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**Sunday 7 February to Sunday 14 February**

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Sunday 7 February 2021

# Take a step back

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**‘God sits on his throne above the circle of the earth … He stretches out the skies like a piece of cloth’ (Isaiah 40:22).**

Read Isaiah 40:22–24

There are times in life where we may feel hopeless:

* Your business is struggling, and you can see no way out.
* Your dearest loved one is dying right before your eyes, and you are powerless to help them.
* Your own health is failing.
* The pile of tasks you have to do seems insurmountable.
* Your refugee status hangs in the balance and threatens the peace and freedom you so desperately seek.
* Your family is fractured, despite your best efforts.

One thing I’ve learnt from my psychologist while dealing with my own failing health/disability is to mindfully take a step back and passively observe from the outside the situation I’m facing.

As I read Isaiah 40, it strikes me that the writer invokes a similar principle. The writer takes the reader out of the inwardly hopeless situation they face and shows them the larger heavenly perspective at play, namely God’s sovereignty over all. God is above and beyond political machinations, national disasters, and personal tragedy and has a larger eternal plan well beyond our momentary human comprehension.

When the hardship is overwhelming, stop what you are doing, close your eyes, mentally take a step back, and passively observe the issues you face right now from an eternal perspective – your own timeline, if you will. Passively observe what has happened, what is happening now, and maybe where things are heading. Don’t judge, and don’t engage with the emotion. Just observe things without bias and realise that God reigns over all of this. Spend a few moments in silence doing that right now.

Isaiah 40:29–31 (The Message)
He energizes those who get tired,
gives fresh strength to dropouts.
For even young people tire and drop out,
young folk in their prime stumble and fall.
But those who wait upon God get fresh strength.
They spread their wings and soar like eagles,
They run and don’t get tired,
they walk and don’t lag behind.

The promise given in verses 29–31 is profound. What are we to do in our hopeless situations? We are to qavah. This means ‘towait, to look for, to hope, to expect’. Spend time waiting for God to turn up. Take a breather with God – whatever that looks like for you. For me, it is in meditation; for you, maybe it’s a contemplative walk, Sunday worship, timeout with God listening to a favourite song or hymn, or just praying around those verses.

That is where the strength comes; not in princes, powers, possessions or politics. The strength to move forward through hardship ironically comes from what some would call ‘navel-gazing’ or ‘sitting down and doing nothing [practical] about it’!

**Almighty God, as I sit here with your word, I wait for you. Open my eyes to see your hand in my life and circumstances. Come, Holy Spirit; breath your breath of life and power into my frail human form. Lord Jesus, raise me to life to love and serve you this day. Amen.**

Monday 8 February 2021

# A word for the fearful

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**‘Say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear”’ (Isaiah 55:4a).**

Read Isaiah 35:4–7a

What is your biggest fear right now? I’m not talking about spiders or a Stephen King clown!

What threatens you? What keeps you up at night right now or has in the past? (Pause for a moment to contemplate this.)

Sometimes just having to face up to that kind of question is fear-inducing!

As I read Isaiah 35:4–7a, I’m fascinated by the phrase ‘fearful hearts/souls’. The most literal translation of the Hebrew phrase nimharê leb is ‘racing heart’. Twice in my life, I’ve experienced an actual clinical ‘anxiety/panic attack’. A panic attack is a sudden episode of intense fear that triggers severe physical reactions when there is no real danger or apparent cause. Just thinking about it makes my blood run cold; my pulse raced, I couldn’t breathe, and I was physically trembling. I felt such an impulsion to run away, to flee while feeling utterly trapped in my body at the same time. This phrase reminds me of that kind of attack – or at least what it is like to feel so deeply threatened that you experience an intense fight-or-flight response.

The call in verse 4 is for God’s people to minister to those who feel threatened and attacked:

Tell fearful souls,
‘Courage! Take heart!
God is here, right here,
on his way to put things right
And redress all wrongs.
He’s on his way! He’ll save you!’

I really like the way The Message version handles verses 3 and 4. It gives the sense of ‘restorative justice’ rather than a ‘vengeful God’ (which I think is more accurate to the original language).

It’s a command to speak, to proclaim to those experiencing mental/emotional hardship that God’s presence is close. They are not alone in their struggle, and God comes to meet them at the weakest moments and save them and put things right.

That is a powerful message. It implies that we are to intentionally address those in our communities who feel threatened and are struggling.

Who do you know right now who needs to hear this word? Can you think of someone who at this very moment needs restoration, repair, healing and transformation? How would you verbalise this message to them in your own words?

Sister/brother, you may feel immobilised by the threats facing you. You may feel like all hope is lost. I have come to give you a word of hope, one that has restored hope in my life in my darkest times. One word; the name, ‘Jesus’.

**Lord, we name in our hearts those we know who need hope, who need things to be made right, who need your Spirit of love to calm their racing heart. You call us to bring that hope to others, to shine your light of hope into their lives. Give us ears to listen and lips to share the hope we have: your son, Jesus. In his name, we pray, Amen.**

Tuesday 9 February 2021

# A promise for those feeling crushed

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**‘I live in the high and holy places, but also with the low-spirited, the spirit-crushed’ (Isaiah 57:15b).**

Read Isaiah 57:14–20

If you know anything about me from Google or YouTube, it’s that I’m a retired Lutheran pastor, I write songs of worship and meditation, and I suffer from long-term chronic pain. I experienced a spinal injury, which forced my retirement from full-time ministry in my early 30s.

In the interview Lutheran Media did about my situation in 2014, I described my chronic pain. ‘It feels like my left leg is being continually crushed by a truck or road-roller’ (and you can google that by going to the playlist ‘Chronic’ in the [Messages of Hope YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/Messagesofhope/playlists)).

That word ‘crush’ is an interesting one. Young people use that word to denote victory: ‘I totally crushed my chemistry exam!’

We use it when we talk about falling in love: ‘I had a crush on a pretty girl in high school – so much so that I married her!’ (Actually true!)

Maybe you’ve heard it used in a negative sense: ‘I feel crushed by what has happened!’

In today’s reading, you may hear it used in verse 15, depending on your translation. The word in verse 15 for crushed can also literally mean ‘dust’ – rocks ground down to a powder!

But we find it used in a similar context in Psalm 34:18: ‘The Lord is close to the broken-hearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed’.

Now let’s take you back a few thousand years to God’s ancient people in Israel. If you asked ‘where is God’, you would expect an answer like, ‘He’s in the cloudy summit of Mount Sinai’ or ‘He’s in the Most Holy Place in the temple at Jerusalem’. In fact, that was pretty much the only place you would expect to encounter God in person. What is most unprecedented here is that God’s Almighty earth-shaking, universe-creating presence is found somewhere else: with those who are feeling ‘crushed in spirit’, ‘contrite’ or ‘broken-hearted’.

That is amazing! To God’s ancient people whose nation was decimated and scattered as refugees throughout the Persian and Greek empires, just imagine how profound that notion is!

Feeling down-and-out, cut down, ground down, contrite and crushed? Surprise! God is right there with you!

Let us pray for the broken-hearted. Maybe begin by naming those we know in our hearts, or if this is you right now, talk to God. Tell him about your situation and why you feel ‘crushed’. Don’t hurry. Take your time. Then end with this prayer.

**Lord of the broken-hearted, you live in the high and holy places, but also with the downcast whose spirits have been crushed. We claim this amazing word given to Isaiah that you are near to the broken-hearted. Draw near in this very moment to heal, comfort and rescue. We claim this promise in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Wednesday 10 February 2021

# Radical ministry

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**‘Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father”. But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead”’ (Matthew 8:21,22).**

Read Matthew 8:14–22

When I was training to be a pastor, I was super blessed to go on a two-week Holy Land archaeological tour run by Dr Peter and Helen Lockwood. I’m not exaggerating when I say it was life-changing!

We visited so many archaeological sites all over Israel showing the history, geography and even climate science that underlies so many biblical accounts.

Just as an aside, I prefer not to use the phrase ‘Bible stories’. New Atheists like to use that phrase synonymously with ‘fairytales’. What we read in Scripture isn’t a bedtime story. These are historical accounts of real people and places in history!

We visited an archaeological dig that modern scholars regard as the Apostle Peter’s house in Capernaum (feel free to google that one!). This was one of the bases of Jesus’ ministry, and over the decades, it went from a simple home to an early house-church to large worship centre! On our tour, we also went across Lake Galilee by boat. We ate fish caught from the lake!

There are so many times in my ministry I have referred to all I learnt from those two weeks. But something was missing that I didn’t see. I didn’t see healings; I didn’t see demons exorcised. I had a warm bed to sleep in every night, and I came home to loved ones waiting for me!

None of what we did on that trip was as radical as Jesus’ earthly ministry: miracles of healing and exorcism! Being in an itinerant ministry and not having a bed to sleep in! Following Jesus and not being able to even bury your father.

In Matthew, Jesus’ ministry begins with amazing teaching in chapters 5 to 7. It was radical teaching for the time – extreme and even offensive to those hearing it. It was urgent, uncompromising and challenging. And in Matthew’s gospel, that pace and urgency rarely abates; the way Jesus lived was no less radical. As we read through Matthew, we learn that being a follower of Jesus involves self-denial, service, suffering, persecution, and perhaps even death.

As someone who lives in the wealthiest country in our region of the globe, it makes me call into question how I live as a disciple of Jesus. Could I live like that? Is that how uncompromising my life should be as a follower of Jesus?

And I think that that is exactly what Matthew’s gospel wants us to do – to question how seriously we take our faith. Now, not all of us are called to drop everything and be an itinerant preacher. But we can drop everything and financially support those who do. We can visit the sick or start a new ministry. We can replace that overseas holiday with a mission trip.

Matthew’s account reminds us of the seriousness of our baptised life. Following Jesus means letting go of the comforts of this world – home, wealth or even family. Remember that with material things, at the end of your life, you can’t take it with you! But there is something you can go with: others you’ve ministered to with the life-changing love of Jesus!

Being a disciple is radical, life-changing stuff. Amen, Jesus! Lead the way.

**Lord Jesus, your earthly ministry was so uncompromising and powerful. As you taught your disciples, teach me. Challenge me. Help me take stock of my life. Reveal to me where you would have me serve. Lead me to new paths of discipleship. Call me, Lord Jesus. I am ready to follow. Amen.**

Thursday 11 February 2021

# Get it done!

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field’ (Matthew 9:37,38).**

Read Matthew 9:32–38

Growing up on the farm, I learnt that when harvest time comes, you drop everything and find people to just ‘get it done’. My mum’s lesson from Dad on how to drive the tractor was ‘get in and drive’! At harvest time, there is this small window of opportunity before the weather may turn and ruin the crop. Don’t think about it, just get it done! And many other industries experience that sense of urgency: chefs during peak service, teachers during interviews and report writing, project leaders when a big job is coming up. You drop everything, working hours into the night just to get it done.

There's a great story about Tim Cook, the CEO of the tech giant, Apple. It goes like this: a few years back, Tim convened a meeting with his team, and the discussion turned to a particular problem in Asia.  'This is really bad,' Cook told the group. 'Someone should be in China driving this.’ Thirty minutes into that meeting, Cook looked at Sabih Khan, a key operations executive, and abruptly asked, with no trace of emotion, 'Why are you still here?'

I love that story. If there’s a problem, just go fix it! Sometimes in the church, we see an important need and get so caught up in procedure (forming a committee, organising to meet, setting the agenda, writing the minutes etc) that we miss the opportunity to just act and get the job done!

We get that sense of urgency as Matthew gives the account of Jesus’ ministry in today’s reading; so much to do and so little time to do it.

And what is his motivation? ‘When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’ (Matthew 9:36).

Jump onto [BibleGateway](http://biblegateway.com/), or whatever you use, to compare translations and have a look at the different ways this verse is translated. It’s a challenge here with that ‘gut turning’ Greek word splagchnizomai, which has no direct equivalence. ‘His heart broke’**, ‘**moved with compassion’, and ‘deeply moved with pity’ all give the sense that Jesus wasn’t just sad, he was ‘gutted’ for the lost and broken people he saw!

You see that emotion in our country when there is a natural disaster, when people ‘feel gutted’ for fellow Aussies, drop what they are doing and get stuck and help their neighbours.

And I love in verse 38 Jesus’ plea to his disciples (and to us!): ‘Pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields’.

Enough talk! Let’s just do it!

**Almighty God, you know our world has been turned upside down by recent events. People are struggling, feeling lost and broken by hardship and tragedy. Lord of the Harvest, we pray for workers to help with this harvest of tears. Lead us in the ways we can help people physically and emotionally and share with them the faith that empowers our loving service. In Jesus’ mighty name, Amen.**

Friday 12 February 2021

# Complete conversion

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’ (Acts 10:34,35).**

Read Acts 10:34–43

What would it take for you to completely, wholeheartedly stop barracking for your favourite sporting team? I mean ‘complete conversion’, dropping your team for the one that is your team’s arch-nemesis? Imagine dropping support for Australia and barracking for the USA in Olympic swimming, swapping from Ford to Holden, or the Wallabies to the All Blacks.

I’m what’s called an ‘Apple fanboy’. I’ve used Apple computer technology for 30 years. I know I’m biased, but it would take a miracle for me to switch to another brand!

It was the same for the early church. It took a miracle for Peter to switch from accepting ‘Jews only’ as Christians to ‘Jews and Gentiles’. Simon Peter, a Jew from birth, had been taught his whole life that only the Jews had access to the one true God.

From Acts 10:9, Peter had a God-given vision, where God allowed the eating of unclean animals. And after he woke up, he had an encounter with an unclean enemy, a Roman officer (and you know how the Jews felt about their unclean national captors, Rome!).

Acts 10 is about two conversions: the Roman officer Cornelius’ conversion to Christianity and Peter’s (and the early church’s) conversion to accepting non-Jews as followers of Christ.

The Greek word katalambanomai (Acts 10:34) normally translates as ‘I understand’, but it literally means ‘I am gaining the understanding’.

It’s a word of change, of ‘the lights coming on’ to a new way of thinking. I think this stands not only as a witness to this historical change of acceptance in the early church, but it highlights that God’s community of faith is dynamic. It changes – even if those changes are challenging and confronting. You keep your theology intact, of course. But as the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand, we have been led to make many changes, from presidents to bishops, from hymns only to hymns and songs, from communing at confirmation to a younger-aged first communion (and I could go on – answer the rest for yourself!).

It begs the question: where is God taking us next?

Change can be confronting and painful. But there are times where God shatters our preconceived notions and opens his church up to new possibilities of growth, new ways of being a light to the world and a new acceptance of others.

**Almighty God, as a Gentile, I wouldn’t be one of your people if you hadn’t worked an amazing change in the early church. Open my mind to your possibilities in my life and in the life of your church. Lead the way, Lord Jesus. I am your servant. Amen.**

Saturday 13 February 2021

# This word speaks directly to you!

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

**‘Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed’ (Psalm 2:1).**

Read Psalm 2

As a teenage boy on my 45-minute bus trip to school in the country, in those first 20 minutes where I was alone in the morning, I’d pick up my red Gideons New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs and read it with a pen in hand!

I was pretty dogmatic and passionate about my faith as a teen. I remember having some challenging theological conversations with my very atheistic science teacher in and out of class. I distinctly remember reading Psalm 2 and feeling, ‘This was written just for me as I battle my foolish, God-denying authority figure. He’ll get his just deserts in the end!’.

As I look fondly and amusingly back on that time in my youth, I’m reminded of how when we read Scripture in isolation, we can find it serendipitously applying to situations we currently face. And that is great – with some caveats!

Whenever we read Scripture, we do so through the lens of our own bias: our worldview, social norms, our psychological makeup and our theological background. The risk of reading Scripture purely in a personal manner without the self-awareness of our bias is it that we may only see what we want to see!

Maybe you’ve observed this sort of thing in the comments in some Christian groups or pages on social media. It’s been especially prevalent regarding US politics over the last year with people dogmatically believing that their candidate is God’s anointed leader and quoting any Bible verse to back up their opinion. A mentor of mine once said to me, ‘If you read Scriptures and your preconceived notions are only being affirmed, you are reading it wrong!’

So, is Psalm 2 about the US-elected leaders, my battle with my atheist science teacher or something else? In its historical context, Psalm 2 refers to the nations that challenged the king of Israel – like King David and his successors. So, God’s word speaks about times during history, but it also speaks prophetically about what is yet to come!

With its talk of ‘the anointed one’ in verse 2 (meshiach in Hebrew and christos in Greek translations) and the reference to ‘son of God’ in verse 7, Luther sees Psalm 2 applying to Jesus and those leaders who stood against him:

Psalm 2 is a prophecy of Christ, that He would suffer, and through His suffering become King and Lord of the whole world [and that it] stands a warning against the kings and lords of this world: If, instead of honoring and serving this King, they seek to persecute and blot Him out, they shall perish (from Reading the Psalms with Luther, pp17–19).

In my theological training, I was taught that we Lutherans look at Scripture ‘through the lens of The Confessions’ (that is my bias – and I happily accept that!). However, I think it is prudent to be aware of other ways of interpreting Scripture. That when a verse of Scripture has spoken to me personally, I ‘test the spirits’, use my study Bible and google it to see how other theologians I trust have interpreted it. I do not doubt that the Holy Spirit guides us into God’s word. I have had passages that have spoken powerfully into my context over the years and still do this very day. But let us always be aware and honest about our own biases and what we bring with us as we open the pages of God’s word.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word – its history, witness, teaching, and guidance. As we read it, Holy Spirit, convict us of sin, remind us of our sure salvation and comfort us when we are perplexed or troubled. Open our hearts to hear what you have for us. In the name of the Chosen One, our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.**

Sunday 14 February 2021

# Transfiguration – a four-act play

by Martin Oldfield

**‘“Listen to him!” Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus’ (Mark 9:7b,8).**

Read Mark 9:2–10

The Transfiguration is a mixture of theatre, history, prophecy, and covert operations. There are many themes, but one overarching message. Jesus was anything but conventional in his approach.

Peter, James and John were in Jesus’ inner circle. Only a few days earlier, Peter acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah and was horrified when told that he was going to die (Mark 8:29–33). Jesus gave them a dramatic lesson in a four-act play.

Act 1: He took them up a mountain – the setting for many biblical encounters with God. He shone in his glorified form – no wonder they were terrified!

Act 2: Entering from stage left, the long-dead Moses and Elijah appeared and started talking to Jesus about his impending death (Luke 9:31). The disciples knew who the pair were: Moses received the law, and Elijah represented the prophets of the Old Testament. Peter offered to build three identical tents – a physical place for each of these three to reside, effectively putting Jesus on par with Moses and Elijah. Peter still had much to learn!

Act 3: The play reaches its crescendo with the Father appearing from a cloud and saying those immortal words, ‘This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him!’ And – shazam! Moses and Elijah disappeared, leaving Jesus centre stage. The message was loud and clear. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. His is the only voice you need. Moses led his people out of the bondage of the Egyptians; Jesus will lead his people out of the bondage of sin.

Act 4: And finally, the covert bit – ‘Don’t tell anyone about this until I have risen from the dead’. That threw them for a loop as they had no idea what he meant by rising from the dead, despite having been told many times before. Those disciples were a bit thick at times!

The message for us today is equally clear. We can be a bit thick at times also. Listen to him!  The Son of Man has risen! We are free to talk and tell everyone about the beautiful, playful and wonderful God we can call our dad! Let’s revel in that freedom and do just that!

**Dear Dad, I love your unconventional approach to meeting people where they are and showing them what it means to be loved. Please help me to show those people you place in my path the joy of knowing you. Please give me the words that they need to hear from you. Amen.**