



Matthew

devotional

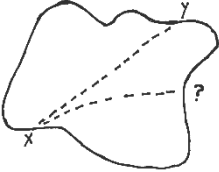
COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

JANUARY 2026

A Note from Pastor Charlie

Let's pretend you're at a lake, at point X, and you want to get to point Y. If you get off to a poor start, you could end up very far from your desired destination.

A good start is important.



For me, I know that a good start is important to my day. If I too quickly get distracted by my email, or games on my phone or doomsscrolling the news, the rest of the day is often unfocused and not as fruitful as it could be.

So I try to start each day with some Bible reading and some prayer. I know the importance of connecting with God each day, trying to faithfully follow Jesus, and listening to the Holy Spirit.

To get 2026 off to a good start, this devotional invites you to read a chapter of Matthew each day: Matthew 1 on January 1, Matthew 2 on January 2, and so on, all the way until the conclusion of Matthew on January 28. Each day has a reflection written by a member of the Covenant community.

I hope this resource helps me and all of us to get each day and the whole year off to a good start. We're reading through Matthew's Gospel, which emphasizes Jesus as a teacher. There are five large teaching sections in Matthew:

- 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
- 10 Discipleship, Following Jesus
- 13 The Kingdom of God
- 18 Being in Community
- 24-25 The Future

As you read, pray, and ponder, take a moment to ask yourself, "What is God teaching me today?"

Blessings on the journey of learning and living God's love,

Charlie Berthoud
Pastor/Head of Staff

Written by Jane Kolakowski

Thursday, January 1

Tell the truth. Did you skim or skip the genealogy verses? What a boring way to begin a book, we think. A genealogy that spans 40 generations does not grab our attention. Yet for Matthew and his Jewish community, this was a captivating and persuasive opening! It announces that Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham, and the long-awaited Messiah. It's a powerful and convincing way to prove that Jesus is Israel's promised Christ and that God does keep his promises. As promised to Abraham and David, Jesus is Israel's promised King, the Son who will bring peace and justice to the earth and who's kingdom will have no end.

Read the genealogy again noting the women. Women were seldom, if ever, included in genealogies back then. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and probably Bathsheba ("the wife of Uriah") were all Gentile women before entering God's family. Tamar was a seducer and an adulteress. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho. Ruth was a Moabite—a hated people. Bathsheba, mother of Solomon, was seduced from her husband by David. Yet God breaks down barriers with these people and others, using them to carry forth His plan. Each of these women's stories carries a theme of righteousness, which is a central theme in Matthew's Gospel.

Reflect for a moment on the fact that God works through imperfect people. Jesus' genealogy reminds us that no one's past is too messy for God's plan.

Now review Matthew 1:18-25. Joseph is deeply disturbed to discover that his betrothed Mary is pregnant, and he resolves to divorce her quietly according to the law of Deuteronomy 24:1. What does God do now but turn Joseph's world upside-down. An angel of God comes to Joseph in his sleep, calms Joseph, and reveals the truth to him. Joseph accepts Jesus as his legitimate son, thus bringing Jesus into the Davidic line. Matthew and his community now see in Jesus the fulfillment of Israel's deepest hope prophesied in Isaiah 7:14: God becomes flesh and dwells among us.

Lord God, thank you for showing me that Your grace reaches into every story. Help me to trust that You are working through my life, too. Use me, like those in Jesus' lineage, to reflect Your love and redemption. Amen.

Hearing Through the Noise | Matthew 2

Written by Jenn Sauer

Friday, January 2

I think because this story of the magi following the star is so familiar and is such a staple of children's Christmas pageants, I had forgotten to be curious about it. So this time, I tried to read it with a beginner's mind and was rewarded with fresh insight.

It hit me this time that magi - people known for their wisdom and access to special knowledge – were big deals. Such big deals, in fact, that kings routinely called on them for advice. We see this here, when King Herod summons a few magi to help him find the baby Jesus “so that I too may go and worship him.” Yet despite their inside track with royalty and what we can imagine must've been the constant validation of their specialness, these men didn't lose the ability to listen for Truth beyond all the ego-stroking.

Because Matthew states their decision to disobey Herod so matter-of-factly in one short line, it's easy to miss that these magi jeopardized not only their relationship with the ruling power, but their very lives. We read that “when Herod realized he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious.” If Herod was willing to kill baby boys, it's probably a safe bet that the people who double-crossed him wouldn't fare any better.

This fresh reading got me wondering: who or what are the “ego-stroking” powers in my life that might prevent me from hearing and heeding Truth? Am I willing to forfeit my privileged position(s) if a voice of Truth demands it?

God of kings, magi, and common folks alike, thank you for intervening in the world and in our lives. Help us to quiet our minds and to see beyond our own self-interest so that we can be your hands and feet in the world. Amen.

Go With the Flow | Matthew 3

Written by Cindy Lovell

Saturday, January 3

The Jordan River plays a significant role in Matthew 3, being the site of many baptisms, including Jesus'. The Jordan River carries less water today than it did in Jesus' time (and is more polluted), but it still exists. The river is an apt metaphor for our spiritual lives. It begins high on Mount Hermon (from melting snow) and forms where three rivers meet. If our Christian lives started as accepting

Christ into our lives, that “born again” type event is often described as a “mountain top” experience, and the Trinity is certainly present.

The Jordan River has many twists and turns on its route, just as our faith and lives can change and be unpredictable. The current of the Jordan is sometimes strong, but it slows toward the end of its meandering toward the Dead Sea. Hopefully, the course of our spiritual lives is mostly strong, but there may be times when our faith is tested, or just plain lags. And although our earthly bodies will end someday, we can take comfort in knowing that our sacred journey doesn’t end as the Jordan does (John 11:25).

Because Jesus lived on earth and took action such as being baptized in the waters of the Jordan, we know that through belief in God our souls can live on. Jesus’ baptism was (and is) meaningful for many reasons, including it confirmed his deity (with the dove and voice coming from heaven), it foreshadowed his death and resurrection (through his being immersed and then arising from the water), and it marked the beginning of his public ministry.

Let us follow and learn from the life of Jesus, as we continue our sometimes solid, and sometimes meandering, journey of faith.

Immediately? Seriously? | Matthew 4

Written by Brad Brown

Sunday, January 4

Temptation, withdrawal, recruitment, preaching: this chapter contains four rather unrelated stories. Lots to digest here, but I’m going to concentrate on one word: immediately. Because, well, can you even imagine? You’re sweating it out at your job—family business, mind you—and this guy saunters by and he says, “Follow me.” And you do—immediately. Not even a moment’s thought. You just go with him. I mean, who does that sort of thing? Isn’t this a standard script for a cult: some charismatic figure appears on the scene and practically hypnotizes people and they blindly follow the person? Are we really supposed to believe this? Two of the gospels (Luke, John) recount a more credible story, with Jesus either performing a miracle or being identified as the Messiah before the fisherfolk decide to follow him. But not Matthew (or Mark). Why? What’s the big deal about following immediately?

First off, we must realize that this is a story, not a news report with conscientious fact-checking for accuracy. The details of the story must fit the intentions of the teller. And the teller, most likely, was

a Jewish man living toward the end of the first century. This teller presents Jesus as rather charismatic: compassionate, authoritative, astounding (all those miracles), a visionary. And Simon, Andrew, James, and John lived in difficult times. Fishing was a tough life under Roman rule. They'd probably welcome a new profession, a new life that allowed them to escape Roman oppression.

We all come to Christ in a context. For some, who live in oppression or squalor, Christ's message of hope and salvation may seem immediately attractive. Others, who live in safety and comfort, may not be so easily swayed. The tenor of our times is more "What's in it for me?" than "How can I help?" So, if we are privileged enough (and jaded enough) to slowly weigh our options, perhaps it helps to recognize what Matthew was trying to say about following Jesus: it's not just an optional lifestyle. It's a transformative event. "I will make you fishers of people." Jesus has the power to radically remake our lives. Can we afford to persevere on that promise?

Oh, God, make me an instrument of your piece, and help me not dally about it!

A Dash Here, A Dash There | Matthew 5

Written by Eric Girard

Monday, January 5

Matthew 5 is a rich chapter full of instructions from Jesus. The Beatitudes would have been the first place I thought I would have gone to for my devotion when I first signed up for this devotion. But, after a couple of readings I kept coming back to Matthew 5:13, You Are the Salt of The Earth.

I've read that verse before and sat in the pews at Covenant and heard our pastors speak the words, but I never really took it in like I did the other verses in the chapter. I've always liked the way Salt of the Earth sounded, but it was only a couple days ago when it struck me that I myself am the preservative and flavor - the salt - of the word.

As a disciple of Jesus, it's on me to put a dash here, a dash there, and to preserve God's love in the world. I can add flavor to the world. And maybe I can help preserve God's Love on Earth as it is in Heaven.

But I must be vigilant, because just as I can be a preservative and flavor enhancer, I also can let my flavor spoil. With an overly busy schedule or a foul mood, I can forget my station and responsibility.

What happens if I'm not sprinkling a little Grace and Love around? What if all the Salt of The Earth spoiled?

Dear Lord – Help me remember to spread Grace and Love throughout my day, throughout my relationships. Help all your followers remember that they are also Salt, and to do the same.

Do Not Worry | Matthew 6

Written by Robert Dent

Tuesday, January 6

“So don’t worry about having enough food and clothing. Why be like the heathen? For they take pride in all these things and are deeply concerned about them. But your heavenly father already knows perfectly well that you need them, and will give them to you if you give him first place in your life and live as he wants you to.

“So don’t be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time.”

Reading this passage alongside a conversation with a patient about the same time led to a remarkable understanding and confirmation of my faith.

The conversation took place as I entered the exam room to see an elderly pastor patient of mine with a bad heart and cancer as follows:

Me: “How are you doing?”

He: “ Well, Doc, my body’s kind of letting me down. But my spirit’s fine! I feel like I’m 25 years old.”

At hearing him an inspiration spontaneously came to me: “Well that makes perfect sense. The spirit is immortal. It probably doesn’t age.”

We then conversed for a while about the importance of the spirit in guiding our thoughts and feelings. Eventually this conversation led to my giving a sermon in church. The message was simple. What is eternal in your life? What doesn’t last? Which of these do you spend most of your time thinking about? Which of these should be the greater priority in your life?

Consequently, my faith that God will take care of tomorrow allows me to be less anxious and more willing to live and love one day at a time.

Holy God, you are our Rock and our Provider. Help us to trust in you, so that our energy would go to sharing your love with others in meaningful ways. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Keep it Simple | Matthew 7

Written by Nancy McCulley

Wednesday, January 7

Is it any wonder that “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching”? He didn’t attempt to clarify whether Roman law(s) were more important than the hundreds of commandments in the Torah, and he wasn’t interested in which societal rules took precedence over others.

He spoke simply - of justice and common sense - about the same moral issues we face today: don’t judge others, enter through the narrow gate, watch out for false prophets. The most important decisions we make every day are based on doing what’s right. Simple, but not always easy. Fortunately, our prayers are heard when we ask, seek, and knock. It’s as if Jesus is walking beside us whenever we forget to keep it simple.

Holy One, we seek your guidance to live simply and care for our neighbors as you have taught us. We honor you with praise and song. Amen.

Doing What I Can | Matthew 8

Written by Laurie Jones

Thursday, January 8

“Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he [Jesus] got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” Matthew 8:26-27

When I signed up to write a devotion for our study of Matthew, I just blindly chose a chapter without reading it first. Big. Mistake. The chapter is filled with examples of the miracles of Jesus. Jesus

cleanses a leper, heals a Centurian's servant, heals many at Peter's home, collects disciples, stills the storm, and drives out demoniacs. Jesus was a very busy man!

The many miracles were inspiring, but as I try to put these scriptures into the context of daily life, I find it hard to relate. When's the last time I saw a miracle? Do miracles even happen anymore? Is Jesus still with us? We are a time of great distress right now with a bigger gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" than ever. Those in power point blame rather than try to work with others to find a better way to deal with issues. When I look at the passages in Matthew 8, I see the exact opposite happening: Jesus cleanses a leper - an unclean outcast; Jesus heals a Centurian's servant - a member of the army who directs men and servants to do his bidding; Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and multiple people in the house - just because they're there; Jesus' disciples wake Jesus up during a storm and Jesus calms the winds and sea - all because the disciples were scared; and Jesus sent demons into a herd of swine and sent them over a cliff - finally allowing people to pass by.

Jesus acted for people who were lost, unclean, lonely, and scared, much like many people today. I can't say that I see miracles today, but I certainly believe in the good of God and Jesus when I look at a sunrise or a sunset, gaze on the brilliant fall colors that brightened our lives in October, watch a waterfall with its natural power, or see spring buds appear. Even without the "proof" of seeing miracles performed, I know that God is with me. Even when I am inundated with bad news, I know that I have Jesus in my corner, and he will take me to a better place when I pray and ask for his help.

My primary goal these days is to maintain faith in God and know that Jesus is working within me to make the world a better place. I may not see someone cured of leprosy or demons sent into pigs, but I can keep doing what I can... where I am ...with what I've got, knowing that God is with me.

Lord, be with me each day. Keep my spirits up, even when things aren't going well. Help me love my neighbor and love you with all my heart and mind and soul. Amen.

What Would Jesus Do? | Matthew 9

Written by Jennifer Morgan

Friday, January 9

Matthew Chapter 9 is a rich telling of the way in which Jesus lived his life, what he felt was important and who was most in need of his presence. He does these things all while the scribes and Pharisees are watching, judging and questioning him!

During the study of our Presbyterian Creeds and Confessions over the fall, it was noticed and mentioned several times that while Jesus' birth, death and resurrection are foundational, what he did during his life and how he lived was barely mentioned, if at all. But what we learn about Jesus' life and actions from the Gospels and particularly from this chapter is, in fact, how we are to live our lives and how much our humble faith really matters.

Jesus heals so many faithful people, including bringing a young girl back to life, that he decides he needs to give his disciples the power to heal as well. Importantly, he emphasizes that they were forgiven of their sins and healed because they admitted those sins and believed that Jesus could save them. He spent time with the taxpayers, not because they were great to be around, but because they needed his healing the most.

Sure, it is more fun and easier to be around the popular people, but Jesus leads us by example that we should be looking for those who are in need of healing, such as those on the margins of society either due to their own bad deeds or through no fault of their own. This is what I feel we are reminded to do upon studying this chapter.

Heavenly and wonderful Creator, grant us the insight to see where we are to be like Jesus, where we can make a difference in someone's life, and where we can help the lost to find your healing presence. Amen.

How Do We Win by Losing? | Matthew 10

Written by Fred and Mary Ross

Saturday, January 10

In Matthew 10 we find Jesus charging the disciples as they prepare for their missioning to the people of Israel. The work will be arduous, he tells them. You will be scorned and misunderstood, and you will be little more than sheep among wolves.

The message Jesus delivers is packed with contraries: snakes and doves, Jews and Gentiles, body and soul, and family members as enemies. He seems to be reinforcing his message that their mission will be anything but routine. There is no script.

But Jesus closes his charge with a memorable couplet, indeed, one found in different form in all four Gospels: “Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them.” What are we to make of this claim? It is more, I think, than an urging to reject (that is, “lose”) a current, purposeless life and take up a new and purposeful one. Jesus gives a reason to do so. Do it “because of me” he says here.

We are understandably reluctant to give up a comfortable life and take on a new one that promises to be fraught. Journeys like this are not easy. But we do so in the assurance that Jesus will be our guide, and that we make life’s journey not just for him but with him.

Lord, we ask that you be with us this day and every day as we continue on our life’s journey. We realize the way will be sometimes arduous and frequently puzzling. But with you as our constant strength we will ultimately find eternal life.

Wisdom is Justified by Her Works | Matthew 11

Written by Doug Poland

Sunday, January 11

Matthew chapter 11 sets out a three-part lesson in which Jesus makes clear the primacy of action - or works - in bringing the Kingdom of God into full being. The chapter begins with John the Baptist in prison, hearing about the works of Jesus, and sending his followers to ask Jesus whether he is the messiah. Jesus does not respond directly but instead instructs John’s followers that the answer may be found in his works: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor are given hope.

Jesus then addresses how both John and he have been viewed and people’s expectations of them, noting that up until that time, the promise of God’s kingdom on earth had been controlled by those in power. But even though both John and Jesus preached and modeled a kingdom of God that was accessible to all people, John was dismissed as too pious (“neither eating nor drinking”) and Jesus

as insufficiently pious (“a glutton and wine-biber”). Again, Jesus turns to the role of works, declaring that “wisdom is justified by its works.”

Finally, Jesus closes the lesson by inviting the people to follow him and to “[t]ake my yoke upon you.” As we learn in other passages of Matthew’s Gospel (chapters 5 and 25), that means to love and serve God and neighbor in tangible ways, or works such as giving food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, and visiting those in prison. That is how God’s kingdom is brought to its fulfillment.

Gracious God, may we have ears to hear the words of wisdom that Jesus preaches to us and the will to carry those words into action as works that advance your kingdom on earth.

Busy with Family | Matthew 12

Written by Marco Mascitti

Monday, January 12

Who is my mother and brother?

Jesus leaves us with this question at the conclusion of Matthew 12. Jesus is more concerned with continuing his teachings to the multitudes than in obliging his family’s wishes to speak to him. He seems to compel us to do the same.

What an unsettling dilemma. I thought we were supposed to focus on our families first. We are supposed to prioritize our families, provide and care for each other and within our families find comfort and refuge, right? Is Jesus saying we should forget, ignore our families in place of doing God’s work out in the world?

Deeper reflection reveals that perhaps Jesus is not in fact instructing us to abandon our families. What he may be asking of us however, is to expand our vision. He challenges us to question conventional wisdom and social norms, just as he challenges us earlier in the chapter concerning work on the sabbath.

And perhaps most importantly, Jesus reminds us that we are part of God’s family too. Are there ways we might open our doors and our hearts to God’s family all around us.

Heavenly Father, please grant us the vision to see slightly beyond ourselves and our usual routines. Help me discover one way this week that I can help somebody I may not ordinarily have thought of.

The Parable of the Sower is one of the more well-known of Jesus' parables, and it is one of my personal favorites. Jesus connects with his followers by using images that everyone can relate to. After all, almost everyone has had the experience of trying to grow something from seed. And most of us know that it is anything but easy!

As an avid gardener myself, I am intrigued by the parallels Jesus makes between the various fates of the seed in the parable and the fates of God's Word in our lives. What jumps out to me the most in this season of life is the fate of the seed that falls among the thorns. This seed never really has a chance. The thorns grow up quickly and choke the young plant so that it cannot thrive and bear fruit.

Similarly, when I come to church on Sunday, hear the Word proclaimed, and take it into my heart for the week ahead, I am preparing that seed for growth. However, when I allow the worries of life, the temptations of sin, and feelings of hopelessness to grow during the week, these "thorns" can completely overshadow and choke out any chance that seed has of flourishing. A better option is to do a bit of radical pruning throughout the week. Prayer, mindfulness, Bible reading and study, and service to others are the pruning tools I can use to keep those thorns at bay so that the word of God can thrive in my life.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the imagery in the Bible that helps us to see more clearly how to live. Make us aware of the places that we have allowed thorns to grow and choke out your Word for our lives. Equip us with the tools we need to grow and flourish as your servants here on Earth. Amen.

Being Both Present and Active | Matthew 14

Written by Marcy Carlson

Wednesday, January 14

Matthew 14 is full of well-known stories: the death of John the Baptist, Jesus feeding the five thousand, and Jesus walking on water. Many of us have heard the story of Jesus feeding the crowd since childhood, as five loaves and two fish became a meal for thousands with baskets of leftovers. But it is worth pausing to look again at the moment itself.

Jesus had gone to “a lonely place apart” to grieve John’s death, but the crowds followed Him. As evening approached, the disciples urged Him to send the people away to buy food (Matthew 14:15). But Jesus replied with words that must have startled them: “They need not go away; you give them something to eat” (Matthew 14:16).

With this declaration, Jesus welcomed the people to remain close to Him and also called the disciples to take action.

Jesus’ words, “They need not go away,” remind us of the importance of presence and connection. Even in His grief, He chose community instead of isolation. He then invited His disciples to participate in meeting the need. He asked them to offer what they had, even though it was not nearly enough, and then multiplied it into abundance.

Together, these moments offer a picture of the Christian life. We are called to stay present with others, and we are also called to act on their behalf. When compassion and obedience meet, God can multiply what we offer, just as He multiplied the loaves and fish.

Dear God, help me to be both present and active in furthering Your Kingdom. Help me to notice the needs around me, to offer what I have, and to trust You to multiply it. Amen.

What Do We Keep in our Hearts? | Matthew 15

Written by Winfred Byrd

Thursday, January 15

There is so much familiarity in Matthew 15. I cannot remember a time before I knew the story of the loaves and the fish and have often reflected on the foreign woman's persistence in seeking God through Jesus.

What stayed with me - and what I'm struggling with - on this reading was Jesus's castigation of the Pharisees. We are taught that goodness comes from within, and we all have our own joy to bring to the world, but that's not the way He tells it! Murder, greed, and slander! Is this what I carry in my heart? Even when I am honestly not thumbing the scale that weighs my own behavior, I like to think I don't see too much of that.

Though perhaps the better question is, without our Father's strength, can any of us remain ever good? Perhaps not. That is a bigger task.

To me, one of God's answers to this is to give us the gift of strong community with one another. No matter how much we bring out the light of others, there will always be many more supporting each of us. As we start fresh the new year, we can take a moment to be grateful for the goodness of the world and reflect on how we can work to build on what is already present. Give thanks for our neighbors near and far. And recognize that most all of use, even the faceless and ever present "them," are usually friendly idealistic people trying to share their inner goodness with us.

Dear Lord, be among us and in our hearts. Replace the shaking of our fears and apoplexy with the stillness of peace until there is no place for wickedness learned from worldly experience. Teach us to reach ever more slowly for hate and misdeed until our words and acts cannot help but follow the example of Jesus: to divide our gifts amongst our neighbors sharing the benefit with more of them than we ever dreamed; and to hear faith and virtue pouring out of those that might seem so different from us. Amen.

But Whom Say Ye That I Am? | Matthew 16

Written by Ernie Perry

Friday, January 16

In Matthew 16, the disciples realized they forgot to bring bread on their trip with Jesus across the lake. While those in the boat discussed the lack of bread, Jesus, admonished the disciples, telling not to worry about the bread; had not they seen 5 loaves turn to 5000? Jesus has the bread covered!

But instead, He said, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." The warning and discussion were about those who would be seduced by the false prophecy of "the

yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” This seems very relevant in today’s political, social, and religious context. A modern case study of who is Jesus?

Seduced by a golden figure of a president? Trying to justify Christian fundamentalists supporting political practices and policies that further weaken the weakest? This not Jesus. As Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

The one that brings all the love.

Dear God, in Jesus name I pray that I am by Your side and follow the true You. Please help me eliminate all that distracts me from loving and serving you and others. Amen.

Hearing Voices | Matthew 17

Written by Polly Guequierre

Saturday, January 17

While contemplating Matthew Chapter 17 when Jesus experiences His Transfiguration while accompanied by Peter, James, and John, I am envious that the disciples actually heard the voice of God. Matthew 17:5 – “A voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my son whom I dearly love.’”

In Exodus, Moses and Joshua heard God’s voice. Exodus 24:12 – “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there. I will give you the stone tablets.”

And also in Matthew 3:17 when John baptized Jesus, the Spirit of God came down like a dove and spoke. Matthew 3:17 – “A voice from Heaven said, ‘This is my son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in Him.’”

It makes me wonder why God doesn't speak to us in this way. Or does He? Doesn't His voice speak through sermons, scripture passages, hymns, and in the words of others, in each of these ways, conveying His messages to us?

Recently I had a milestone birthday. My daughter knew the best gift to me would be to see my 11 year old granddaughter and 9 year old grandson. Here's the problem – they live in Tennessee. On one ordinary Wednesday, their family appeared at our door bearing flowers and birthday cards! I was stunned and overwhelmed with tears to see them! When a friend saw a picture of their arrival

all smiles and excitement, she said, “That’s what love looks like in action.” Was that not God speaking, through my friend, “voicing” the way He wants us to share love with each other? He won’t be loud, or insistent but will speak quietly, so we do need to carefully listen.

Gracious Lord, your words of love surround us. Help us hear them loudly and clearly and then share them fully and generously with each other. Amen.

Not a Simple Task! | Matthew 18

Written by Judy Von Bergen

Sunday, January 18

The writer of Matthew 18 created a jarring juxtaposition. Matthew 18:1-5 tell of Jesus teaching his disciples that people must be as humble as a child to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus had been asked a stupid question: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He taught by bringing a child into the group. “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:4). Having a child present makes me feel tender.

Then, in Matthew 18:8, Jesus used exaggerated, violent examples to make his point. If your foot was leading you astray, cut it off! If your eye got you into trouble, poke it out! This change in temperament got my attention! We are to go to excruciating lengths to support others as well as our own humility! We are not being asked to do something easy here.

What might be leading us astray this year, here in Madison, WI? Are you devoted exclusively to work? Could you have an addiction that rules your life? Do you feel you are always right? Are you selfish about sharing your resources? Are you overly concerned with your looks?

Changing our lives to live into our values does indeed feel extreme! Change can be complex and frightening. Going to Alcoholics Anonymous or therapy, learning to listen with curiosity, prioritizing family time or self-care instead of constant work, these are all difficult to do.

Gracious God, we all face unique challenges. Help us first identify our stumbling blocks, and then be courageous enough to work toward eliminating them. I know we have your love, encouragement, and support as we do this challenging work. Help us get started NOW!

Worldly Baggage & the Kingdom of God | Matthew 19

Written by Mark Soderberg

Monday, January 19

“...It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19:24)

When the disciples heard Jesus say this they were astonished. “Who then can be saved?” they asked. Jesus’ reply was, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26)

Many believe this passage was meant to be hyperbole to make the point about the difficulty of entering the kingdom of God when you are attached to wealth or material possessions. Camels are beasts of burden, carrying all your baggage. In an historical context of biblical time, it was common belief that wealth was a sign of God’s favor.

I believe that scripture is telling us that your belief in God and following His teachings is more important than all the material baggage and wealth we accumulate in life.

Dear Lord, I ask for the grace to strip away those attachments, to unload my old ways, and to allow you to make me a new creation in Your image. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.

God's Generosity | Matthew 20

Written by Tom Popp

Tuesday, January 20

Jesus tells a story about workers who worked all day and who, though they were paid what was promised to them, became angry when they were paid the same as those who had worked for only an hour. The owner told them not to be jealous but to take their money and go home. He said he was not being unfair. "Are you going to get stingy because I am generous," he asked them, according to Matthew 20:15 (MSG).

And it is more than a story. Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like that owner.

Ponder that.

Do you remember the national debate about forgiveness of student loans and how angry some people became? Those who had worked hard to make their payments were angry that others who had not done so would get off free. "Unfair!"

Does this story change your view of what is fair and right? Why or why not? And is "fairness" the test we mean to apply to the behavior of our God?

We are blessed to have a generous God who is loving and kind, whose grace extends to each of us, and whose forgiveness is poured out freely and does not have to be earned.

Will we get stingy because God is generous to all?

Dear God, make us ever humbly mindful of your great generosity and astonishing grace, which is for all people. And teach us not to be jealous but to know and to seek always to love all your children as you love us. Amen.

Praise from the Mouths of Children | Matthew 21

Written by Mark Soderberg

Wednesday, January 21

In Matthew 21, Jesus enters Jerusalem in his final week. He overturns the tables of the money changers and heals the lame. The children there were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David.' The priests were indignant and confronted Jesus. Jesus replied, quoting from Psalm 8, "From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise" (Matthew 21:16) And then Jesus left, silencing his critics.

Psalm 8:2 states, "Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger." Jesus was using strong words against the temple priests' indignation, using the priests own teachings and calling them out.

From this passage, some interpret that God uses the innocent and uninhibited praise of children to demonstrate His strength and power. Children's praise is unburdened by pride or hypocrisy, allowing them to clearly perceive spiritual truth.

Heavenly Father, I stand in awe of Your power and the wonder of your creation. Fill us with the strength and clarity that comes from praising You, so that we can see through the deceit peddled by hypocrites and the schemes of those who seek to abuse Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen

Love God and Love Thy Neighbor | Matthew 22

Written by Barb Eikenberry

Thursday, January 22

After major foot surgery, I had two months of being unable to put any weight on my right foot followed by another month of limited weight-bearing on my foot with no driving and very limited stair use. Although my husband and I tried to plan ahead by freezing meals, doing many monthly and seasonal chores beforehand, borrowing important aids (a wheelchair, scooter, and walker), and many other things, we found that having one of us disabled even temporarily was difficult. Through it all, we felt God's love and caring through people at church and through neighbors, friends, and family members who gave us meals, garden vegetables, cards, or who reached out to ask how we were doing. We have felt this love in the past too, sometimes from people we don't yet know well at church and in our neighborhood.

We are so very fortunate and thankful. We seek to learn God's love in community at church and then show God's love to family, friends, neighbors, and also others we don't know who live nearby and elsewhere (also "neighbors") by providing donations of food and money, by treating all with kindness and respect, and by supporting causes that work toward social justice and equity.

Lord, help guide us to fulfill your greatest commandment: to love you with all our heart and soul and mind, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Be Mindful of Leaders Who Mislead You in Word and Deed | Matthew 23

Written by Nancy Gunder

Friday, January 23

From the very outset in Matthew 23, Jesus is warning the crowds and his disciples to be mindful of "the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for they do not practice what they preach." Jesus goes on to say that everything they do is done for show, for other people to see, and to honor and respect them, and call them "Rabbi."

Instead, Jesus reminds the crowd and disciples that they have one Teacher, one Father, and One Instructor, namely the Messiah. He says the Pharisees and scribes are hypocrites and wicked because they don't practice what they preach to the people. And they continue to mislead the people in the name of power and control over them.

The Pharisees focus on trivial things: gold as sacred but not the temple itself that holds the gold; they hold back on giving of their spices; they build tombs for prophets and decorate graves of the righteous ones, yet it was their ancestors who murdered them and on and on. Jesus points out that they've neglected what matters most in law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Jesus is rightfully angry and says that he'll be sending in prophets, sages, and teachers into Jerusalem but doesn't hold out hope that these righteous people won't also be killed, crucified, followed, or flogged. He offers us an image of gathering his children like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings for protection and nurturing. Yet the Pharisees and scribes have not been willing to let the people enter this door to the kingdom of heaven. In the end, Jesus says he will not appear again until they are able to say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Dear Lord, I feel that these same times are upon us once again, where so many of us are being misled as to what is important: namely, justice, mercy, and faithfulness to Jesus's teachings in word and deed. Please help us to pray deeply for a return to what matters most. Amen.

Stay Awake - Living Ready for Christ's Return | Matthew 24

Written by Katie Barden

Saturday, January 24

Jesus and his disciples sit on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the temple. When the disciples ask about the future - when the temple will fall, and what signs will mark his return - Jesus responds with both prophecy and warning.

He does not offer a timeline. He offers a calling:

"Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." (Matthew 24:42)

Throughout Matthew 24, we experience themes of discernment before ending with a message of readiness.

Regarding discernment, Jesus warns, “Watch out that no one deceives you.”

False prophets, false messiahs, and false hope will rise. His followers must anchor truth in His Word, not in headlines or fear (Matthew 24:4–5, 11, 24). As followers of Jesus, we are called to ponder: what are modern examples of “false prophets” or deceptive teachings that distract from Jesus? How can we discern truth in an age of misinformation?

Matthew 24 ends on the hopeful note of readiness and faithfulness. The focus of Jesus’ message isn’t prediction - it’s preparation.

He calls us to live faithfully in the present, ready for his return (Matthew 24:42–44). In order to best live this message out, we must ask ourselves: What does it mean to “keep watch” in your spiritual life? How can you cultivate readiness without falling into anxiety?

Lord Jesus, Thank You for Your Word that warns and comforts. Teach us to watch with faith, not fear. Help us to live as light in a dark world — steadfast, truthful, and full of hope. When You return, may You find us faithful. Amen.

Ready, Set - Do | Matthew 25

Written by Nan Schaefer

Sunday, January 25

Matthew 25 is a chapter full of teachings for us on how to do God’s will. From being maidens keeping their lanterns filled and ready when the bridegroom comes to being servants trusted with money, being expected to use it (without being told) and increase its value over time. The maidens who were not ready when the bridegroom came, or the servant who had hidden the money and returned only what he was given to begin with – these were cast aside and deemed unworthy of God’s good judgment. Jesus continued his teaching by telling the “righteous” that they had fed him when he was hungry, clothed him when he was naked - in essence they had taken care of him. When the listeners didn’t see that they had done those things for him, he told them “whenever they did these things for the least among them, they had done them to him.” Likewise, he told the “unworthy” that they had NOT taken care of him. When those listeners heard this, they asked when

had they not taken care of him. His reply was that “whenever they did not do these for the least among them, they did not do it to him.”

Covenant Presbyterian, as a Matthew 25 church, hopes that we will carry on the works of the “righteous” – taking care of those who lack basic necessities and the ability to care for themselves. We are not told to do specific things, but we do feed the hungry at the Healing House and Triangle Ministry and the Pres House, we contribute toward Heifer to help others help themselves, we fill the Little Free Pantry, we support school scholarships in Guatemala. And **so much more**.

Dear God, help us to use our time and talents to take care of the ones among not as privileged as we are. Give us a spirit of generosity with what we have been given. Let us take care of your beloved children. Amen.

This familiar chapter of Matthew tells of Jesus' anointing by the woman with the alabaster jar, the betrayal by Judas, Jesus with his disciples as they celebrate the Last Supper, Jesus praying and then being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. It finishes with Peter's denial of Jesus, not once but three times.

I am always moved by Peter's part in this story. Jesus predicts Peter will deny him three times before the cock crows to which Peter responds by insisting he will stand by Jesus, even die for him if necessary. I believe Peter intends to follow, serve and defend Jesus, even with his life. Yet, as we watch the story unfold, we see Peter's actions differ from his intentions. Later that same night, Jesus asks the disciples, Peter, James, and John to stay awake and pray with him in the garden but Jesus returns to find them asleep. As the evening advances and as Jesus predicts, not once, not twice, but three times Peter denies knowing Jesus. Not only that but Peter curses and swears that he does not know him. "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Once the cock crows, Peter realizes what he has done, how he has turned his back on Jesus, and he goes out and weeps bitterly. Oh, Peter. How I relate to you - so devoted and yet so conflicted.

This passage makes me think about intentions and their importance. I have many intentions: to be kind, to exercise, to volunteer, to call my parents regularly, to feed hungry, to use my time wisely... I would guess I am not alone. I, like Peter, often have the best of intentions and so easily abandon them out of fear, laziness or ambivalence. Our intentions are important, continually striving to seek God, to love and to serve others. We will make mistakes; we will have moments of weakness. When we fall short, we must, as the song says, "pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and start all over again!" There is enough grace for me and you. Thanks be to God!

Merciful and loving God, you know my heart, see my sins, and love me anyway. Give me strength and courage to live with intention, loving and serving God and neighbor. Amen.

Never Forsaken | Matthew 27

Written by Peg O'Donoghue

Tuesday, January 27

The 27th chapter of Matthew is a sad accounting of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, Judas's remorse and suicide, the priests and elders bringing charges against Jesus, Pilate's dealing with the charges, the verbal and physical abuse Jesus suffered prior to his crucifixion, his death, and burial. It is said that "Gospel" means "Good News." I find it next to impossible to see what good news there could possibly be in this chapter of Matthew.

And yet... sometimes you have to walk the painful journey as Jesus did to get to the good news. Sometimes when all looks lost, something new is being created. Even Jesus was not immune to feeling abandoned, exclaiming, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) The humanity of Jesus was on full display with these words.

We know the rest of the resurrection story, so reading this account of suffering is tempered by the knowledge of what happens next. Without the suffering, death, and resurrection, the prophecies could not be fulfilled. These parts make up the greater whole and we know the story does not end at death. We are Resurrection People because we claim Jesus's resurrection as our own.

Let me trust that something new might be possible when I am frightened, feeling abandoned and forsaken. Let me live as a Resurrection Person with faith, hope and a sense of renewal.

We are Called | Matthew 28

Written by Chan Sommers

Wednesday, January 28

When you enter a house, first say, "Peace to this house!"
And if anyone shares in peace, your peace will rest on them. Luke 10:5
Whoever listens to you listens to me. Luke 10:16

Matthew 28 is a rich chapter with numerous concepts. Three that stood out to me are Resurrection, Doubt, and the Great Commission.

Resurrection: When the women go to the tomb, an angel invited them to see the place where Jesus was buried. They fully expected to see him and were confused when they didn't. The angel told them to go to Galilee and tell the disciples that they would see Jesus again, and the women were assured that they also would see the resurrected Jesus. The tomb which symbolizes death now becomes a sign of new life. Jesus wasn't just raised from the dead; he was raised to continue his relationship with them in a new way. As Christians, we need to ponder what the empty tomb means to us and how we might continue to have new life with Jesus.

Doubt: When the disciples saw Jesus in Galilee, they worshipped him although some doubted. There could be numerous reasons why they doubted. Jesus' resurrection was contrary to their expectations of a Messiah as some were expecting a different type of Messiah. They could have been afraid. They had just witnessed Jesus' execution and feared the same fate could happen to them. They may have struggled in their belief because the resurrection was beyond anything they had seen. It was an unprecedented event. Previously, all of their interactions with Jesus were with him being human. Now it was different. As Christians, we need to confront our doubts just as the disciples did, trusting that doubt can be part of our spiritual journey.

The Great Commission: Jesus established his God-given authority which was important because it showed the disciples the importance of his commandment. He sent the disciples into the world with a mission to make disciples of all nations, but he did not send them alone. He promised them that he would be with them even to the end of the world. As Christians, we need to remember that just as Jesus promised to be with the disciples, he will do likewise with us. Jesus will never leave us.

Dear God, thank you for Jesus' resurrection and the new life that it symbolizes. May we be transformed from a state of spiritual death to one of spiritual life. May we walk in the freedom and newness of this life. May we be faithful followers of the spirit of the resurrection. May we begin today with a spiritual renewal as our lives reflect the Great Commission. Amen.

Written by Jess Scholten

Being a Matthew 25 Church is a core value of who we are as a congregation. Studying the Gospel of Matthew in depth over the course of this month gives us a chance to see the big picture of Jesus' teachings in Matthew. From the Sermon on the Mount to discipleship to how God cares for us and we care for others, Jesus emphasizes compassion and seeking out the lost and the least.

Jesus' teachings culminate in Matthew 25:35-36 with the parable of the sheep and goats where he highlights six ways we serve God by serving others: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

The PCUSA has committed to following Jesus' example laid out in Matthew 25, especially partnering with mid-councils and congregations to help us embrace three core pillars that rise out of the text:

- 1) **Building congregational vitality** by challenging us to deepen and energize our faith and grow as joyful leaders and disciples actively engaged with our community, seeing new disciples engaged in ministry and longstanding believers develop in faith as the gospel of Jesus Christ is shared in word and deed.
- 2) **Dismantling structural racism** by fearlessly applying our faith to advocate and break down the systems, practices, and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice, and oppression of people of color.
- 3) **Eradicating systemic poverty** by acting on our beliefs and working to change laws, policies, plans, and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor.

Holy God, keep our eyes always open to the needs of those around us. Keep our hearts always compassionate to those who are suffering. Keep our hands always open in generosity and ready to serve. May we see you in the face of those in need and respond with your deep and abiding love. Amen.

