect you to show up on time in my life and in the life of the world. I know I can have hope that you will because of what I know of you from Scripture. Help me to be on the lookout. AMEN.

ISAIAH 51:5

*I am ready to vindicate,
I am ready to deliver,
I will establish justice among the nations.
The coastlands wait patiently for me;
they wait in anticipation for the revelation of my power.*

In Romans 8:19, Paul says that “the creation eagerly waits for the revelation of the children of God.” On the first Sunday of Advent, we talked about the creating God who was alive before the beginning and that he created all there is. Even his creation is longing for him to fulfill his promises because it has been subjected to futility. In Isaiah 51, God says he is ready to bring about the fulfillment of his promises. He says that even the coastlines are living in a kind of anticipation of his saving power.

If the creation itself, the beaches, and the cliffs are anticipating God’s delivering power to be revealed, how much more do you think Israel was anticipating and longing for it? They were experiencing some deep lows when they were paying attention. What about you? Are you longing for God’s saving purposes to be fulfilled? For his vision to be fulfilled in us? God loves his creation, but he loves you even more. The shorelines have been pounded by waves for 2700 years since this prophecy came down. You may feel like your soul has been pounded by the waves of sorrow in this reality, but God is faithful. In your longing, he is there, present with you. His deliverance is coming.

PRAYER

Father, when I find it difficult to trust you in the middle of my longing for more, I pray that you would meet me with your peace. Let me bare my soul to you and trust that the peace that surpasses all understanding will come and envelop me as you guard my heart and mind in Christ Jesus. AMEN.

REVELATION 6:9-11

They cried out with a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Master, holy and true, before you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?” Each of them was given a long white robe and they were told to rest for a little longer, until the full number was reached of both their fellow servants and their brothers who were going to be killed just as they had been.

Longing for God to act isn't restricted to the Old Testament prophets. You already know that, since you have experienced longing at one time or another. The martyrs in John's vision cried out, “How long?” and God's response to them was, “Wait a little longer. There are a few things that have to happen first.”

We don't know how much of a comfort that is to them. How do we feel when we're told to wait just a little longer? We're impatient. “I want what I want and I want it right now!” The waiting is unbearable. But it's one thing to wait for something you aren't sure is ever going to come. It's a whole other thing to wait on someone you're anticipating. A groom at the altar knows that at any moment his bride will come down the aisle. He just has to wait for the music to change. Israel, the martyrs, you, and I are listening for the music to change from something minor-themed into a majestic and triumphant major key. Even though you are longing for God to come and move, his presence is with you. He will sing that new song over you as you wait and smother you in his peace. We may have to wait a little longer, but he is coming.

PRAYER

Gracious God, in the middle of the fierce assault of the evil one in this world and the harsh words and actions of those who have been deceived by him, I hear you saying, “Just wait a little longer.” Help me to trust. Give me your peace so that I may endure to the end. AMEN.

DAY 23

NOVEMBER 17

PSALM 33:20-22

*We wait for the LORD;
he is our deliverer and shield.
For our hearts rejoice in him,
for we trust in his holy name.
May we experience your faithfulness, O LORD,
for we wait for you.*

What else can a longing and expectant people do while they wait but trust in the Lord? Turns out, plenty. That's what we discussed yesterday. Repentance in order to walk in God's ways is one thing. Another thing we can do is rejoice. But how do people rejoice in the middle of the agony of waiting? When we're impatient?

The Psalmist here reminds us that God is our deliverer and shield. The first means that he is the one whose strong arm acts on our behalf to rescue us from our bondage. God acted as deliverer when, through Moses, he led his people out of their captivity in Egypt. He was their shield when their enemies, like the Philistines, threatened them. So what did they do when they were waiting? They remembered. They recounted the mighty deeds of God and experienced peace as a result. They remembered that God is to be trusted, for he has done great things in the past, and there is no reason to think he will not do so again.

The final thing they did was to petition God to do something for them. "May we experience your faithfulness." They didn't want it to be merely a theological point to believe, but a reality to know. Let us petition God for the same while we wait!

PRAYER

Father, may we experience your faithfulness. Help us to trust in you in a way we have not done up to this point. You are my deliverer and defender. Protect me from despair and give me your peace. AMEN.

JUDGES 6:11-12

Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.”

It's worth reading the whole section on Gideon, but focus for a moment on the initial interaction between Gideon and the angel from God because this week we're focusing on the fact that when God speaks through his messenger, the wheels really get moving. The word “angel” is a Greek word meaning herald or messenger. When an angel appears in Scripture, it is bearing a word from the Lord which is trustworthy and true according to Revelation 21. In this instance, Gideon and the people of Israel are afraid of the Midianites. They're hiding their resources because they don't want the Midianites to take them. Poor, scared Gideon is hiding wheat when the Lord's messenger shows up.

The first thing the angel says to Gideon is, “The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.” Gideon is neither mighty nor a man of valor. Yet, because the Lord's messenger proclaimed it, we can be sure not only of God's intent to make Gideon into both of those things, but also that he's already started that work. When it's God's time, it's time. And when it's time, not even a scaredy-cat like Gideon can escape the sovereign plan of God. There's great comfort there for us, that even when we're scared, the inevitability of God's good plan coming to fruition means that even if it's a bumpy ride, the destination is amazing.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to hold on when I see the wheels moving, when you proclaim that it is time to have faith. I may fear not being able to see what's next, but I want to trust you nevertheless. AMEN.

1 SAMUEL 2:1-10

Hannah prayed, “My heart has rejoiced in the LORD; my horn has been raised high because of the LORD.”

The whole reading for this morning is a song from Hannah. Reading 1 Samuel 1-2 alongside Luke 1-2 is an interesting project. There are similarities, but some profoundly striking differences. The first being that Hannah was aching for a child. She was already married and had not yet become a mother, something she clearly wanted. Mary, on the other hand, was just engaged. She wasn't expecting motherhood for quite some time. Yet in both instances, God intervened and both women became with child. Both of them experienced a kind of salvation (Jesus clearly had messianic work to do when he was born, and Samuel was at the center of God's work to establish King David, an ancestor of Jesus). Both of them also experienced tremendous joy.

When God comes through, when the announcement comes, there is a great joy of knowing that something divine is going on. Even when we're unsure, even when we feel like we're taking a leap, it's worth the moment to pause and to let the joy of the Lord overwhelm us. Is there anything in your life this week that has been an unexpected source of joy? Have you let God know how happy you are in that? Now might be a good time to rejoice in God and tell him in prayer how grateful you are for his love and his fulfilled promises.

PRAYER

Blessed Lord, give me the words to say thank you to you for all that you have done. I rejoice in your love and in your salvation. I rejoice in your goodness and provision. Never let me forget how blessed I have been. I sing your praises forever! AMEN.

JOHN 15

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

The reality of Jesus' coming into this world results in an invitation to know God as a person. Not just words on a page about God. Not some facts that we can memorize. But we can know God person to person. On one hand, that can be a terrifying proposition. Nearly every encounter a person has with a messenger from God in the Bible makes that person jump the way people do when they open a can of biscuits. On the other hand, knowing and experiencing the love of God is the best thing in life. It's full of many wonderful emotions, one of them being joy. In fact, Jesus says he can fill us to our capacity for joy if we remain in him.

What does that mean? I think it means what it sounds like. If we stay in God through the means of grace, through worship, through paying attention to what God is saying to us by Word and the Spirit, we'll have a relationship with him that is marked by intimacy. That's what abiding or remaining is all about: intimacy. The thing about having intimacy with God is that it's marked by joy. That doesn't mean that you won't have difficulties and sorrows, but it means that the overarching theme of your life is one of joy and fulfillment in God.

PRAYER

Jesus, help me to abide in you and receive your joy. When I think about your entry into human flesh and the word that you are coming again, I want it to trigger a joy response in me. I know that comes from our relationship together, so I pray that you will help me to walk closely with you all of my days. AMEN.

ROMANS 8:32

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

The apostle Paul tells us that God has done far more than we could possibly imagine. In fact, we cannot even comprehend the power and depth of His love for us. By sending Jesus into the world, God sacrificed a great deal. Jesus experienced things that most of us couldn't even possibly imagine. There was a real horror to the arrest, torture, and crucifixion. But Jesus endured it all. He endured it all for you.

That's not all, though. Paul asked a great question. If God was willing to give up the Son, not spare him, what else might God do for us? As if it weren't enough that Jesus became incarnate, as if it weren't enough for him to suffer and die for us, what else could he possibly do?

Ken Collins says that we Methodists are supposed to be unboundedly optimistic about what God can do in the life of a person. If God can "make the foulest clean" according to John Wesley, is there anything God cannot or is unwilling to do in you and me according to his great love? Nope! There is not a single thing. So what is it that you've been wrestling with? What has you feeling like you're in bondage? Bring it to God and see if he won't deal with it in ways that you couldn't begin to believe. We've seen it millions of times in other people, but what about you? What do you need God to do for you? For our church? For our city and world?

PRAYER

Jesus, help me to trust you with my whole heart. Help me to believe that you can do far more than I can think or ask. I want to walk in your love, the love that compelled you to do so much for me and all of humanity. AMEN.

ZEPHANIAH 3:17

*The LORD your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.*

One of the great comforts in life is when God comes into our lives for His saving purposes. It creates a new reality for us in which the love of God fills us up from within. Not only is that a comfort, it is an utter joy. The prophet Zephaniah tells us that when God comes, he not only saves, but he also sings over us. He rejoices over us with gladness and quiets our anxious hearts with his love. That is an experience without equal in a human heart.

As we prepare for commitment Sunday, let us reflect on the joy that fills us when Jesus comes into our hearts. Just like when a parent sings over a newborn, God sings over us. It is an act of joy and comfort. It is an act that lets the child know that their parent is near. God does the same for us when he saves us and walks with us for the rest of our days on this earth, preparing us for what is to come.

Think for a moment about the joy you have experienced in God. Think about the hope, peace, and joy he has brought you through a saving relationship in Jesus Christ. As you think about this, ask him for ears to hear his song of exultation. He loves you. We can rejoice in that.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to hear the song you sing over me. It is a song that brings joy into my heart in ways that I can't quite express. Help me to always hear your words as I live today in your presence and your love. AMEN.

