

Rise Up!

Isaiah 40:31

*But those who wait for the LORD's help find renewed strength;
they rise up as if they had eagles' wings,
they run without growing weary,
they walk without getting tired. NET*



The book of Isaiah speaks of knowing and hearing throughout its text. It seems to reflect that the hearers may have some struggles with what is contained within its message. This section of Isaiah was written to the people coming out of the Babylonian exile in the 530s BCE. There would have been anxiety and trepidation as this group, many of whom could not remember Jerusalem, made their way back to the former capital city. No longer did the temple stand strong. The walls surrounding the city had been laid to waste. Exile might have been hard but returning to this now unknown place was difficult too.

It is into this situation that God asserts Godself through the prophet's words. We are reminded that God is the creator of the universe and that nothing is beyond God's reach, even the exile. God shares the good news that the people will not be relying on their own power but will be blessed with God's power as they go back into their homeland. God hears the cries of God's people and empowers them! The lord does not grow faint or weary, instead God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

Sometimes we are challenged in our assumptions of God's greatness. Things like cancer, violence, hatred may make us wonder if they are stronger than God. Economic woes or terrorism, our fears and doubts can seem to overpower our understanding of God. Into these very situations the prophet speaks. "Those who wait upon the Lord's help find renewed strength; they rise up as if they had eagles' wings." But how can waiting do anything, we may ask.

We are called to wait for God, but this is not a time of passive waiting. This kind of waiting is defined by the confidence that God is with us, that we are held in God's power and love. It's a kind of waiting categorized by trust. We trust that God has things in control, that the outcome is assured. And because of that trust, that waiting, we can take the time needed to be renewed, to learn how to take flight, to run and not grow weary, to walk and not faint. New life can begin because the very God who holds creation together acts in the lives of God's children for good. Thanks be to God!



January: Waiting, Seeking, Shining
by Rev. Cindy Barton

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (NKJV)

Focus Scriptures: John 4:4-26 and Philippians 2:12-15

Background Scripture: John 4:27-42

Opening Prayer: *Eternal God, you are Spirit and Truth; you are Living Water to sustain us. Help us understand fully who you are, and therefore who we are. With bright hope we seek your salvation that we may find forgiveness and completeness. As we seek, we come to identify and appreciate all the gifts of God, even those that look like challenges. We wait for light to dawn, understanding to come, and Jesus to return. As we wait, be at work in us, teaching us to live daily so that the light of Christ shines from us, like stars in the darkness. In Jesus’ Holy Name, Amen.*

Historical Background: Samaritans were a mixed race resulting from the intermarriage of Israelites (those left behind when people of the Northern Kingdom were exiled) and Gentiles (brought into the area by the Assyrians). In Jesus’ day, bitter enmity existed between Jews and Samaritans: although both groups worshipped the same God, there was disagreement over the proper place of worship, and the Samaritans rejected all writings of the Bible outside of the Pentateuch. Jewish travelers commonly avoided passing through Samaria. People of the two races avoided conversation and interaction. John 4:4 indicates that Jesus “had to go to Samaria”, suggesting that he was spiritually called to this interaction. In verse 4:9, the woman protests Jesus’ request that she give him water she had drawn from the well because Jews would have considered a drink from a container handled by a Samaritan to be ceremonially unclean.

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: We must always be seeking to grow in knowledge of who we are in Christ, to “work out our salvation” with reverence, awe, and respect for God and God’s plan. The story of the woman at the well shows us that Jesus is intentional in seeking out sinners, even as we seek to understand the gift of salvation and know how to share it with others. How does the Samaritan woman show us to wait for the anticipated return of Christ? True worship occurs not in a church building, but in our daily acts of life and interactions with others. Through these acts we become beacons of light and hope, pointing others to Christ.

Discussion and Application:

Jesus Affects Change in the Samaritan Woman. The Woman at the Well is thirsty; she seeks answers. Upon receiving the truth about Jesus, there is an immediate change in her: she goes from one who hides from interactions with others, to one that carries the Good News to others. The woman had come to draw water from the well at mid-day when others would not have been likely to be there; most people drew water during the latter part of the day, when temperatures

were cooler. This indicates her reluctance to speak or interact with others. After her encounter with Jesus, the woman intentionally seeks out others in her town to tell them about Jesus (John 4:28-30). As a result, many Samaritans come to believe that Jesus is Savior of the World (John 4:42).

God is at Work. Jesus intentionally seeks out the Samaritan woman to provide what is needed: a change in her sense of self-worth and value, seeing herself as loved and forgiven, redeemed for God's purpose. Jesus also explained to her that true worship does not depend on the place of worship, but upon the attitude of the heart and spirit. We are called to worship God through daily acts of living and interaction with others.

We Can Be Unexpected Light-Bearers. Paul's letter to the Philippians encourages unity and a servant-like attitude that imitates Christ's humility. "Working out our salvation with fear and trembling" indicates that we must strive together to revere God and respect and obey God's commands. Paul directs the Philippians to do all things without complaining and disputing. Christ's salvation will express itself in the way we live and act. This corresponds to Jesus' description of true worship as he speaks with the Samaritan woman: worship in truth and spirit will be seen in the acts of our daily lives. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit allows us to imitate Christ's servanthood more closely. We are called to shine like stars, as lights in the darkness. Transformed by Christ, we are to share with others the "words of Life", the Good News of Salvation, just as the woman at the well shared what she discovered in Jesus.

Further Thought: A life transformed by discovering the grace and love of Jesus is a powerful witness to God and God's Word. How has knowing Jesus and accepting his forgiveness changed your self-image and empowered you to share your testimony with others for their benefit?

A Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, Savior who brings light to the world, I ask that you change the way I see through your transforming presence: when I see hopelessness, show me healing. When I see inexperience, show me potential. When I see giants, show me your Promised Land. Change the way I see so that I may be strengthened to follow you boldly in response to your call. In Jesus Holy Name we find grace and forgiveness, love and healing, strength and completeness. Amen

Additional Verses:

2 Timothy 1:6-8a For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord...

February: Renewal and Rising Up: Acknowledging, Recognizing, (Knowing), and Extending the Love of God
by Rev. Linda Howell



Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. NKJV

Focus Scriptures (Acknowledge God) : Deuteronomy 4:39. Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. **Matthew 10:32.** Jesus said, “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.”
(Recognizing: Knowing God)

Psalms 46:10. God says, “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” NIV

John 3:16-17. (Extending the Love of God). For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish: but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world, through him might be saved. NIV

Background Texts: Matthew 5-9

Opening Prayer: God, our Father, we come to you today in excitement and wonder of your blessings to us. We are blessed by your bountiful goodness and mercy given to us throughout our years. We are humbled because we have failed to seek you as we should. Thank you for loving us even when we are unloveable. Help us to praise your name through our every thought, word, and deed. Help us to wait upon you, God, to renew our strength, so that we can mount up with wings like eagles. For we desire to run and not be weary and walk and not faint as we serve our Heavenly Father’s will each day. We pray in the names of your Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Historical Background of the Israelites in the time right before the Suffering Son.

Hezekiah suffered an illness right after the Lord God put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. Sennacherib king of Assyria had returned to Nineveh and remained there. Hezekiah was at the point of death when Isaiah told him to put his house in order, because he was going to die. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord. He told God he has been faithful and has devoted his life to do what was good in the eyes of the Lord. God hears his prayer and gives Hezekiah fifteen more years to live. Marduk-Baladan, son of Baladan king of Babylon, sent Hezekiah letters and a gift because he had heard about Hezekiah’s illness and recovery. Hezekiah received the envoys gladly and showed them what was in his storehouses—the silver, gold, spices, fine olive oil—his entire armory and all of his treasures. Isaiah asks Hezekiah if he displayed all the wealth of Judah. To this, Hezekiah said yes. Isaiah’s prophecies say that all the riches of Judah would be carried to Babylon. He also told Hezekiah that many of Hezekiah’s descendants will be taken away to serve the Babylonians. His descendants would serve Babylon as eunuchs. Hezekiah told Isaiah “The word of the Lord you have spoken is good.” For Hezekiah thought, “There will be peace and security in my lifetime.

Discussion and Application: The stories of Isaiah give us our call to work for the Lord God. We are called to Rise up and follow God. Isaiah served as a prophet of God for many years through a difficult time for Judah. While Ahaz broke down the Kingdom of his father David, so Hezekiah built up the strength of the Kingdom of David again. However, as he neared his last days on earth, Hezekiah did fail to protect the Kingdom. Babylon reigned over Judah for many years, destroying Solomon's Temple and a large part of Jerusalem. Knowing that the Israelites would finally return to Jerusalem, Isaiah's prophesies concerning the "suffering servant" gave them hope for that new Jerusalem.

This "Suffering Servant" is found in in Isaiah 53. This prophecy met its fulfillment at the birth, life, death and resurrection of our savior, Jesus the Christ, The Son of God! I suggest that the group take apart Isaiah 42-53 and the four gospels about Christ, so that all might really connect the two sets of scriptures together. Isaiah was blest to be able to tell the story of Christ to the Israelites. In the gospels one can see the truth of Christ in the words of his love, teaching, reaching out, suffering, dying, and raising again.

Isaiah 42:1-4 — Luke 9:22

Isaiah 49:1-6 — Luke 17:22-27

Isaiah 50:4-7 — Luke 2:25-40

Isaiah 53:—Matthew 16: 21; Matthew 17:22-23; Matthew 20:17-19. Matthew 26:23-30; Matthew 27: 27-31; Mark 15: 2-15; Mark 15: 16-20; Luke 23: 2-3, Luke 23: 33-43; John 19:17-24.

I believe that the steps to salvation begin with acknowledging that there is one God, who was and is and ever shall be. That is, the Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit. During the growth of our faith, we learn to **acknowledge** that this is true; there is only one God. We can then strengthen our faith in God through the process of reading the Bible, asking questions to clarify confusion, and seeking guidance in prayer. God was, is and ever shall be. If we forget that fact, we make our children, our home and our country the center of our thinking and working. We stagnate in the mire of worry, frustration, isolation and desperation. However, if we center on the things of God, if we **acknowledge** God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can then **recognize (know)** God in all our life situations. We can truly look beyond ourselves and our needs and concerns, to find God in all of nature and in the many people who rise up and follow Christ. We can then look beyond **Acknowledging** God is real, to **Knowing "recognizing"** God. We then find grace for **extending** God's gift of love beyond ourselves to all we meet. 1) We can **extend** God's love by identifying helpers who notice needs to be met, then take the step of identifying other helpers who can supply the food, actual water, furniture and housing needed in a particular situation, and finally identifying helpers who are willing and able to deliver the basic needs required of those waiting for help.

Other examples of extending God's love to others may be, praying for people who are ill, suffering, or questioning God; for people who are angry, bitter or hopeless; for people who are happy, content and secure in their faith, so that they may be an even larger help in time need, forgiving others so that we may be forgiven. Extending ourselves beyond our comfort zones may be a challenge we could find daunting, but the reward of serving others with humility and gratefulness might offer a new peace in our hearts. Meeting the physical and emotional needs of a brother or sister in Christ during their crisis times. We may never know how important our faith stories can be to others. Be willing to share how we received Christ in our hearts and how that has changed our lives. Always encourage those to whom we witness as we teach them. We show our willingness to extend God's love to others by living our lives as examples of the love of God and the love of humankind through our living faith example to them.



**March: Confession and Repentance/ Revival and Renewal
by Rev. Linda Howell**

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall want and not faint. NKJV

Focus Scriptures: Jeremiah 1 (Jeremiah’s Call to Prophecy From God)

Background Texts: Jeremiah Chapters 7-52 (The rebellion of Judah and the responses of God through the words of the prophet, Jeremiah.)

Opening Prayer: Most gracious, giving and forgiving God, today we come to you as children. We have forgotten your loving kindness to God’s people. We do not understand the obedience of Abraham, Issac and Joseph: or the determination and obedience of Jeremiah. We seek the things of this world, instead of the things of God. In your mercy, Father God, help us to find your will and guidance for our lives, rather than the guidance of the world; a world that denies you, God, while allowing the evil of hate, anger, violence and mistreatment be our daily guides. Humbly, we pray for forgiveness and ask, dear God, for your help to cleanse us from all thoughts, words and deeds which are not from the Holy Spirit within us. Stir in us a renewal of faith hope and love for you. In the name of Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten son. Amen!

Historical Background: Jeremiah 1, 7-52: The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah, son of Amon king of Judah. Jeremiah 1:4-5 explains how and why the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah. The LORD spoke to Jeremiah in this way, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah made excuses to the LORD for why he could not

be a prophet. Jeremiah said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” The LORD discounted Jeremiah’s excuses and told him to get ready, stand up and say to Judah whatever the LORD commanded. The LORD made Jeremiah God’s prophet to the nations. This pronouncement ensured that Jeremiah would be the LORD’S prophet against the whole land of Judah and Israel. Jeremiah’s prophesies were not easy to accept. The people fought against the words of Jeremiah, but The LORD refused to allow Judah to overcome and kill Jeremiah, for the Lord would rescue Jeremiah. Israel had been a land of many gods for quite some time. Israel had betrayed the one true God for the gods of Baal and other idols without substance. The Idols were made by the hands of humans, idols who saw nothing, heard nothing, and said or did nothing. Israel and Judah became lands of multiple gods, faithlessness, and adultery.

The LORD, through Jeremiah, called Israel and Judah to repent - turn back to the LORD. and the countries would be healed. However, if the people refused to come back to the God of Abraham and Jacob, God would reject the nations. Jeremiah had the responsibility of going to the other prophets, princes, and kings and give the LORD’s message to these leaders. Jeremiah was always threatened with bodily harm by the rulers. The last words of Jeremiah were recorded in Jeremiah 51:58-64. God told Jeremiah to prophecy the fact that Babylon would eventually destroy Israel and Jerusalem, killing many who stayed in Jerusalem by injury and starvation. The people who were forced to go to Babylon became prisoners there for fifty years. Many Israelite

children born in Babylon knew little of the greatness of the one true God and the Temple, the Holy Place of worship in Jerusalem. After the fifty years of isolation, the Israelites were finally free to return to Judah and Israel.

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: Why did you think Israel ignored the warnings of Jeremiah? What advantage could ignore a possible destruction of the homeland bring about? Were the people simply comfortable with many gods who allowed more freedom of lifestyle than did the true LORD GOD? Perhaps they felt overly confident in their countries safety because peace existed. Why did God send Jeremiah as his prophet?

Discussion and Application: Perhaps these reflections on Jeremiah and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple sit at the back of our minds because many of the people in the United States feel comfortable and safe with their plight in life. Our economy is doing well, and the majority of people have adequate, or even more than adequate wealth so that there is no fear of their lives shattering in the next moment. The Church is losing members right and left, divorce is at an all time high, destructive sins are rampant and the lack of respect for other people has grown to towering heights. Our lives are centered on ourselves, our families, our jobs, and our homes. Many people claim to be Christians but live like unbelievers. Perhaps this might remind us of the time of Jeremiah. Perhaps we can learn something very important about God, faith, life in Christ and life without Christ. As we evaluate our lives, how much of our time is spent working, communing, loving, living, and giving for the glory and honor of Christ, our Savior? Perhaps it is time for us to re-evaluate our love of Christ. Jesus gave his all for us on a cross at Calvary. He calls us to also give our all for the glory of God in Christ.

Words like “Confession” and “Repentance” come to my mind when I consider the tomb and the resurrection. To get our lives closer to the path of Christ, we must confess our sins against God and humans, and repent, ‘turn away’ from these sins. Without Confession and Repentance we can never reach Revival and Renewal. Though we cannot save people, (only God can do that), we can be part of the tools God can use to bring others close to God in Christ. We can pray in the church for revival all day and receive no response. The world is outside the doors of the Church. Do not keep the Church of Christ inside a building. Bring out the Church. the beautiful story of God’s love for each of God’s creation. Share the Good News in every opportunity given us. Speak Prayer and supplication for those we encounter. Being in the world can help encourage the people we meet to ask other questions concerning faith, opportunities for reflection and love of others. We are partners with Christ, led by him. March on!

April: Victory Over Death/ Rising Up on Wings Like Eagles
by Rev. Linda Howell



Theme: “Rise Up!” Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. NKJV

Focus Scriptures: Matthew 22: 37-39; Matthew 22: 41-46

Background Texts: Matthew 12: 20, 1Corinthians 15: 54-57, 1John 5: 4, Luke 12-16, John 1-3

Opening Prayer: We come today to your Throne seeking comfort and peace in times of the loss of loved ones and friends who have passed on to be with you in Heaven. Our sorrow is great, our weakness is strong, and our grief seems to envelope our very souls. Help us to know that our loved ones have now won the victory over death, for we trust your Word of love, of victory, and rising on Wings like Eagles. We leave our loved ones in your precious care, confident that we too, will have victory over death and sin. Help us live our lives in fellowship with you, Dear Father, and with our savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Historical Background: John begins his book speaking of who, exactly, Jesus was and is. Jn. 1.1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shone in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” Jesus’ light shined brightly throughout his ministry. When Jesus came to call his disciples to follow him, they all immediately followed him. The light of God was on Jesus. During his short life of ministry, the light of God was never brighter. At a wedding in Cana in Galilee, at his mother’s request, Jesus turned the water into the best of wines. During his ministry, Jesus healed the sick, caused the lame to walk, cured the blind, gave the dead new lives. Because of his miracles, the leaders of the temple plotted, from the beginning, to kill him. Meanwhile, Jesus spoke of the love of God and the love of humankind that is so precious to the Father, God. He was hated by the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Teachers of the Law and the Temple Priests. With the help of the Romans, they hung Jesus on a cross, because God required this of his only begotten son, and Jesus accepted his Father’s will for him to die a disgraceful death and rise again. Jesus rose again on the third day, to the glory of the Father. His victory over death and the grave gives us victory over sin and death. We can mount up with wings as eagles. We can run and not be weary. We can walk and not faint. Thanks be to God!

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: The concept of agape love is a beautiful thought, but a difficult reality to ponder. Agape love calls us into action. Agape love is not just something to think about on wintery days when we are drinking cocoa, sitting on the sofa, and watching the fire flicker in the fireplace. Agape love is the love God requires us to embrace in our darkest needs. Agape love calls us to love all of humankind. We may hate what someone has done, but with agape love we can still love the person. One thing to note, God does not require that we accept the destructive intrusion in our lives over and over again. But we can pray for those who

despitefully use us, because we are praying for their eternal souls. Can any of us struggle with the ability to forgive? When we pray for our enemies, are we truly sincere?

Discussion and Application: How easy would it be to forgive someone who has attempted to ruin your reputation by spreading unfounded lies about you? How would you prove the lies were not real?

As a worker, how would you react to a boss who yelled at you, often using bad language? I have faced a boss like that. I must confess that I reported him to his supervisor. He left the corporation within two weeks of our encounter.

Perhaps we can understand the difficulty in melding a great tragedy in our life with a heart of love for the one, or ones that caused the tragedy. An example from my life: My sweet, loving nephew was shot six times in the chest at his home. He was killed because he had reported to the police that he had seen a drug sale by a known drug dealer in his town. Now, let us put ourselves in the place of his mother, who loved him with all her heart. His mother forgave the murderer of her son. She forgave the drug dealer that controlled the young, addicted boy. The young man went to prison for life, without parole. Nothing happened to the drug dealer. He was set free on parole because he turned state's evidence against the seventeen-year-old victim of his drug addiction.

My nephew's mother chose to forgive both the boy who shot her son and the drug dealer that ordered her son's death. I confess I was unforgiving at first. But with God's help, and my sister's support, I did forgive the young man who killed my nephew. I hated what he had done, but I realized I would never be able to let go of my pain until I forgave him.

Has anything like my experience spoken to you about your struggles with forgiveness? How did you find peace? Or perhaps you are still seeking Agape love? Matthew 22: 37-40 tells us to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. "Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Encourage one another to pray for a spirit of forgiveness. Encourage each other to choose to love, rather than hate.

Further Thought: The love God gives us is beyond anything we deserve. God loves us so much that he gave his only Son so that we could be redeemed. Consider prayerfully what that gift from God should mean to us all. Think of how each of us can give God the glory for God's forgiveness for us. For, in truth, we are all sinners saved by grace. That grace comes from God alone. Read the background Bible verses together and discuss what the verses mean to each of you. Choose love! Living in peace with God and Mankind is a blessing from God in full measure.



May: Run the Race/ Victory through Christ
by Rev. Linda Howell

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. NKJV

Focus Scriptures: 2Timothy 4-7; Corinthians 9:24-26; Galatians 1:11-2:21;

Background Texts: Matthew 6:31-34; Luke 6:37-42; Acts 7:54-8: 8; Acts 9:1-31; 2Timothy 4; Mark 9:17-29; Hebrews 12:1-12.

Opening Prayer: Thank you, Heavenly Father, for your grace to us who are sinners. Our sins are many, but your mercy is more. We thank you for the gift of the Bible, which records the Faith History of your lovingkindness to your children. We humbly come into your presence with thanksgiving and into your courts with praise. Help us to be always thankful to you. Please continue to give us a heart for your love, strength in your teaching and continuing trust in the lessons of your messengers who were before us. Help us to walk and not grow faint. Help us to run to the end the race you have given us. AMEN.

Historical Background: The Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Temple priests tried in every way they could to convince the Jewish people that Jesus was a charlatan, a magician who had close ties to Satan. When the leaders tried to debunk the work of Jesus, our Savior responded with questions for them that they could not answer. Among the scoffers of Jesus stood Saul, a zealous defender of those who would arrest and or kill not only Christ, but his followers. Stephen, a zealous follower of Christ, spoke truthfully and powerfully the history of the Jewish nation. (Acts 7: 1-7) In the rage of the members of the Sanhedrin, Stephen was dragged out of the city and stoned to death. Stephen’s last words were, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:60). Saul held the cloaks of the men who stoned Stephen, approving Stephen’s murder. Saul continued to breath out murderous things against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found anyone there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he could take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2). God offered Saul another way of life. As Saul neared Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven surrounded him. The voice of Christ asked Saul, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul said, “Who are you Lord? Saul felt a light from heaven flash around him.” Jesus spoke these words, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he was blind.” Acts 9:4-6. “In Damascus, God prepared Ananias, a believer in Christ, to teach Saul. God said, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” Acts 9:10-19. “Ananias was afraid to do this for a man who harmed the holy people in Jerusalem, for Saul had the authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” Ananias did what the THE LORD, Jesus, willed. “Saul was filled the Holy Spirit. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some

food, he regained his strength.” Acts 9: 13-19. Saul was renamed Paul. Paul was charged with spreading the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, to Gentiles. Paul gave the entire rest of his life to teaching and bringing Gentiles to belief in Christ as the Son of God, the savior of the world. Paul penned many of the books of the New Testament, books that were letters to the different church’s he started. He was imprisoned many times. Ultimately, he suffered rejection from many, but led many to the Christ, the son of the Living God. Paul led women and men to help organize churches in their homes. The gospel spread over much of Galilee. Paul was zealous that the words of Jesus not be rewritten. He went to Rome and spoke to the people about Jesus. His witness called many Romans to Christ. “Paul died a Martyr’s death in Rome. In Paul’s letter to Timothy, a young evangelist, he said, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2Timothy 4:6-8). Paul never said he won the race. He told us the race itself was what was important. He ran the race until his last breath.

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: Spend a bit of time viewing Saul and Paul, one man with two different life paths, Saul rejected the idea that Jesus was the Messiah, but Paul believed Jesus was the Messiah, his savior. Because of Saul’s sins against Christ and his followers, God allowed suffering to follow Paul’s given witness for Christ. Paul’s faith and strength helped the Gospel travel to new parts of the world in a very small amount of time. Consider how the CPW could make a dramatic difference in the knowledge and love of Christ. What can each of us do individually to help continue the growth of the faith in our communities? Collectively, what can we speak to the world that would bring others to Christ? I am reminded of the words from a favored hymn as a challenge for our women. “Ponder anew what the Almighty can do; If with His love he befriends us.” We must be willing to allow Christ to “create in us clean hearts and renew a right spirit within us.”

Discussion and Application: Perhaps, after understanding the suffering of Paul and his dedication to his faith in Christ, we can recognize the strength and solidity of his witness to Christ. His faith changed the world’s view of God, and Paul spent the rest of his life drawing others to Christ. However, the bonding is not just for the fellow members of the CPW. We must bond together with the determination to run the good race until our last breath. However long we are here, and able to serve Christ, that should be our daily goal. We do not need to worry about winning the race. We are only called to keep running the race. Let us run and not be weary; let us walk and not faint.

Further Thought: Those of us who may be living in the “twilight” of our years are perhaps being negligent in continuing to set the faith example for our young girls and women. When Christ called us to salvation, we were called for service while we are yet able. If there is any guidance better than the gift of women never giving up on their service to Christ, I am unaware of what it is. Stand firm! Do not be moved! Love created us. Let us love God and others now, because tomorrow may not appear.

June: A Vision for the Future
by Rev. Linda Howell

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. NKJV

Focus Scriptures: Genesis 3:15; Genesis 12:1-3; Genesis 15:1; Luke 1:31-33; Acts 4:1-31; Phil. 3:12-14; Phil. 4:1-23; Acts 4:

Background Texts: Genesis 12:1-3; Mark 1:15; Acts 10:9-23; Acts 11:1-18; Acts 12:9; Acts 16:6-10; 18:9; 26:19; 2Cor. 12:1; Rev 9:17.

Opening Prayer: Most gracious Father, God, we come to you today to praise your name and the name of your Son Jesus, the Christ: Who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried. On the third day he rose again. Jesus now sits on your right hand. From there he shall judge the quick and the dead. Give us so much love for God and Jesus, that our hearts continue to overflow with praise, love, honor and humility in your sight as long as we are on this earth and in heaven. Thank you, God, for all the forgiveness, peace, loving kindness, and joy you have given us. May we join with all women of Christ, praising your name and the name of your Son. Give us the vision to follow your will, Dear God, in all that we say and do. May all praise, glory and honor be given to God! AMEN!

Historical Background: Central to the Background for the Church of Christ after Christ’s resurrection is the life and work of Visionaries. In Genesis 15:1 the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. In this vision God spoke to Abram saying: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” In response Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” Gen.15:2-5. The word of the Lord spoke to him again saying, “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” The Lord promised Abram, in this vision, that he would have as many offspring as there are stars in the sky. “Abram believed the Lord, and God credited it to him as righteousness.” Gen. 15:6. Throughout the Old Testament many people were blessed with visions.

In the New Testament visions did continue, though on a much smaller scale. Luke 1:26-33 tells us of the visit of the angel Gabriel to Nazareth. There, Mary heard and saw the angel Gabriel in a vision. Gabriel told her she was highly favored by God. She was told not to be afraid. Mary would conceive and bear a son called Jesus. He would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord would give him the throne of his father David. He would reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom would never end. Saul also saw a bright light that produced the words of salvation to him through a vision. Jesus was in the light, guiding Saul to become Paul, one who would suffer much for his former sins against Christ, but would be God’s apostle to the Gentiles. Because of this vision, Paul gave all his life to the work of Christ. In Revelations 9:17 John saw a vision of the sixth angel releasing four angels to kill a third of mankind. In the vision, John saw horses with heads like lions. Out of the lions’ mouths



came fire, smoke and sulfur. John saw visions of the Angel and The Little Scroll, the Two Witnesses, The Seventh Trumpet, The Woman and the Dragon, the Beast out of the Sea, The Beast out of the Earth, The Lamb and the 144,000. The visions continued until Rev. 22:20-21. "He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon. Amen Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: The talk of visions may make some people a bit uncomfortable. But visions are messages directly from God's will to the hearts and minds of humankind. Have you ever received a vision, or even a spoken word which warned you about some trouble you might confront? Have you ever felt the touch of God's hand to comfort you when you were afraid? Do you discount these visions or touches, or are you willing to wait upon the Lord to tell you what God's will is in these circumstances? Discuss together how your spiritual life has grown because of your active communication with God. Is it the right time for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church to proclaim the power, grace and love of God to the world? Are we bold enough to risk all for the sake of Christ?

Discussion and Application: Throughout scriptures we read about communications between God and mankind. We are often moved by the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We may grieve for the martyrs who laid down their lives for Christ. Stephen comes to mind when I think of the martyrs. What do you think and feel about the biblical reports of the ills perpetrated by evil humans? Spend some time looking at the above listed scriptures, reading each with a heart for those who did evil in the name of God. Contemplate how many wars were started in the name of Christ. Can we find the love in our hearts to forgive those who sin against us? Pray for all who are lost. Pray for those of us who are in the midst of the battles. Love each other, for love is of God.

Further Thought: Take these last moments to express your needs, and successes of the last month. Can each of you relate some regrets and joys you may have in your life? Rejoice together for the blessings received this month from God. Laugh together, work together, pray together and love together.



July: Carrying the Gospel to the World
by Rev. Linda Howell

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. NKJV

Focus Scriptures: Matt. 9:37-38; Matt. 11:9-11; Luke 10:1-12.

Background Texts: Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 10:1-12; Mark 10:13-16; John 20:1-29; Romans: 8; Rev. 1:1-3. 2Timothy 4:6-8.

Opening Prayer: Dear Gracious Father, God: we come to you tired, challenged, feeling under equipped, waiting for your still small voice to speak to us all. We are beginning to understand the immense challenge you have given us through the lessons we have studied this year. We hear your call, but as from a distance instead of at your feet. But you do not ask us to receive our calls to worship and follow you without the preparation we need to stand firm in our faith. May we commit our lives wholly to you and the Gospel of your Son, Jesus Christ. This last hurdle of the day is difficult, but not impossible. Retune our hearts to you and your word. In Jesus’ name we pray. AMEN!

Historical Background: Saul was an enemy of Jesus. Saul believed there was only one God, Jehovah. Saul believed Christ and his followers were perverting the faith of the Israelites by teaching a new gospel of God. Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God made him a heretic. After Jesus died, and arose again the third day, Saul continued to hate the disciples of Christ. Saul held the cloaks of the men who stoned Stephen to death. The Church continued to be persecuted and scattered. Philip went to Samaria to proclaim the Messiah there. Many people came to believe Philip’s message and were baptized. Peter and John traveled from Jerusalem to Samaria. When they arrived in Samaria, they began praying for the new believers to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Saul continued his zealous destruction of all who claimed Jesus as the risen Son of God. Saul was sent on the road to Damascus with instructions to persecute all of the people of Damascus, man or woman, who believed in the resurrection of Christ.

However, an encounter with the risen Lord completely changed his life. Jesus said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul responded, “Who are you?” Jesus said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do. Saul realized he was blind, so he was led to Damascus by others. Ananias was the man God chose as Saul’s teacher. Ananias was fearful of Saul, but God told Ananias he did not need to be concerned. Saul was “God’s chosen instrument to proclaim God’s name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show Saul how much he must suffer for my name.” Ananias went to the house where Saul was. He told Saul that the Lord, Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes so that he could see again. He got up and was baptized. He took food and regained his strength. On a mission to Cyprus Saul claimed another name, “Paul.” Paul witnessed to Christ until his death. Paul suffered an unimaginable pain and

isolation for standing up for Jesus in all his trials and tribulations. Remember that much of the New Testament is in the Bible because of the letters of Paul to the churches.

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: What do we understand about suffering for a cause greater than ourselves? What does Jesus ask for when he tells us to let go of everything in our lives and follow him? God does not tell us to refrain from marriage. Paul chose to be unmarried. Paul chose to be able to go where God called him, when God called him. Do you believe you could give up your family to go across the globe to serve Jesus? For me these are extreme measures for which few have the call. That being suggested, what can we, who are married with children, offer the cause of Christ? These questions are in no way asked to make us feel uncomfortable or unworthy in any way. We ask them because each of us has a path to follow which the Lord calls us to walk. Are we ready?

Discussion and Application: Jesus had suffered and died on the cross for the salvation of all believers throughout all the ages. After Christ rose and ascended into heaven in a cloud, Peter, James, John, Matthew, Mark, Luke and all the followers of Christ were called to find their places to teach the lost about Jesus. All of the disciples suffered, and all of them chose the pathway they believed would best increase the message of Christ to the world. Paul, self-described late comer to faith in Christ, traveled many times to many places in the Middle-East, Rome, Cyprus, Antioch, Paphos, and even along what is now Spain and Portugal, though that is unclear. He spread the news of Christ out of his true faith and love of God in Christ. In 2Timothy 4:5-8 Paul is telling us he will soon be with God. “But be thou sober in all things, suffer hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill thy ministry. For I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, also to all them that have loved his appearing.” A dear friend of mine, was for almost four years, the Chaplain at the Arlington Cemetery. His name is Reverend and or Chaplain Bill Christian. When I asked him what were the favorite verses the families of the soldiers who died in the service of our country wanted Chaplain Christian to preach on, he quoted, “I have fought the good fight, etc.” Notice, Paul never says he won the race, just that he fought the good fight. Isn’t that what we want on our tombstone? Can we say we have fought the good fight? Imagine receiving the crown from our Savior and Lord!

Further Thought: I pray that the race I have run and still continue running has not been in vain. The race we need to run is a race of gentle love given to those who have not received Jesus in their hearts. Running the race means to be willing to work with all the people who are seeking Christ. Running the race is helping those in need, whether the need be physical, emotional or spiritual. Running the race is loving God and loving neighbor.

August: Misplaced Trust and the Grace of God
by Rev. Cindy Barton

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (NKJV)

Focus Scriptures: Isaiah 7:4a and 9b. Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart...If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all. (NIV)



Isaiah 7:13-14. Then Isaiah said, Hear now, you House of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel (God with Us)". (NIV)

Opening Prayer: Almighty and Eternal God, we thank you for your faithful, steadfast love and the covenant of grace in which we live with you. As we explore your word, open to us new understanding of you. Build our faith that we might trust you more. Forgive our impatience and doubt. Help us to see your presence with us in all seasons of life. In Jesus' Name We Pray, AMEN.

Background Texts: Isaiah 7:1-16; 2 Kings 16

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: It is sometimes difficult to trust our unseen God in all circumstances and situations of our lives instead of relying on the humans around us or even on our own abilities. How many times do we run ahead of God instead of waiting for God's direction? How does God pull us back when we go astray?

Historical Background of Isaiah 1-39: The Prophet and the People.

In the Old Testament, a prophet was an intermediary, a man or woman of God, who carried the word of God to God's people concerning the conditions of their lives and the need for change as seen by God. The prophets held the people and their leaders accountable for failing to keep the covenant with God through immorality, injustice, or lack of faith. Isaiah, son of Amoz, was a Judean living in Jerusalem during the latter part of the 8th century before Christ. He viewed Jerusalem as the chosen dwelling place of God, and Israel as the people of God. However, at this time, Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Judah in the South and Israel in the North.

Ahaz, of the line of David, was king of Judah from 735 BCE to 716/15 BCE. Judah was threatened by its northern neighbors, Israel (ruled by Pekah) and Aram (ruled by Rezin); these nations wanted to form an alliance against the powerful and rising kingdom to the south, Assyria. When Ahaz refused to form this alliance, Israel and Aram threatened to overcome Judah. Details of these political interactions are given in 2 Kings 16. Ahaz is described as a king who did not walk in the ways of the Lord, but allowed himself to be influenced by the pagan peoples around him. When faced with opposition from the northern nations, Ahaz formed an alliance with the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser: he asked the Assyrian king to rescue Judah from the threatened

attack by Aram and Israel, taking silver and gold from the house of the Lord to buy Assyria's help. In the context of this situation, God sent the prophet Isaiah with a message for King Ahaz.

Discussion and Application: Ahaz, A Story of Misplaced Trust

God spoke to Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah, saying "Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid..." (Is. 7:4). God assured Ahaz that the threatened defeat of his kingdom would not happen because Judah was protected by God. God called on Ahaz to stand firm in his faith, to trust God. God was even willing to strengthen Ahaz's faith by providing a sign, a visible demonstration of God's power and presence. God would allow Ahaz to choose the sign. Yet Ahaz refused, pretending to do so out of reverence for God (Is. 7:10). In reality, Ahaz had already made the choice to depend on the pagan king of Assyria, asking that human force to assure Judah's safety by destroying the enemies to the north. Ahaz's refusal to trust God resulted in God choosing a sign of God's own power: "The Sign of the Child". Speaking again through the prophet Isaiah, God said that because of Ahaz' refusal to trust God, the nation would be all but destroyed before a child born in the year of the prophecy was old enough to choose right over wrong (within 12 to 13 years, according to Jewish cultural norms of the time). The near-term fulfillment of this prophecy came when the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib overcame the kingdoms of Aram, Israel and Judah by 701 BCE. The distant fulfillment of this prophecy was the birth of Christ, through which God assured God's presence with and deliverance of the people from sin and death. This prophecy, also called "The Emmanuel Prophecy", promises our restored relationship with our Creator through the sacrificial love and grace of Jesus Christ.

The people of Isaiah 1-39 were concerned about their physical survival in a time of national strife, and they chose to trust human powers instead of God to achieve security. Misplaced trust resulted in eventual defeat of their nation by Assyria and Babylon, the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem, and the captivity of the Jewish people in Babylon. The time of exile is reflected in chapters 40-55 of Isaiah (sometimes called Second Isaiah), but these chapters also reflect the grace and mercy of God towards God's people. God is faithful and trustworthy. God's grace is the means by which Israel will be cleansed and restored to God's service.

Further Thought: In the Old Testament, trust is taught by example and consequences. The Zondervan "Compact Topical Bible" reports that in OT (KJV), the word "faith" is used only two times; rather the concept of faith is demonstrated by a life committed to God in unwavering trust and obedience. Ahaz allowed his worship of God as the one true God to be corrupted by pagan practices and idolatry. How did this lifestyle choice corrupt his ability to trust God in the face of danger? God's choice of the "Sign of Emmanuel" showed God's desire to restore relationship with God's people through God's own grace and mercy. Reflect on the gift and action of God's grace in your life. How does grace heal relationship?



September: Trusting God in the Face of Danger
by Rev. Cindy Barton

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (NKJV)

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 37:9-20 Hezekiah’s Prayer

Opening Prayer: Loving Father God, We know you as Creator of all things and as the One True God, who gives us life and guides our days. We depend on your faithfulness, grace and mercy to sustain and repair our relationship with you when we are wayward. Father, help us to know you better, to understand your ways and your will, to honor you with trust and obedience. Then we will walk in ways of peace and hope, enjoying abundance, safety and security in your presence. Teach us to wait upon you. In Jesus Name we pray, Amen

Background Texts: Isaiah 37:21-38; 2 Kings 18 and 19

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: Learning to trust God is a process that requires growing in faith, patience and the ability to wait upon the Lord. How do lifestyle choices and daily worship habits affect our ability to trust God in times of trial or crisis?

Historical Background: Hezekiah, son of Ahaz and Abijah, became king of Judah at the age of 25 when his father died. He reigned for 29 years (716-687 BCE). He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kings 18:3). Politically he worked to strengthen Judah by building up military fortifications and weapons and by increasing the wealth of the national treasury. Religiously, he restored Hebrew practices and customs, closing pagan altars that had been built and used during his father’s reign. He restored and reconsecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and encouraged all Hebrew people from the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to worship there. He was strongly supported in this work by the prophet Isaiah.

Discussion and Application: Hezekiah Trusts, Prays, and Obeys God

In 704 BCE, Hezekiah joined an anti-Assyrian alliance, against the advice of Isaiah. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, then moved against Judah, capturing many cities, demanding payment of silver and gold from Judah’s treasury and temple, and demanding the surrender of Jerusalem. The king of Assyria claimed that Hezekiah misled his people when he said the Lord God would deliver Judah from the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:26-37; 19:9-13; and Isaiah 37:10-13), and he sent a letter to King Hezekiah disputing God’s power to save his people.

Hezekiah’s response to the letter was to go directly before the Lord in prayer for deliverance. Hezekiah asked God to save his people, not because they deserved it or for their own sake, but for the glory of God, “so that all kingdoms of the earth may know that you, Lord, are the only God” (Isaiah 37:20). In the prayer, Hezekiah addressed God with reference to God’s place in the tabernacle, between the cherubim, for that is the place God promised to meet with and listen to God’s people (Exodus 25:22). Hezekiah acknowledged the sovereignty of God and

the power of the Lord Almighty as the Lord of angel armies, commanding all the angelic hosts of heaven. This description of God is used 56 times in chapters 1 to 39 of Isaiah. Hezekiah asks only that God deliver the people from Sennacherib, leaving the choice of how to accomplish that task to God.

God responded to Hezekiah's prayer, speaking to him through the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 37:21-35). Isaiah's poem denounces Assyria and proclaims judgement against the nation for mocking the Holy One of Israel. The Lord declared that Assyria would not attack or enter Jerusalem, but that Sennacherib would leave without fighting. To accomplish this, God sent an angel of the Lord with plague (reported as bubonic plague by Greek historian Herodotus) into the Assyrian army, and in one night, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers died. Sennacherib returned to Nineveh without attacking Jerusalem.

Compare Hezekiah's response to political and military threats with that of Ahaz in the previous lesson. Trusting God (or not) is a choice. Think of a time when you trusted God or a time when you did not. Share with a neighbor how you grew through this experience.

Further Thought: In the New Testament, the words "faith" and "believe" are used almost 500 times. We are called to trust in the person of Jesus, in the truth of his teachings, and in the salvation he offers. Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace and love. We are New Testament people living with God in the Covenant of Grace. How is trust related to faith in God's grace? How is trust related to obedience? How is trust related to hope?

Additional Verses on Trust:

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths.

Psalms 46:10 Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.

October: Servant Songs: A Story of Two Servants
by Rev. Cindy Barton

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (NKJV)

Focus Scriptures: Isaiah 41:8-20, The First Servant, Israel; Isaiah 42:1-9, The Second Servant, Messiah

Opening Prayer: Eternal and Mighty Father God, You made us in your image, with a spirit that longs for you. Our mistakes separated us from you, but in your grace, you intervened. You gave us a Savior in Jesus, the perfect servant. Through his sacrifice, our covenant relationship with you can be restored. Through his example, we seek to learn our own roles as servants of the One True God. Through his gift of the Holy Spirit, we are filled up with you, to be poured out on the world. We seek to understand and accept servanthood. In Jesus Name, Amen

Background Texts: Isaiah’s Servant Songs referring to Messiah: Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-2

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: Although God chose Israel as God’s servants to carry the special knowledge of who God is to the world, they repeatedly failed to live in covenant relationship with God. In divine grace and for God’s own glory, God did not reject God’s servant Israel. Instead, God sent a perfect servant, the Messiah, to redeem the first servant. How do you identify with Israel as God’s imperfect servant? How can we seek to imitate the perfect servant by striving to be Christlike?

Historical Background: The story of the decline and fall of the chosen people of God, existing as the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah, is described in the book of 2 Kings. The history of the Israelite people is marked by alternating reigns of kings who served the Lord and obeyed his commands, and those who did not. Kings who brought reform and restoration of righteous living according to the laws of God included Hezekiah and Josiah. Those who were led astray by the idolatry and paganism of surrounding cultures were evil in the sight of God; they led the people of God into sin. Sinfulness of the chosen people brought disastrous consequences for Israel.

In 587 BCE Babylon defeated Judah, destroyed the temple of God, and took many of the best and brightest talents of the Israelite nation into exile in Babylon. The section of Isaiah referred to as “Second Isaiah” is written to or about people in exile. These people, although chosen by God, now are separated from their homes and their religious temple. They doubt whether God wants to save them. This portion of Isaiah speaks of redemption and deliverance. God has not rejected them, and in divine grace, God will send a redeemer to them. The near-term fulfillment of these prophecies was in the person of Cyrus, king of Persia, who defeated the Babylonian Empire in 538 BCE, and allowed the Israelites to return home, ending their years of exile (Ezra 1:1-4). The distant fulfillment of these prophecies is in the birth of Jesus as the Messiah, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.



Discussion and Application: A Story of Two Servants

In terminology of the ancient Near East, a “servant” was a trusted envoy, worker or messenger chosen and entrusted with a significant task. The first servant song we read (Isaiah 41:8-20) seems to describe the nation of Israel, the chosen people of the Lord. Their task was to share their knowledge of the one true God with the world. This text confirms Israel’s place as God’s people, but God reminds them that they were chosen through Abraham centuries before because God wanted to, not because they deserved or earned the honor. Although they were rebellious, fearful and disobedient, God did not reject them, but promised to strengthen them, help them, and uphold them with God’s Righteous Right Hand.

The Righteous Right Hand is the Messiah, subject of the second servant song we read (Isaiah 42:1-9). Jesus is the servant of God, “my Chosen One in whom I delight”, who is obedient, sensitive, gentle, encouraging, and willing to suffer for others. It is the Spirit of the Lord that makes Jesus the perfect servant. His task is threefold: to save the first servant and be a new covenant for the chosen people; to be a light for the Gentiles, bringing them hope and salvation; and to bring justice to the nations. In this last task, Jesus will restore divine order to the world.

We, as believers in Christ, are called to be his servants, and to share in his mission. We are equipped to do this by the gift of the Holy Spirit, with which we are sealed when we give our hearts to Jesus. The Spirit applies to us what God has planned and Jesus has put into effect. We must be filled with the Holy Spirit before we can shine light on others. Equipped with the Holy Spirit, we are able to pour the gifts we are given out upon the world.

Further Thought: Revisit Isaiah 40:31. We do not need to fear being used up or emptied out, because we can be refilled through the power of the Holy Spirit in time spent with God. Take time to restore and renew your power in Christ by seeking a close relationship with him, worshipping him, and glorifying his name. What activities have served to renew your strength and passion for sharing Christ’s mission? Share these with your neighbor. Plan to spend more time with Jesus!

Additional Verses on Trust:

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths.

Psalms 46:10 Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.

Isaiah 41:9b-10 I said, “You are my servant”; I have chosen you and not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.



November: Waiting Thankfully, Trusting God's Providence
by Rev. Cindy Barton

Theme: "Rise Up!" from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (NKJV)

Focus Scriptures: Psalm 103:1-5; John 6:5-14

Opening Prayer: Loving Father God, you are Creator, Provider, Liberator, Savior! From nothing you created all things in heaven and earth. You uphold and rule all you have created in everlasting love and faithfulness. We praise you and give you thanks in all things. Help us to see clearly your goodness and providence, that in all circumstances, we may trust you fully, give thanks sincerely, and wait for you in hope and gratitude. In Jesus' Holy Name, Amen.

Background Texts: Matthew 6:26-33; Psalm 23

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: Why is it important for us to realize the eternal and steadfast nature of God's providence? Looking at today's story from John 6, ponder how faith, trust and hope are grounded in our knowledge of God's providence and are increased by gratitude and acts of thanksgiving to God.

Discussion and Application: God's Providence: An Everlasting Source of Faith and Gratitude

The story of Jesus feeding the multitude with the meager offering of a small boy's lunch is reported in all four gospels and provides an unusual point of continuity between John and the other gospels. This is an important story because it teaches us about God's Providence: God can and will sustain and provide for God's creation through unlimited power, love and grace.

God's "Providence" is defined as God's good, loving, and wise "superintendence" of God's creation. As the creator of all things, God oversees, controls, upholds, provides for, maintains, directs and governs all creation; this includes all creatures great and small, all living things, all non-living things, and all actions and processes occurring in heaven and on earth. God's providence is according to God's sovereign will and through God's unlimited wisdom, justice, and power. God is present and active in all parts and times of creation, directing events towards the ends God wills. Human choice also is active, but God can and does use our actions, good and bad, to accomplish God's will and purpose and to bring God's glory.

All four gospel accounts of the feeding of the 5,000 are very similar. Jesus sought solitude and a time of rest and prayer. However, seeing that a large crowd of people was following him, Jesus looked upon the people with compassion and ministered to their needs. This is a picture of God's providential love. As the end of the day drew near, Jesus knew the hunger of the people, just as God in providence, knows our every need. Jesus used this opportunity of need to teach his disciples that they must trust God's ability to provide in every situation, and that God is not limited in how God will meet the needs of creation and secure God's own will.

By John's account (6:6) Jesus tested Philip by asking where food could be purchased for the crowd. Philip looked at what he did not have: he did not have enough food or money to feed 5,000 men and the families that accompanied them. However, another disciple, Andrew, looked at what he did have: a boy's lunch, consisting of five loaves of bread and two fish. It is significant that Andrew offered to Jesus what he had, even though it seemed too small to matter. This is a picture of hope in God's providence. God can multiply the smallest gift to do God's work and will.

The scripture passage from Matthew 6:26-33 reassures us that we can trust God's providence. We are an important part of creation, the ones made in God's image to accomplish God's purpose and bring God glory. God's love, grace, and mercy cover us, even as God's providence covers the sparrows, the lilies, and all creation. God knows our needs, and asks only that we seek God's kingdom first, trusting God and giving thanks.

In this Thanksgiving season, we are called to give witness to the goodness of God and to declare our faith and trust in God's providence. In adopting a thankful attitude, we focus on what we do have. We know that all we have comes from God, and that God's plan is to love and provide for all of creation. We do not always understand why difficult things happen in our lives. We do not know how God will work to bring about God's good will and purpose. We give thanks to God in all things while we wait for the working out of God's eternal will. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits...who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:2,4-5).

Further Thought: Revisit Isaiah 40:31. How has God provided good things for you in difficult times of your life and in unexpected ways? How does this build your faith and give you hope?

Additional Verses on God's Providence and How It Affects Our Spiritual Well-being:

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

1 Peter 5:6-7 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that God may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on God because God cares for you.

December: Waiting in Humble Obedience to God
by Rev. Cindy Barton

Theme: “Rise Up!” from Isaiah 40:31. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (NKJV)

Focus Scriptures: Genesis 22:16-18; Matthew 1:22-23 or Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1:45-50



Opening Prayer: Almighty God, Infinite in Love and Wisdom, we praise you and give you glory for all the blessings of our lives. We ponder the mystery of your plan for all creation; we give thanks for the ways you provide for us and call us to be yours. We humbly bow before you, realizing that we are limited in understanding and power, but you are not. Help us to trust you and obey you, as we wait for you to reveal more of yourself to us, in your time. In Jesus’ Holy Name, Amen.

Background Texts: Genesis 22:1-18; Luke 1:26-38 and 39-56

Beginning Point/ Questions to Ponder: We wait upon God’s timing to fulfill God’s promises. How do we wait? Abraham’s humble obedience in response to God’s test showed his love for God; the blessings he received as a result overflowed to affect all nations, over all time. How did humility enable Mary’s obedience to God in the face of mystery and personal risk? What does this say about how we respond to God’s unexpected call to specific actions beyond our limited self-image and perception?

Discussion and Application: Humility and Obedience

Humility is the personal quality of being free from arrogance and pride and having an accurate estimate of one’s worth (*Holman’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 777). If we would be humble, we must understand who we are as God’s creation, and who God is as the Source and Sovereign of all things. Humility is a quality needed for life in the Kingdom of God because it enables our willingness to submit our wills to God’s. This leads to obedience.

Two examples of humble obedience to God are offered in today’s scripture readings. In Gen. 22, Abraham was tested by God’s direction to offer his only son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. This command cannot have made sense to Abraham, who acknowledged his son as a gift from God. However, he obeyed God’s direction promptly and completely, without argument. His faith and trust in God’s goodness and wisdom are shown by his statement in Gen. 22:8, “God himself will provide the Lamb...” Abraham submitted humbly to God’s infinite wisdom with a sacrificial act of heart, showing his love for God to be the greatest love of his life.

In return, God provided an alternate sacrifice (the ram in the bush), sparing Isaac, and God also blessed Abraham and his descendants. “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, I will surely bless you and will

make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky... and through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (Gen.22:16-18).

In Luke 1, Mary humbly accepted God’s call to bear God’s son, even though she could not understand the mystery of her pregnancy, and the condition of pregnancy outside of marriage posed a risk to her safety and the disruption of her own plans for marriage. When the angel Gabriel presented God’s plan to Mary, her humble response was “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). Mary trusted God and allowed room for mystery in her relationship with God, accepting that God’s wisdom may lead us into places that are beyond our comprehension. She accepted the blessing and gift God offered, praising God’s name, and giving God glory. Through Mary’s humble obedience, the world was blessed with a Savior.

The stories of Abraham and Mary are connected by their examples of humble obedience, and also by God’s plan and prophetic words of scripture. God did indeed provide a sacrificial lamb to cover the sins of the world in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. The birth of Mary’s Son provided offspring of Abraham through whom all nations on earth are blessed. Matthew 1:22-23 reminds us, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel --- which means God with Us”.

Further Thought: The following verses suggest a tie between humility and absence of worry or anxiety. Ponder this connection. Read the doxology offered in Romans 11:33-36.

Additional Verses on Humility and Peace:

Romans 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond searching out!

Proverbs 3:5-6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

1 Peter 5:6-7 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Mark 9:35 If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last, and servant of all.