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**Sunday 1 January 2023 to Sunday 8 January 2023**

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Sunday 1 January 2023

# Trust in God and focus on Jesus

by Maria Rudolph

**Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him (Matthew 2:13).**

Read Matthew 2:13–23

Happy New Year! What might this new year hold for you?

Consider Joseph of Nazareth. I wonder if he asked himself the same question after the sensational birth of Jesus. Joseph and his family were away from home in a makeshift ‘bedroom’ in a stable, visited by shepherds and, later, Magi with precious gifts. But there was also the looming threat of the murder of this newborn baby. What an unsettling time!

When Jesus entered Mary’s and Joseph’s life, Jesus became their focus. Their life choices became guided by his existence. If it were up to Mary and Joseph, they would have returned to Nazareth to live a quiet life after the census. But Herod was out to kill their baby, and they needed to sacrifice their comfort and stability for Jesus’ sake. They stepped into unknown territory and fled to Egypt. God spoke to Joseph in dreams, first reassuring him to marry pregnant Mary (Matthew 1:20), then guiding him to bring his family to safety in Egypt, and later back to Nazareth.

Admittedly, I wish God would clearly direct me in dreams too, so I could be sure of my next step. Do you? But was it really that straightforward for Joseph? Maybe God is already speaking to us through his word and Holy Spirit if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear. If only we have the courage of faith to follow God’s lead.

Be courageous like Joseph this year and step out boldly in faith. This new year will bring new challenges to your personal life, profession and church. I think it will involve stepping into unknown territory. And just like Joseph and his wife Mary, in all these situations, trusting God wholeheartedly and focusing on Jesus is all we need to do.

What new territory do you see ahead that you can intentionally pray into so that you might trust in God and focus on Jesus?

**Loving Jesus, I pray for your guidance and blessing over each moment of 2023. I pray that you can help me trust and focus on you. Use me as your hands and feet and your eyes and mouthpiece wherever I go and whatever I do. When I enter unknown territory, reassure me with your presence. Help me to step out boldly in your name. Amen.**

Monday 2 January 2023

# Unfamiliar paths aren’t scary with God

by Maria Rudolph

**I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them (Isaiah 42:16b).**

Read Isaiah 42:10–17

How much do you like change? It depends on what the change concerns, you might think. Some change is positive, like feeling healthier. A bitter heart that opens up to forgiveness and love again is also great change. But often, the thought of change unsettles us. We are creatures of habit.

We find comfort in being able to predict things and find familiarity in how things are. But in this, we must be careful that we don’t become like the Pharisees in Jesus’ days. They were so wary of change to what they knew as the ways of God that there was no room for them to accept Jesus.

Jesus opened the eyes of the blind, led the people to the kingdom of God along unfamiliar paths like servanthood, humility and inclusion, and turned darkness into light. When we walk with Jesus, we can be confident amid the changes we face. Unfamiliar paths aren’t scary with God. We have his promise: ‘These things I will do, I will not forsake you’.

For you, this could mean journeying through a time of illness that changes your everyday life. It could mean embracing changes in relationships with people dear to us. It could mean embracing changes to how we practise ministry in our church. Unfamiliar paths aren’t scary with God. God’s perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). God will smooth the rough places and not forsake us as we fix our eyes and hearts on him through all familiarity and change.

What changes are you currently experiencing or foreshadowing in your life?

**Loving God, you never change. You are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Yet we are constantly faced with changes around us. Please give me courage. Give me steadfast faith in you so I can prevail along unfamiliar paths through the darkness and in rough places. Yet not I but through Christ in me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Tuesday 3 January 2023

# All those who have ears, let them hear!

by Maria Rudolph

**You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen (Isaiah 42:20).**

Read Isaiah 42:18–25

Have you ever explained something to someone but later felt like saying to them, ‘You just don’t get it’?

Jesus was in the same boat a lot of the time during his earthly ministry. Of the people listening to his teaching, Jesus said they were ‘ever hearing but never understanding, ever seeing but never perceiving’ (Mark 4:12). Jesus wasn’t the first to have this problem. What Jesus said was a quote from the prophet Isaiah (6:9). God had often had this problem before Jesus ever set foot on earth.

What God wants from his people, from us, doesn’t sound too hard to understand: love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbour as ourselves. The tricky thing is that it is really hard to put into practice daily.

Might God be feeling like muttering, ‘You just don’t get it!’ about us? Of course, God is bigger than that. He is filled with grace and patience for all those eye-rolling, cringe-worthy moments where we act as though we’d never held a Bible in our hands before.

Listening to God brings us life. Next month’s General Convention of Synod takes its theme from Isaiah 55:3: ‘Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live’. Jesus himself advised: ‘All those who have ears, let them hear’ (Matthew 11:15). In the strength of Christ, let us daily listen to God and seek his help in understanding his word.

What is God saying to you today? Take some time to listen.

**Loving God, I want to listen to you. Make me quiet and receptive to seek and listen to your voice. Give me ears to hear and truly pay attention to what you say. Open my eyes to perceive you through your word and in my sisters and brothers around me. I need you every hour, and I’m so grateful you are always by my side. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Wednesday 4 January 2023

# You are God’s

by Maria Rudolph

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine (Isaiah 43:1b).**

Read Isaiah 43:1–13

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and lecturer during the time of the German Nazi regime, was thrown in prison and would later be executed for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. While languishing behind bars, Bonhoeffer wrote a poem to express his inner turmoil called ‘Who am I?’. In it, he said that, on the one hand, he appeared at peace and strong, knowing he was in God’s hands and that, ultimately, nothing could harm him. On the other hand, behind bars, he felt unsettled and caged, hungering for freedom, safety and his loved ones.

Does this turmoil sound familiar to you? You rest assured in the hands of God, yet you also can’t help but feel restless because of something big going on in your life. That’s one of the reasons we go to church regularly, every week if we can. Hopefully, your church is a refreshing watering hole where you hear God’s assurance and grace spoken over you again and again.

Bonhoeffer’s poem concludes with the words, ‘Whoever I am, you know, O Lord, I am yours’. Let today’s words through the prophet Isaiah be your daily reminder of God’s love: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine’. You are baptised in the name of Jesus. He says (in John 10:14,15), ‘I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep’.

Take a moment to imagine yourself safely in the arms of God, no matter the circumstances.

**Good Shepherd, I shall not fear for you have redeemed me. You have called me by name, and I am yours. Thank you for what you have done for me. Draw me close to you today and reassure me of your presence when life becomes tumultuous and uncertain. I know you will never let me go. Thank you, loving God. Amen.**

Thursday 5 January 2023

# Streams in the desert

by Maria Rudolph

**See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland (Isaiah 43:19).**

Read Isaiah 43:14 – 44:5

My husband is a watercolour artist. For the LCANZ’s Simultaneous Art Exhibition in 2021 on the theme of ‘Living Water’, he took today’s verse from Isaiah and brought it to life with his brushes and paint. He painted a barren desert floor, so dry and cracked from the sun that parts of the hard ground started to lift off around the edges. Can you picture it? Then, hope arrives. A drop, no, a whole pool of water appears in the wasteland and sends ripples out from its centre. Now, if we look closely, we can see that a shape becomes visible, superimposed on the water. It’s the outline of Jesus with outstretched arms. The Living Water himself. I hope you can see it all in your mind’s eye.

Jesus first told the woman at the well that whoever drinks living water will never be thirsty again (John 4:14). God says through Isaiah (55:1), ‘Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters'.

Are you feeling dried up at the moment? Is there a wasteland you are traversing? God, the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Living Water, is right here. It wells up inside you like a spring. You take it with you wherever you go without having to carry big, heavy water bottles. With Jesus, you will never thirst again. The water soaks the dried-up ground and transforms it, creating a new landscape. Now the ground is ready for new growth and renewed life. Let today be a day in which a cracked patch of wasteland is rejuvenated by a drizzle of the Living Water.

What are some cracked patches of wilderness and wasteland you perceive in your life, church and country?

Today’s prayer is a song by Rev Chris Chataway (music) and Rev Elizabeth Smith (words).

**Holy Spirit, Living Water, flow in us and set us free. Cleanse our unbelief and sorrow, wash our eyes and make us see. Holy Spirit, come as wind and blow the dust of death away. Breathe the gift of life into us, lighten hearts to laugh and play. Holy Spirit, rushing fire, burn with truth and justice here. Catch our minds alight with passion, perfect love that drives out fear. Holy Spirit, come in silence, wordlessly to heal and bless. Be the heart that prays within us; fill the void with tenderness. Holy Spirit, blessed Wisdom, teach us all of God’s delight. Offer us the wine of grace and make us children of the Light. Amen. (© Elizabeth Smith)**

Friday 6 January 2023

# Worshipping Jesus

by Maria Rudolph

**They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11).**

Read Matthew 2:1–12

Today is Epiphany, the day we celebrate the Magi coming to Jesus to worship him and present him with precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They had come from a faraway country and followed a star until it showed them the location of the promised Messiah.

Epiphany is a lovely and quite low-key celebration in Australian and New Zealand Lutheran circles. Some other parts of the world and denominations have major festivals today. Epiphany is a public holiday in some countries around the world and the cause for parades through towns and all kinds of traditions. Did you know, for example, that the French have a tradition of baking a cake called ‘cake of the Kings’ (gateau des rois), which contains one or more little figurines of nativity characters? It is a highlight around the afternoon tea table to see whose piece of cake has one of these little surprises.

Today is more than just romanticised stories of the Magi crossing a desert to find baby Jesus. It shows a facet of the spectacular grandeur of the Messiah arriving on earth. Did these Magi from a faraway country even know the Lord God? They didn’t seem to have a deep knowledge of Scripture because, unlike the scholars in King Herod’s palace who determined Bethlehem to be the location of the Messiah’s birth, the Magi were using their astronomical observations to find the way. But we know that God talks to them in a dream, warning them not to return to King Herod, so they do have a connection to the Lord God. Is God using foreigners to the Jewish faith to show honour and devotion to Jesus?

Indeed, on Epiphany, we are already gaining a glimpse at the totally new, inclusive good news Jesus has come to proclaim and live out. Are we ready to proclaim and live out the same good news? The Magi worship Jesus, who has come to seek the lost, for whom barriers of race, gender or status do not count anymore. The Magi worshipped Jesus, who has found you and has made you his beloved child. May today’s Epiphany be an epiphany for you of the amazing Jesus we love and worship and how out-of-the-box and boundless his love for the world expresses itself!

What barriers do you perceive in society that Jesus has overcome?

**Loving God, Jesus came into the world miraculously, and Magi came from faraway lands to worship him. You have commanded us to go and make disciples of all nations. We know that at the end times, people will come from all corners of the earth to worship you on your throne. Prepare our hearts just as you prepared the Magi of long ago. Lead us back to Jesus so that we may worship him without ceasing – all the days of our lives. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Saturday 7 January 2023

# You’re the voice

by Maria Rudolph

**The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic (Psalm 29:4).**

Read Psalm 29

You can use your voice to give life or bring destruction. Words are powerful. The Bible has much to say about how to use our voice, chiefly in the Eighth Commandment: ‘You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour’. In his explanation of what that means (Small Catechism), Martin Luther writes, ‘We should speak up for other people, say only good things about them, and explain their actions in the kindest way’.

How are you going with that? I know for myself that I have not always acted in that way and rely on the grace and strength of Christ to help me keep this commandment, along with the other nine. God leads with a shining example. God’s voice brings life and speaks things into existence. God’s voice is just and powerful. God’s voice is the one that calls each one of us by name. God’s voice is revelational: When Mary heard the voice of Jesus call her name after the resurrection when she mistook him for the gardener, she recognised him despite his changed appearance (John 20:15,16). God’s voice is transformational: Jesus speaks words of healing over sick people, and they are made well instantly.

One day, we will hear the voice of God in heaven. The same voice that spoke the universe into existence at creation will resound in all eternity. God’s voice is perfect and glorious like no other, and while we try hard to act as God’s mouthpiece here on earth, we often fall short. So, God sent the Word made flesh to us, so voices across the world can proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and be loved and accepted by God despite our many shortcomings. Hallelujah! Use your voice to praise God today.

How can you use your voice to bring glory to God today?

**Loving God, how I long to hear your voice. I praise you for your glory and majesty and for showing me through Jesus how my voice can be used to bless and bring peace. I pray that you will forgive my shortcomings where I haven’t used my voice in a godly way. Please guide and lead me to be your mouthpiece and speak your good news and love into situations. Above all, give me ears to be the sheep that hears your voice, loving Shepherd, and follows you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Sunday 8 January 2023

# Listening to the Lord

by Pastor Tim Klein

**And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’ (Matthew 3:17).**

Read Matthew 3:13–17

Over this week, we will hear a decent dollop of law and judgement as the Lord speaks out against his enemies and calls out his people.

However, among it all, there is hope. There are promises and assurances that despite how people behave, the Lord still wants them all – us all – to be saved. Some of it may resonate with your circumstances; some might not sit so well.

We start the week with this short but wonderful announcement from the Lord concerning Jesus: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

It may be interesting to note the exchange between John and Jesus before Jesus’ baptism occurred. It often happens this way. We have our expectations of how God should act, what he should do and how he should be. And so, John confronts Jesus with his idea of how things should go. John would have prevented him, saying in verse 14, ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’.

But Jesus gently reminds him of who he is in relationship to John by effectively saying, ‘this is how it has to be’ … Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness’.

And so, Jesus is baptised and then revealed to all the world as the Son of God! God has great plans, and they are all being fulfilled in Jesus. If you are a baptised child of God, then some of these plans are being fulfilled in you – and that’s how it’s meant to be!

Perhaps take some time to reflect and pray on what you have experienced of the Lord’s purposes in your life.

‘Come, Lord Jesus, come; into this weary and tangled world. O, how we long for you to come, Lord, come!’

**Dear Father, we thank you for revealing who Jesus is in all his fullness as your dearly loved Son. We know all he has done for us, and so we look forward with confidence to life with you into eternity. Amen.**

Tim is the husband of the lovely Joylene, father of three and their spouses, and Pa to nine grandchildren. Tim loves family time. He also loves family time with his faith family at Faith Warradale, where he has served as the pastor for eight years. He has served as a pastor of the church in various capacities for more than 30 years. Tim also enjoys photography, pushbike riding and gardening and is a self-taught guitarist, Adelaide Conservatorium-trained singer, and writer of an occasional song. Tim says he looks forward to a couple more years as a full-time pastor and is open to where the Lord would use him beyond that.