

Bible Study for 2016



Presbytery of Tampa Bay

The Mission of the Presbytery of Tampa Bay
is to identify and strengthen leaders
so that every congregation makes
new and mature disciples for Jesus Christ.

Presbytery of Tampa Bay Bible Study for 2016

Do you begin meetings with a Bible Study? Imagine if Sessions, Committees, Councils, Task Forces, ... all across our presbytery began meetings with the same Bible Study.

Authors for this Bible Study were given the following guidelines:

- Include a Scripture passage, selecting an appropriate translation.
- Optionally include a brief exegetical note or illustration.
- Include questions that will encourage reflective discussion about God's presence and guidance among us.
- Optionally begin and/or end with a prayer.
- Include a brief autobiographical note.
- Fit everything, including your selected passage and your biography, within a sheet of paper.

Please tell us how you found these Bible studies helpful in your ministry.

Please tell me if you might write one of these for next year.

Yours in Christ,

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January

Job 33:4

The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.

Breathe

Take a deep breath in. And exhale fully. We say that God is just that close, as close as our next breath. We are God's children, God made us, God's Spirit breathes life into us. So take another deep breath in...and blow it out. We usually breath from a shallow place, so we are refreshed, made dizzy even, when we breathe more deeply.

The hectic Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas seasons are behind us now. Yet Ash Wednesday is not far away—February 10! January is a respite. A time of planning. A time of breath-catching.

January represents new. It's a new year. Many find it a time to reflect on what's ahead. What needs to be done? What need not be done? What do I add? What do I throw away? Truth is, most of us know what those things are for us—we just don't do them, staying with what we know instead.

Wouldn't having the very breath of God within us give us some sort of vision and courage for 2016, indeed for over the course of a lifetime?

Consider these verses from Ezekiel 37:1-6:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and the Lord brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, You know." Then the Lord said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

Talk together about these things

Have you ever felt like a pile of dried out and bleached bones? What was that like?

When have you experienced God's breath renewing you?

Take stock: think about and pray about those things that need to be added to your life—a more meaningful prayer life, for instance, or more rest; and those things that need to be taken away—things that are hurting you, like distrust, gossip, a heavy diet, too much alcohol, cigarettes, anger. Write your answers down.

Pray on these things in January. Ask God's breath to fill you up, give you courage to do what you sense God calling you to do or not do. Discern the first thing you need to do about it. Write that down too.

Prayer

Holy God, we are in January. Give us a time of respite. Help us to uncover what we need to add to our lives that would draw us closer to You. Help us to be honest with ourselves as to what we need to drop. Fill us with creating Your Holy Spirit for courage and forward motion. We pray in Christ's name, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Laurie Palmer is the Designated Pastor at St. Andrew PC, Tampa.

February

Prayer

God of our Lord Jesus, Father of glory, give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation that enables us to know, love, and serve you. Give us light to see what is the hope of your call, the riches of your inheritance, and greatness of your power working among us. (Adapted from Ephesians 1.17-19)

Ephesians 4.1-6

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Commentary

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is regarded by many as his most sublime letter. He focuses on God's purpose in establishing and completing the universal church of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote it, while a prisoner, to a first-generation, fledgling Christian community. They struggled to learn what it meant to be a faith community and to live as disciples of Jesus. Chapters 1-3 are doctrinal; chapters 4-6 are ethical or practical. Our text is an appeal for unity in the faith. Paul notes five character traits Christians are to strive for and lists seven elements of our unity. In Paul's epistle to the Colossians, likely written during the same imprisonment, he offered instruction in 3.12-15 with a call for forgiveness and love among Christians and within the church. These are important themes for Paul.

Discussion

- Why is it important for Christians to maintain unity?
- What does Paul ask from us in 4.1? According to him, how can we do so?
- What are the seven elements of our unity?
- Name one thing you will do to engender unity in your congregation and in our presbytery?

Prayer

Gracious God, as Paul told the Ephesians, you are above, through, and in all. You have graced us with the gift of faith and called us to be part of the one body of Jesus Christ, the church. May our worship, study, ministry and mission bring you joy and point all who know us to Jesus Christ, your Son and our Savior.

Dave Hosick was born and raised in Pittsburgh and remains a rabid Steeler and Pirate fan. He is known to have waved a "terrible towel" during worship. He attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and serves on its board. He recently retired as pastor of First PC in St. Pete.

March

Psalms 8

For the director of music. According to gittith. A psalm of David.

Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

From the mouths of babes and infants you have established a bulwark against your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look up at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what are humans that you are mindful of them,
children of Adam that you care for them?

You made them a little lower than gods
and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you put all things under their feet:

all sheep and oxen,
and even the wild beasts,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
all that moves in the paths of the seas.

Yahweh, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Reflections

On a clear night, in a dark place, you might see about 2,000 stars in the sky. If each visible star was reduced to a grain of sand, they would fill about 1/32 of a teaspoon. Until relatively recently the Milky Way, our galaxy, was perceived to be the only galaxy in the universe. Astronomers now estimate that 400 Billion stars comprise our galaxy. If all of these stars were reduced to grains of sand, they would fill a large dump truck. In 1923 Edwin Hubble photographed the Andromeda galaxy. Currently, by using the telescope that orbits our planet named for Edwin Hubble, astronomers estimate the known universe contains 80 Billion galaxies. If all of the stars of from all of the galaxies in the universe were reduced to sand, they would fill enough train cars with sand that passing through a crossing at a rate of one car per second, twenty-four hours a day, everyday, they would continue passing for 100 years!

Questions for Discussion

- How big is God?
- How are people "a little lower than gods"?
- How do we communicate, with those outside the Church, the "honor and glory" given to us in having dominion over creation?

Water continues to be significant to Teaching Elder Robert Shaw: he loves to swim, served the US Navy on a submarine as a Reactor Controls officer, labored as a Sonar Systems Engineer and now baptizes new Christians at Temple Terrace Presbyterian Church.

April

John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

For Discussion

"Fear is the cheapest room in the house," the Sufi mystic Hafez wrote. And that's the "room" which we find the disciples inhabiting in John 20:19 -- the room labeled "fear." The disciples are afraid because they themselves still haven't seen the Risen Jesus. So, fearing Jesus' enemies, the disciples have retreated inward and locked the door in an attempt to hide from everything and everyone who's scary "out there."

The problem with going into this sort of lock-down mode, though, is that it actually limits, inhibits and diminishes us. Instead of finding safety and protection, we find ourselves stuck in that cheapest room of which Hafez spoke. When you're stuck like that, there's only one solution. "When a group of people are stuck," Rabbi Edwin Friedman once said, "the only way for them to get unstuck is to go on an adventure." And it's an adventure, in fact, which the Risen Jesus comes to send his disciples out on, saying in John 20:21, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus sends them (and us) out to carry on his own great, earth-shaking, life-changing, creation-renewing, God-incarnating mission in the world. And that mission is, in the words of St. Augustine, "the greatest of all adventures" because it is an adventure beyond fear into the fullness of life, lived, shared, indwelt and energized by the Spirit of God.

For Reflection

- In the "brave new world" of post-Christian America, what are your fears for your church and its future?
- How does fear of what might be "out there" (either in the future or in the secular world around us) limit, inhibit or diminish your discipleship here and now?
- If you stepped out from under your fears, what new adventure in faith might the Spirit of Jesus be ready to send you out on? Will you say "yes" to that great adventure?

Prayer

Jesus, breathe life into us anew. Set us free for all fear and fill us with a boldness born of your Spirit, so that we may live the adventure which you rose to send us on, faithfully and fully for you. Amen.

Rev. Ron Pfeifer is Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Inverness. His wife, Rev. Nan Riddle, is also an ordained minister. Between them, they have six children and two and a half grandchildren.

May

Luke 10:38-42 (TNIV)

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

For discussion

Jesus and the disciples were involved in on-going ministry that required continuous travel. En route to Jerusalem they were welcomed into the home of Martha. As tired and hungry as He must have been, Jesus does not waste time: He gets comfortable and begins to teach. What a golden opportunity! Mary assumes the role of disciple and sits at Jesus' feet to learn. But Martha was distracted by the many tasks she had to do and became upset that her sister was not helping. Martha's hospitality and home-cooking were certainly needed by her guests, and learning from the rabbi was not an option for women of her time. Mary was expected to help with domestic chores, so Martha complained to Jesus and tried to enlist His help.

Jesus replied by providing perspective on what was going on, which was ministry. Both sisters were involved in ministry: Martha was doing ministry for Jesus; Mary was receiving ministry from Jesus. Under the circumstances, both ministries were appropriate. Jesus did not devalue or downplay Martha's hospitality; eventually, they would need to eat. But first, they would be fed with the Bread of Life.

The immediate need was for the "one thing" that only Jesus could provide. Mary's unconventional behavior was affirmed by Jesus, which comes as no surprise considering the upside-down, countercultural priorities of the Kingdom. As good, faithful servants of the others-centered gospel of Jesus, we can very easily become distracted from sitting at the feet of Jesus by the many needs and ministry opportunities that surround us.

Mark's gospel reports that Jesus appointed the Twelve "to be with Him and that He might send them out" to minister in His name (3:14-15). Disciples of Jesus today have the same need "to be with Him" because we too are sent out in His name. We do need to sit at the feet of Jesus to be nourished and sustained not only for ourselves, but also for the sake of others. The ministry we are called to is the very life-giving ministry of Jesus, and so we minister in His name by the power of the Holy Spirit for the simple reason that the many needs around us can only be met, filled, satisfied by Jesus.

Jesus needed to regularly be with the Father, spending alone time in prayer off in a secluded place. Our need is even greater, for we need to be filled with the life of Jesus in order to be able to minister in His name.

For reflection

- What distractions keep us from regularly sitting at the feet of Jesus?
- Describe how we 'fill' ourselves with Jesus. In what ways is this for the sake of others?

- Prayerfully contemplate what it is that you are being 'filled' with.

Prayer

Jesus, fan the flames of our love for you and give us a deep hunger for the one thing only you can provide that we may be filled with your life. Amen.

Teaching Elder Peg Roy pastors First Presbyterian Church in Auburndale, Florida.

June

Luke 15:1-10 (NRSV)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins,[a] if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

"The Hardest Thing to Learn"

The Pharisees were upset...again. Jesus was attracting low-lives and idiots, and they were critical. We get a little glimpse of the attitude of the Pharisees toward the kind of people that Jesus was befriending in John 7 when they blast the temple guards for waffling about whether they should, and then failing to, seize Jesus as he taught one day in the temple. The know-it-all Pharisees could not understand how the guards could have possibly doubted that Jesus was anything more than a blasphemous trouble maker who deserved to be arrested. "Has any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?" In other words, no one with any brains in their head actually listens to this man and believes him! The crowds will go along with anything because they are foolish and unlearned, but as Jesus tells the Pharisees the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, he seems to say in his subtle-but-pointed Jesus way that someone isn't learning here and it isn't these sinners.

Jesus says, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." On the surface it seems that the difference between the sinner who repents and the ninety-nine righteous persons is in the sin, but the real difference is between the sinner who has learned the most important thing and the 99 who learned nothing. The ninety-nine hold fast to their belief in their own righteousness, but the sinner learned that he was wrong, and lost, and repentance was the only way forward.

We can accumulate all kinds of knowledge, but often, learning the truth about ourselves—our limits, our weakness, our failures—is the hardest thing to learn. Learning the truth about our limits, faults, and failures is humbling. It leaves our dark places exposed, and it reveals that we do need help from outside of ourselves. It can be a bitter pill to swallow, yet it is when we are willing and able to learn the hardest truth about ourselves that we are set free to learn the most glorious truth about what God has done for us in Jesus.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

Is it difficult for you to admit when you have failed or when you are wrong? Why?

When has your own pride caused harm in your relationships?

How do you need Jesus today? What do you need him to take from you? How do you need him to change you?

The Rev. Joy Laughridge celebrated the 10th anniversary of her ordination in October of 2015. She was ordained at Forest Hills Presbyterian Church in Tampa where she served for six years in her first call. Since leaving Forest Hills, she has served as the part-time Associate Pastor for Outreach and Ministry at St. Andrews Presbyterian in Dunedin. She has 2 fantastic daughters ages 4 and 7. She loves people, all forms of creative expression, the beach, and running.

July

Introduction

The following passage from Lamentations 3 is best known to most Christians from the hymnody of the church. "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" ranks high in many believers' top ten list of favorite hymns. It is a hymn that lifts that spirit with hope and with trust in God. It is a hymn that celebrates God's enduring fidelity. It is also a hymn that can have further meaning for those who read it in a larger context.

Background

The third chapter of Lamentations is a great acrostic poem of 22 stanzas. The stanzas are three lines long, each one beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Like the other four chapters of Lamentations it is a poem that "laments" the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Lamentations 3:1-66 (NRSV), centering on verses 22-24

- ²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
- ²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
- ²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

Questions

Read Lamentations 3: 22-24

- What does this say to you about God?

Now read verses 1-21

- What does this say to you about the degree of need being expressed?
- Does the reading of 1-21 change your understanding of the love that is "new every morning"?
- Does it change your understanding of what it means to say, "I will hope in him"?

Read verses 25-33

- What do these verses add to our understanding of God in the passage?
- What do they say to the person who is suffering right now? (Do you agree?)

Optional: Read 34-66

- What additional insights do you find in the conclusion of the lament?

Exegetical Notes:

There is much debate about some details of the poem, particularly about how many voices participate in the lament and who they are. This study is based on a straight reading of chapter 3. Further questions about the text can be raised by exploring where the voices may change, who speaks what lines, and how such matters change the answers to the questions.

John Underwood is a fourth-generation ordained Presbyterian minister from a family noted for mission service to Korea. After ministering in churches in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania for forty years, and serving on committees at every level of church government, he retired to Saint Petersburg in 2014 with his wife, Judie. He is particularly interested in writing, church art and music, and is a published hymn writer.

August 2016

Philippians 4:1-5 (ESV)

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;

Getting Along with Other Christians

One of the most popular books of the past two years is *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown. It's the story of the men of the University of Washington crew (rowing team) which became the United States 8 man rowing team in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. They were the sons of lumberman and construction workers, blue collar, working class kids who became a "band of brothers."

One of their coaches said "Good thoughts have much to do with good rowing. It isn't enough for the muscles to work in unison; crew member's hearts and minds must also be as one." Unity is important to the success of a rowing crew. Paul writes that the same is true of the Church of Jesus Christ.

In Philippians 2:1-5 (ESV) Paul wrote "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others...and do things without grumbling or questioning."

In Philippians 4:1-5 (ESV) he moves from the theoretical to the specific and practical writing "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel."

We don't know who Euodia and Syntyche were, but obviously they were significant people in the church at Philippi and unfortunately were at odds with one another. Paul was concerned that their disagreement was hurting that congregation and affecting the unity of Philippian Church. The late Dr. William Barclay wrote "this is one of those passages about which we would like to know more. There is obvious drama behind it, but we know nothing and can only guess."

Have you ever heard the little poem about church conflict? It goes like this... "To live above with saints we love, oh, that will be glory. But to live below with saints we know, well that's another story."

Churches experience conflicts for many reasons- personality differences, communication problems, differences of opinion, and systemic problems within the organization itself. Managing conflict begins with managing oneself. I used to panic when facing conflict but have learned that sooner or later one must confront it and manage it. Here are some tips for managing conflict in the church.

Set a good time for a discussion with the one with whom you are in conflict. Don't run from the conflict, sit down and discuss it. Listen as the other person clearly state their feelings and then honestly state your feelings. Don't sugar coat things, but be gracious. Express appreciation to the other person. Work to generate solutions. Select the best alternative and implement the decision. Oh, and pray together.

Reconciliation must be a vital part of our Christian life (the Confession of 1967 and the Belhar Confession address this theologically). How can you be a reconciler in and for your congregation?

Dr. Mike Loudon currently serves as Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Lakeland, and Vice Moderator of the Presbytery of Tampa Bay.

September

Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Worry

It's so easy to worry – to worry about our family members and their health; our children and their choices; our congregations and their vitality; our country and its direction; our world and all the places of war and oppression. We are often surrounded by forces, which reinforce and feed our worry in unhelpful ways, but that is not the call of the church. William Sloan Coffin wrote: "A church is a place where we try to think, speak, and act in God's way, not in the way of a fear-filled world. A church is a home for love, a home for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity, to rest and be healed, to let go their defenses and be free – free from worries, free from tensions, free to laugh, free to cry." How might we live into this call to be a place of freedom?

For Reflection

- What are ways in which your congregation invites people to be free from worries and tension and to have the freedom to laugh and cry?
- What stumbling blocks are present that may prohibit the achievement of such freedom?
- Share with the group or a partner one worry and one thanksgiving you have for yourself or for your congregation, that others may be in prayer alongside of you.

Prayer

God of grace and mercy, we confess that far too often we resort to worry and fear. Through the gift of your Holy Spirit, empower us to let go of the worry and fear and to turn to You. Help us, as individuals and as a community of faith, to live into Your ways that we may be a light witnessing to the peace that is found in Jesus Christ. It is in his name that we pray, Amen.

Nicole Partin Abdnour is a Teaching Elder and has been a member of the Presbytery of Tampa Bay serving as an associate pastor at the Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church since 2006.

October

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 (NIV)

When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Whose House?

A few years ago, I was going through a challenging time. Everything felt like it was out of my control. In addition to difficulties I was experiencing in my home life, I was anxious over some decisions that had recently been made at our church. One morning during this time, I went to a local park early in the morning before most people were out and about. I found a park bench to sit on and got comfortable, ready to pray and read from my Bible. I took in the sights, sounds, and smells that surrounded me. The fresh morning air was sweet and clear, a nearby waterfall gently pattered and bubbled, my view was of lush, green foliage growing up the side of a cliff. Over the next two hours I prayed, read scripture, and simply sat in silence. In the silence I heard the still, small voice of God speaking to my heart saying, "The church is not your church, it is My church. It was here long before you came along and will be here long after you are gone. Trust Me, I know what I am doing – My plan is being worked out as it should be." I knew that God was calling upon me to relinquish my need to be in control. Nothing about my circumstances changed that day, but something inside of me certainly did. I left the park refreshed and renewed knowing that all I had to do was faithfully follow God's wisdom and guidance leaving everything else in God's competent hands.

Questions for reflection:

- 1. How do we sometimes misguidedly approach church leadership as though it is all about us being in control?
- 2. What are some ways that we can be sure to "not forget the Lord" in our decision making?
- 3. How can this passage inform the way we look at the church?
- 4. How does this passage call us to be grateful for those who came before us in the faith?
Pause a moment to give thanks for those who built, dug, and planted before you.

Prayer

Gracious and Loving God, thank you for the solemn responsibility and joyous gift you have given to us as church leaders. Today, we pray to be open to what you would have us do. Forgive us when we try to be your advisor. Forgive us when our words and actions treat you more as a puppet to be controlled than as a God to be worshiped. You don't need our advice or direction; we would be wise to heed you instead. Set our hearts aright so that we care for this church and it's people in ways that bring you honor and glory. Amen.

Submitted by Denise Lay

November

"Love casts away fear" – 1 John 4:18

What are you grateful for? This question evokes the words of the doxology in my heart, prompting me to sing silently but enthusiastically, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures here below, praise him above ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen!" As I sing that, I feel as if the choirs of angels, and the great cloud of witnesses from every age, race, and place, join and sing along, to the glory of God. What a marvelous dream!

In America, the month of November has a built-in pause, when families and friends all around the country take time to gather at the table for a scrumptious meal and to give thanks. What are you thankful for, the heart asks? Pausing to think deeply about what it is we are thankful for is a very important theological task. Thanksgiving Day has made giving thanks vogue, prodding people to ponder out loud what it is they are grateful for and give thanks to God.

Gratitude is an important spiritual discipline because it reminds us of our interdependence with one another, and of our total dependence on God. Gratitude helps us focus outward, outside of ourselves, to acknowledge the one who has helped us on our way. Our hearts are happier when we are grateful. With gratitude, our spirits rejoice because deep inside, we know we are truly not alone. We are acknowledging the presence of someone who has played a part in the story of our lives. To a certain extent, gratitude helps us realize the idea of 'pulling yourself with your own bootstraps' is just a myth. We all need help sometimes, most times in fact, to walk this journey of life.

Gratitude is a companion of hospitality. Gratitude and hospitality remind us that God provides. In our hour of need, God provides, just as God has provided for our ancestors of faith, both in the Biblical stories and throughout all of human history. Gratitude and hospitality should dispel fear of scarcity. Yet, fear of scarcity is so prevalent and pernicious, even in the church. Scripture constantly reminds us of God's provision, abundance, and abiding presence. Unfortunately, we continue to embrace fear, whether subliminal or quite openly so. Gratitude helps us receive and experience God's hospitality. A grateful heart is able to declare with certainty, "God is good, all the time." When a blessed people embrace their blessing, they seek to extend that blessing to others. When we are grateful, we acknowledge that our cup runneth over (Psalm 23). Therefore, we seek to share the plentiful blessings with others.

Recent events of atrocious terrorist violence seek to steal our sense of peace, stripping away our sense of gratitude and hospitality. When we give up our fundamental values of gratitude and hospitality, the terrorists and fearmongers win. The biblical values of gratitude and hospitality pass the test, especially during hostile times. Extending hospitality to those who flee violence is a fundamental tenet of our faith and a bedrock of who we are as a people of faith. Gratitude reminds us the biblical story. Welcome the stranger, for once you were strangers in the land of Egypt, said the Lord, in reminding the people of God from whence they'd come. We are grateful that when the baby Christ was in danger of violent persecution, his parents fled with him back to Egypt, where, as a refugee, he was welcomed, embraced, and nurtured to live a full life. Such a welcome is part of our biblical story, and thus it is part of who we are as a people of God. Gratitude and hospitality are truly part of our DNA, whether we like it or not.

Gratitude and hospitality extend us to reach outside of ourselves, pointing for us the way of the Lord that we must follow. As we prepare to welcome the vulnerable baby, who is the Son of

God, let us also prepare our hearts to welcome those who may not have family or friends close by, those who hunger for community, and those who flee persecution in the lands of their births. We are grateful that Jesus loved us so much that he was prepared to die for us. Christians throughout the ages have been prepared to follow in Jesus's footsteps, loving God and neighbor, even to die gratefully for their faith in God. Are you grateful enough that you are prepared to die for your faith? The Risen Christ bids us to follow him, even unto death. Jesus Christ is Lord of heaven and earth! Amen!

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December

Genesis 12:2b, 3

...and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Galatians 3:8

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel before hand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

Notes and Questions for Reflection

- Bless (barak) a root word, conveys a kneeling down/admiring both from God and to God;
- Blessings (brakah) from the root word, includes bringing prosperity, a present, and a benediction to make happy, bring shalom.
- Families/Kindred/Nations/Heathen all refer to any peoples NOT Hebrew/Jewish.

The familiar phrase "Blessed to be a Blessing" brings us to relook at some church activities during the Christmas season, but also, to think through activities and plans for next year's church calendar. From the first mention of "blessings," the purpose was the salvation promised by God through the redemptive seed we embrace as Christ Jesus. However, that does not preclude thinking of tangible and present-day "How can we be a blessing?"

How can Christians and congregations and presbyteries reach out to those who need a hope for prosperity... who need a gracious benediction on their lives... who could use admiration and affirmation along with the wonderful good news of Jesus Christ?

Are we using our resources, our energy, our time for "things" and "events" that do not bless us or any family, nation, kindred, or heathen? Is there thoughtful reconciliation of our actions and our intentions? Or have we always done it this way? Or is it because outsiders/ non-Christians expect us to do it?

Who would we consider the "outsider" within our congregational neighborhood? Who could we reach out and serve? Where do we need to "downsize" in our own lives to claim our blessing rather than crowd it out?

How do we get this message out to others in our faith families?

Prayer

Lord, may we be ever searching for ways to be a blessing to others even as we praise you for the blessing we receive and anticipate, once again... the coming of your Son. In his name we pray. Amen.

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