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**Sunday 4 February 2024 to**

**Sunday 11 February 2024**

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Sunday 11 February 2024

**In good company**

by Emma Strelan

***Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah’ (Mark 9:5).***

Read [Mark 9:2–9](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+9%3A2-9&version=NRSVUE)

Here’s a classic icebreaker question for you: if you could have any three religious/Christian figures from history over for dinner, who would they be?

My answer is CS Lewis, Phoebe (the deliverer of Paul’s letter to the Romans), and Katharina Zell (a prominent Protestant woman from the early 16th century). Oh, and I’d probably cook some kind of cheesy pasta bake, and we’d spend the night discussing cool theological matters.

Peter, James, and John’s answer to this question would have likely been Elijah, Moses and their Rabbi Jesus.

Well, the ultimate dinner party wish list comes true! I mean, Moses is the very man God used to bring salvation to the entire Israelite nation in Exodus, and Elijah was the Israelites’ most famous prophet. So, naturally, upon seeing these great figures appear in front of them, the disciples want to get their guests comfortable – put up some shelters and maybe pop open a glass of red. But this encounter doesn't end in an intellectual discussion around a three-course meal as I would have hoped my dream dinner would be.

Instead, this rendezvous is characterised by fear and bumbling, awkward interactions. A bit star-struck, are we? Well, maybe that's a little more realistic anyway.

In this story, the Jesus the disciples have been journeying with for some time now, with his scraggly hair, beard in need of a trim, and clothes that could likely do with some tough stain remover, is transfigured into a figure in dazzling white, surrounded by a cloud declaring he is God’s Son!

Here, the disciples get to see Jesus in a different light and in the company of the spiritual greats of their world. Ah, now they get it! (Or so they think.)

So, isn't it time for the rest of the world to finally realise it as well? Will Jesus walk back down the mountain, shining brightly so *all* can see and believe?

Not quite.

A moment later, it’s just Jesus and his rag-tag bunch of disciples again. As they descend back into the world of sickness, poverty, demon possession, hypocrites and death, the revealed Son of God goes with them. Clothed again in a robe stained from that morning’s breakfast: God’s Son, the Saviour of the world.

***Father God, I thank you that in the revelation of your Son with us, you leave us confirmation of your presence in this desolate world. We don’t always understand the way you reveal yourself, but we can be confident that you are here. Amen.***

*Emma works as a freelance videographer in Adelaide, and she recently joined Lutheran Media as its Production Assistant. Emma also studies theology and is heavily involved in youth camping ministry around South Australia. In her free time, she eats a lot of cheese, attempts to grow vegetables (the tomatoes have been the best success so far), and has committed the majority of her ‘casual reading’ time this year to getting through* War and Peace *by Leo Tolstoy.*

Monday 12 February 2024

**Gone camping**

by Emma Strelan

***And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God’ (Revelation 21:3).***

Read [Revelation 21:1–8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+21%3A1-8&version=NRSVUE)

Perhaps you’ve heard that when the New Testament uses the word ‘dwell’, it means ‘to tabernacle’, referring back to the Old Testament where God’s presence was with the Israelites in a (pretty large and fancy) tent that they carried with them while they were in the desert.

When I think of living in a tent, I think of my experiences camping: flimsy canvas walls, cold, uncomfortable floors, missing tent instructions and never the correct number of pegs. When I put it like that, I kind of wonder *why* I even go camping!

That doesn’t seem like a very fitting place for the almighty God to dwell. But when you think about the state of the world, maybe it’s not too far off from how it is.

I mean, that’s how Jesus came into the world. Not in a mansion. But in a dirty feeding trough with some scrubby shepherds looking on (I’m pretty sure their lack of showering could rival mine after a week camping).

God pitches his tent amongst the uncertainties and flimsiness of our lives. He doesn’t care if we’ve got a few tent pegs missing. He just wants to be with us.

And here, Revelation speaks to the *enormity* of God dwelling with us. This almighty Creator who sits on the throne of heaven, surrounded by the heavenly hosts, comes down into our falling-apart, flimsy world.

I think I’ve worked out why, despite the lack of convenience and comfort, I *do* like camping. It’s because of the people. Stripped of your normal comforts and expectations of life, you can really appreciate the company and the pure joy of being alive, being present with those you love.

That’s what it will be like when God establishes the new earth. The unimportant, unhealthy, unholy things of the world will be stripped away. And it will be just us and God, gone camping.

***Lord, you dwell among us in our shabby, ramshackle lives. We ask you today to remind us of your presence. Help us to keep the hope of your full glory being revealed to all people so all will know you as their God. Show us how we can bring that hope to others here and now. Amen.***

Tuesday 13 February 2024

**Crossing boundaries**

by Emma Strelan

***And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God … the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it (Revelation 21:10,24).***

Read [Revelation 21:9–27](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+21.9-27&version=NRSVUE)

What is worship? That’s one of the big questions of Revelation.

Revelation, really, is a depiction of one big liturgy of worship as it will be upon the return of Christ and the New Jerusalem.

But what *is* worship?

According to the Bible, it is the crossing of boundaries. The bringing together of things that otherwise are not usually near each other. The blurring of the boundaries between ages (both in terms of the age of the people in the congregation and over history as we sing songs and speak words written generations ago), cultures, and heaven and earth itself: God’s realm and ours.

John G Strelan (yes, that’s my grandfather) wrote: ‘Every time the people of God worship God, there the new Jerusalem is coming down out of heaven … Worship breaks the boundaries of space and time. It takes us into God's sphere of existence’.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t exactly *feel* the barriers of space-time being broken on the average Sunday morning. But maybe that’s because God always brings himself to us and puts himself in the world in a way we *can* relate to. He puts himself into simple things, such as bread and wine.

The church today is supposed to foreshadow the final great gathering of God’s people. But in what way, exactly?

We read that *nations* will walk by the holy city’s light, and kings from across the earth will bring their splendour. In other words, in the church, people of all nations are welcomed *along with* their culture. The church is (or should be) a model of God’s future, where all that is good and true in our cultures will be used for the service of God and his creation.

Where do you see your church crossing boundaries?

***Lord, when we worship you, our earthly world meets with your divine one. Help us to see where we as a church can continue crossing boundaries, reaching those who don’t deserve your grace – yet you choose to give it anyway. Amen.***

Wednesday 14 February 2024

**Private practice**

by Emma Strelan

***Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven (Matthew 6:1).***

Read [Matthew 6:1–6,16–21](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A1-6%2C+16-21&version=NRSVUE)

I’m not generally a sports watcher, but this year, I really got into watching the tennis while the Australian Open was on. I was in awe of how naturally the pros seemed to pull off such high-level play. Things that, when I go out for a casual hit, require me to think carefully about my foot placement and timing of the swing, they seem to do with barely a conscious thought.

But the skills of these best-in-the-world tennis players on display on screens across the nation only come about because of how much practice they do in private.

The point of the practice is that the players don't have to *think* about what they're doing when it comes to the big games; it’s just instinctive.

Jesus says a similar thing about spiritual practices (or disciplines). You practice them in private so that in public, you do not have to prove anything; it just comes naturally.

That way, when we're in front of other people, we're not trying to impress them. We don’t need to. We can just be who we are, serving out of a love for God.

The things we practice spiritually aren’t needed to prove to others or God how good we are. But we still need to practice them – because they just don’t come naturally.

After getting inspired by watching the tennis and dusting off the old racquet, I've decided I'm not too interested in getting to the Australian Open. I think I’ll spend more time practising what Jesus preached instead.

***Lord, you know our hearts and motivations. Sometimes, we don’t always have the right reasons for the things we do in public. Help us to practise your words in private so that in public, we don’t have anything to prove and can simply be serving out of our love for you. Amen.***

Thursday 15 February 2024

**Paradise found**

by Emma Strelan

***Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city (Revelation 22:1,2a).***

Read [Revelation 22:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+22%3A1-11&version=NRSVUE)

Restoration – things back to the way they should be. How they were in the beginning before we ruined everything. That’s what God will do at the end of time, right? Fix everything, restore it, purge the world of things that do not glorify him. (Either that or whisk us away to heaven where we sit in the clouds playing harps ....)

Does that mean we should look forward to a Garden of Eden lifestyle: a couple of people sitting around in a garden, petting docile tigers, and bringing scanty fig leaves back into fashion? (Meanwhile, Adam and Eve grumble, ‘We wore those when we were young! Can’t believe they’re back!’)

Is God’s vision for restoration really going to include wiping out thousands of years of human culture and development? If so, what’s the point of it all?

But here in Revelation, humanity isn’t finally restored to a lost paradise. That would entail God ignoring the movement of history from a single person to two, to a whole community, and to multitudes of nations. God's not going to wipe out eons of human history and plonk us all back in the Garden of Eden, excised of our culture and communities.

The new Jerusalem – the new ‘paradise’ – is a city. And the nations will bring to the city their cultural treasure and riches.

This means that the work we do now isn't for naught. We can joyfully participate in the beautiful, creative, joy-filled parts of the world, with hope for its beautiful restoration to come.

While we shouldn't go too far in setting our specific expectations for the new kingdom (it is, after all, far greater than the human mind can imagine), I encourage you to consider what brings joy in your life that you can hope God restores fully in the future – and how might he be calling you to participate in that restoration now?

***Heavenly Father, we await in eager anticipation for the time when your glory will live fully among your people, and you will restore everything to its glory and perfect that which we have clumsily made. Thank you for giving us glimpses of that future glory in the world today. Amen.***

Friday 16 February 2024

**The invitation**

by Emma Strelan

***The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life ... Amen. Come, Lord Jesus (Revelation 22:17,20).***

Read [Revelation 22:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+22%3A12-21&version=NRSVUE)

Youth camps, ultimate frisbee, beach volleyball, camping, strawberry picking, backpacking Europe. These are some of the things I always liked the idea of but never bothered to actually consider doing until I was specifically invited by a friend to join them.

How many things in life would you not have done if you hadn't first been invited?

Fittingly, the end of the Bible, while wrapping things up, is also an invitation. But to what? And by whom?

Firstly, we have the invitation from the Trinity to come and drink the water of life.

And secondly, John (on behalf of the church, I assume) ends his letter with the invitation to ‘Come, Lord Jesus’.

What a beautiful way to finish what is, for most, a very scary and confusing book of the Bible. An ending of *relationship*. Because relationship is *invitation –* love offered without compulsion.

It began in Genesis with God’s invitation to Adam and Eve to *join him* in ruling the earth and building the population. But Adam and Eve didn’t return that invitation. In fact, they were so fearful after their first act of sin that the last thing they were going to do was invite God to come!

But here in Revelation, at the restoration of all things, redeemed humanity can, without shame, cry: ‘Come, Lord!’

Recent studies indicate people in Australia might be quite interested in coming to church and finding out about this whole Christianity thing; they just haven’t been invited yet (source: National Church Life Survey). Let’s extend God’s invitation. Let’s show people they don’t need to fear a perfect God because of their own imperfections any longer. The gift of the water of life is free.

***Lord God, you are always inviting us into relationship with you. Help us to take up the invitation daily and put aside any fear, reluctance or complacency getting in the way of that life-giving invitation. Amen.***

Saturday 17 February 2024

**Timely trust**

by Emma Strelan

***Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God, my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long (Psalm 25:5).***

Read [Psalm 25:1–10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+25%3A1-10&version=NRSVUE)

This verse from Psalm 25 wonderfully points out that in our daily walk with God, we have the blessing of looking to the past, present and future.

The past: ‘Guide me in your truth and teach me.’

This points to the way God has gone before us, laying out the path to be in relationship with him and serve him. The word guide (as written in the NIV) comes with connotations of a large Monty Pythonesque hand reaching down from heaven to push us in the right direction. Which is what we might sometimes wish would happen. But ‘guide me’ is better understood here in the sense of someone treading before us, physically leading the way.

For David, as the psalm writer, God had not yet physically come to earth and walked before his people – although he had interacted with them through priests and prophets. We have the advantage of God literally walking ahead of us, which is recorded in the Bible. We can turn to God manifested in history to seek his guidance.

The present: ‘For you are God, my Saviour.’

We die daily with Christ (1 Corinthians 15:31), and therefore daily receive his salvation, rejoicing in him as Saviour. God is our Saviour in the present, right now.

The future: ‘My hope is in you all day long.’

Hope points to the future. What’s more, hope in this verse is really better translated as ‘in you Lord, do I wait [expectantly] all day long’. David is constantly looking to the future, to the eager expectation of the full revelation of God’s glory. We can do the same.

Today, may you look to God in the past, present and future, following the way of Jesus, living in his daily salvation, and looking with hope for the glory to come.

***God, you are the Lord of all time – past, present and future. Thank you that you work in all of these, and we can experience the blessings that come through that. Help us to live our day with the hope of your future glory in our hearts. Amen.***

Sunday 18 February 2024

**The Spirit leads the Messiah**

by Pastor Glenn Crouch

***At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness (Mark 1:12).***

Read [Mark 1:9–15](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A9-15&version=NRSVUE)

I’ve always thought of Mark as the action movie of the gospels. He gives us one scene after another, with very little rest in between. In our passage today, we have Jesus’ baptism, forty days in the wilderness, temptation, John’s arrest, the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and ‘repent and believe’. All of that happens in seven verses. We also see the Holy Spirit at work, descending on Jesus at his baptism and leading Jesus into the wilderness. I believe Mark wants us to understand that the Spirit keeps doing this – leading Jesus from one scene to another. Mark is eager to show us that Jesus is the promised Messiah and that as we see who he is, we, too, will want to follow the Spirit’s lead and follow Jesus.

Having put our trust in Jesus, we have peace with God; we have eternal life; we have so much – but we are not promised a trouble-free life. We sometimes forget that ‘to follow’ means to go through the same things the person you are following has gone through. We see in the gospels that Jesus faced many difficulties. He went through hunger, thirst, weariness, suffering, betrayal, and so much more. Remember Mark 8:34 (take up your cross). Of course, Jesus had many good times with friends and family; he enjoyed many a good meal with good conversation and, no doubt, enjoyed much of the good creation (that he created).

Like Jesus, the Spirit is going to lead us through various action scenes. We are going to go through glorious times and challenging times – and even devastating times. As we do, remember that we are not the action star – Jesus is! The Holy Spirit, whom we received in our baptism, is with us. Jesus promised he would never leave us. We are the precious children of our Heavenly Father.

***Heavenly Father, thank you for fulfilling your promises and sending Israel’s Messiah – my dear Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Help me to follow your Spirit’s leading so that my life may be based on repenting and believing in Jesus. In his mighty name, I pray. Amen.***

*Glenn is the pastor of St John’s Lutheran Church in Esperance and also looks after St Paul’s Lutheran Church in Kalgoorlie–Boulder. Glenn has been married to Karen for 38 years, and they have two grown sons – and their first grandchild is on the way (due March 2024).*