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**Sunday 1 May 2022 to Sunday 8 May 2022**

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Sunday 1 May 2022

# Feed my lambs

by Neil Bergmann

**Peter said to Jesus, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs’ (John 21:15).**

Read John 21:1–19

Jesus’ death and resurrection confirm for all of us that we are saved, redeemed and reconciled forever to God’s favour – not because we are good enough, not because we believe enough, not because we understand enough, but because Jesus is enough.

We know what we have been saved from – sin, death and the power of the devil. But what have we been saved for? Given that we can be absolutely confident in God’s promise of salvation, and we know we can do nothing more to secure eternal life, how do we respond to that impossibly generous and totally undeserved gift?

Today’s reading – and indeed, much of Scripture – gives us guidance on how we might live in response to God’s love. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times, Peter declares his love for Jesus three times here. Jesus responds by telling Peter how he can live out that love – feed my lambs, tend my sheep and feed my sheep.

If Jesus died for all, then all are part of his flock, and each of us is called to feed and tend that flock. We show our love for God by loving our neighbours. Each of us will be called to exercise that love differently. For some of us, it will be literally feeding those without enough to eat or caring for those society has forgotten. For others, it will be providing spiritual food through proclaiming the gospel, praying for others and giving encouragement and comfort.

Not just as individuals but also as communities of faith, Jesus asks us, ‘do you love me?’  We respond as Peter did, ‘Yes. Lord, you know that I love you’. As individuals and also as communities of faith, we need to pray for God’s guidance on how to live out that love in our neighbourhoods.

***Lord, you know that I love you because you first loved me. Guide me to understand how you are calling me to be part of your mission to feed your lambs. Amen.***

Monday 2 May 2022

# Shepherd your people

by Neil Bergmann

**Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock that belongs to you (Micah 1:14).**

Read Micah 7:14–20

The Old Testament prophets like Micah can be brutal in their honesty and scathing in their condemnation of the people of Israel. Particularly, Micah singles out injustice and inequity as sins that deserve God’s punishment and require repentance and forgiveness. Micah despairs at these sins, just as we can easily despair at a world that seems impossibly unjust and self-centred.

For our gospel-tuned ears, it can be difficult to understand how we should respond to these Israelite prophets. We believe that in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection, God does not reward or punish us as we deserve; otherwise, we would all be condemned. Instead, we live as redeemed children of God, no longer dependent on our own goodness to be reconciled to our Father but totally dependent on Christ’s goodness. We should be confident in God’s promise of salvation, but it is too easy for us to become comfortable and passive in that salvation.

We all make choices about how we live. We can choose to live by human standards of what constitutes a good life – wealth, power and fame – or we can choose to live by God’s vision of a good life – generosity, service and humility. Prophets like Micah hold up a mirror that asks us to examine ourselves and our society and see what choices we are making. God loves us. Do our decisions show we are responding to that love by loving others? We often fall short.

Luckily, it is not up to us alone. Micah tells us the first step to a better life. We acknowledge that God is our Lord and our master, and we belong to his flock. We give up our own ideas about how to live and ask God, our great shepherd, to lead. Reading, listening, discussing and praying together are ways that God can lead us.

***Our Lord and shepherd, speak to us through your word about how to truly live the good life you have planned for us. Help us always turn to you for the love, courage and wisdom we need to truly live out what you have planned for us. Amen.***

Tuesday 3 May 2022

# Search the Scriptures

by Neil Bergmann

**You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf (John 5:39).**

Read John 5:31–40

John’s whole gospel is a testimony that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Christ, the long-promised Saviour. John constantly explains why he believes that Jesus really is the Son of God. In this passage from John, Jesus is explaining why the Jews should believe that he has been sent by God.

When Jesus talks here about the Scriptures, he most likely refers to the Old Testament and, by implication, the old covenants that God had made with the Jewish people. By Jesus’ time, the people had a misguided view of how the Old Testament writings should be interpreted.

The commandments of God were meant to be guidelines for living in a way that spread God’s love to all those around them. Some of the laws regarding food, worship and festivals aimed to reinforce that the children of Israel were set apart by God to be a special people. Sacrificial rituals reminded people of their sins and dependence on God for forgiveness.

This meaning of God’s law had become corrupted. The laws were treated as a recipe for salvation. By carefully making sure none of the ritual laws were broken, one could hope for acceptance by God and eternal life as a faithful servant.

Jesus tells the Jews that they have it all wrong. The Old Testament Scriptures are not a recipe book for salvation. Instead, they are a record of a God that keeps calling his people back time after time when they reject or ignore the most important commandments – to love God and love each other. As Jesus explained to the disciples on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, the Scriptures are a promise that God will send a saviour to people who can never save themselves.

Today, we can still make the same mistakes about the meaning of Scripture. It is not a rulebook to decide who is right and wrong, who is ‘in’ and ‘out’. Instead, it is a testimony to God’s love, incarnate in Jesus Christ, and a call for us to respond to that love by loving each other and loving God.

***God of love, send your Spirit to guide us as we read your Scriptures. Help us read with the eyes of the gospel and the light of the resurrected Christ, who alone is our hope and our salvation. Amen.***

Wednesday 4 May 2022

# Fullness in Christ

by Neil Bergmann

**See to it that no-one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition (Colossians 6:8).**

Read Colossians 2:6–15

We are happy to let God take complete care of our salvation, and that is right and good. We acknowledge we have sinned and will continue to be led astray by sin, but we know Jesus’ death and resurrection is enough to wash all those sins away so we can be reconciled to the God of love. We know God’s gift of eternal life is securely ours.

We are less content to let God take control of the rest of our lives. We never seem to be happy with who we are and how we live. There is an astonishing array of self-help books and social media streams available today that promise to make our lives better. They tell us how our lives can have more purpose, be less cluttered, be more productive, generate more wealth, generate more happiness, be more empathetic, or just tell us how we can be the best version of ourselves. This is not a new trend. Philosophers from as long ago as ancient Greece looked at how we might live better lives if only we used our own powers of reason to rein in our base desires and emotions.

In today’s reading, Paul warns the Colossians that the path to a good life does not come from any of these sources. As well-intentioned as authors and influencers might be, there is not some secret knowledge in human philosophy and tradition that makes our lives complete. We are wasting our time if we look there.

Instead, Paul tells the Colossians – and also tells us – that we should live our lives rooted in Christ. Jesus Christ is not just our Saviour but also our teacher, guide, shepherd and leader. Jesus promises a heavenly kingdom of justice, peace and love for each other, here and now in our daily lives, and he invites us to follow him into that kingdom.

***Loving God, empty our minds and hearts of the empty promises of this world that focus our attention on self-centred wealth, fame and power. Instead, fill us with the heart and mind of Jesus, loving you, loving each other and loving all your creation. Amen.***

Thursday 5 May 2022

# Overflowing grace

by Neil Bergmann

**The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 12:14).**

Read 1 Timothy 1:12–17

In the books of 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul is writing to Timothy to encourage him in his ministry. We are all called to encourage each other as we participate in God’s mission to love and redeem the world. At the same time, we look to promote a spirit of humility in our faith communities. We don’t celebrate the things that we have done. Instead, we celebrate what God is doing through his church, and we continually give thanks for God’s love and grace.

This is not the way the world works. We continually give awards for sports, academic achievement, military service, best book, best portrait, best movie, best restaurant, even awards for just participating. The world values winners; the world values the best and brightest. We compete to have better stuff than our neighbours and friends. In the world’s eyes, our success depends on our own efforts. Some even believe that worldly success is a reward for how strong our Christian faith is.

Jesus teaches a different way. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Paul explains in today’s reading how this applies to his ministry. Saul was the worst possible candidate for God’s missionary. He hated Christians, and he hated Jesus, but God had different plans. When Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he was blinded by overflowing love and grace. Everything changed, even his name. Now, Paul channels his gifts of determination and courage to spread that love and grace.

Jesus ushered in the topsy-turvy kingdom of heaven, where everybody is valued and loved – not just the brightest and the best. We don’t need to pass an exam or run faster than everybody else to get the prize. Jesus has already won the prize of eternal life and shares it freely with us all.

***Merciful God, we give you thanks that you can use sinful, broken people like us in your mission to the world. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.***

Friday 6 May 2022

# Understanding in all things

by Neil Bergmann

**Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things (2 Timothy 2:7).**

Read 2 Timothy 2:1–8

Paul’s second letter to Timothy includes more encouragement to Timothy to continue in God’s mission to heal a broken world, and that same advice continues to guide us today.

I often wonder whether it is easier or harder to be disciples of Jesus today than when Paul was writing to Timothy. The saying ‘you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar’ is apt here. In the first three centuries of the Christian church, disciples were persecuted, yet the church continued to grow. In many countries today, Christians continue to face persecution, yet the church still grows.

Developed democratic countries face a different challenge – not the vinegar of persecution but the honey of a comfortable, consumerist, secular lifestyle. And here, the institutional church is not growing. If what we seek is worldly success – wealth, power, fame, comfort and self-satisfaction – then we won’t find it in church. When we focus on self-improvement, we can avoid looking at the disadvantage, persecution, hopelessness and injustice that affect many in our society.

Paul gives Timothy some images of the life of a disciple – a soldier following the orders of their leader, an athlete competing for victory and a farmer working for a harvest. We can think of ourselves in these images. If we are soldiers, which army have we enlisted in – the disciples of Jesus or the army of self-serving consumerism? If athletes, what competition rules are we playing by – the upside-down last-will-be-first rules of the kingdom of heaven or the race to accumulate earthly riches? If farmers, what is the harvest we are working towards – more stuff for ourselves or more justice in an unjust world?

The choices aren’t always easy, but the Holy Spirit is always there, teaching us through the Scriptures and guiding us when we pray. Paul doesn’t give us a blueprint for our individual roles in God’s mission to the world. Instead, we can take Paul’s advice, ‘Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things’.

***Wise and powerful God, you ask us to join in your mission to the world. We are weak, foolish and easily discouraged. Fill us with your strength and wisdom, so we can better serve you and our neighbours. Amen.***

Saturday 7 May 2022

# My cup overflows

by Neil Bergmann

**I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23:6).**

Read Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Actually, we always seem to want more. Even in our prayers, we are quick to say what we want God to do – stop wars, bring rains in drought, stop rains in floods, heal the sick, basically just fix everything we think is wrong with the world. Even Jesus in Gethsemane struggled with the simple prayer – not my will, but your will be done.

He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. We really don’t like to be led. We don’t like to be led to times of rest in green pastures and beside still waters because we are in a hurry to get things done. We don’t like to be led to be part of God’s active mission to bring the gospel of salvation, justice, mercy and love to the world. We like to do the leading.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. We like to avoid risks. It is much safer to avoid those dark valleys altogether. The easiest way to fear no evil is to stick to the places, people and situations we can control.

My cup overflows. God fills us to overflow with his love and grace, but where does it go? So many in this world need that love and grace (often in those dark valleys), but we think we don’t have enough to share.

I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. We know that Jesus’s life, death and resurrection promise us eternal life in God’s heavenly home, but what does it mean to dwell in the house of the Lord here on earth? I don’t think God’s house is a fine mansion, with individual ensuite bathrooms and large screen TVs. I think it is more like a field hospital where the sick, injured, unwanted and unloved are welcomed in for care and healing. We are also invited to come, not as honoured guests but as humble helpers, ready to serve.

***God of overflowing love and grace, please guide us in your ways and paths, even when you lead us where we do not want to go. For we know that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. Amen.***

Sunday 8 May 2022

# Jesus, plainly

by Emma Strelan

**How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly (John 10:24).**

Read John 10:22–30

Sometimes, I feel I’ve spent up to this point in my (short) life waiting for God to reveal himself properly to me. Once I’ve got the right amount of knowledge from reading the Bible and have been to enough church services, it will all click into place. I’ll know for sure who Jesus is, and I won’t be able to question God’s truth any longer. Twenty-one years in, and it still hasn’t fully clicked.

Honestly, I have genuinely found myself asking God, ‘How long will you keep me in suspense? Can’t you just show me plainly who you are?’

Yet, at the same time, when I read this passage in John, I want to scoff at the Pharisees questioning Jesus and think, ‘You idiots, can’t you see Jesus has revealed himself clearly to you?!’ I mean, in the previous chapter, he healed a blind man!

In a show on Netflix called The Good Place, which plays with the idea of an afterlife based on merit points, a few humans are proud because they managed to get all four clues that the architect Michael (who runs the afterlife) left them. Michael responds that he actually left them 1200 clues, but he’s glad they got enough to work it out at least.

The interesting thing about what we see in the Gospel accounts is that for some people, Jesus’ message was as plain as day: the kingdom of God is at hand, and he is the way to that kingdom. Do you know who those people were? A broken woman, a demon-possessed man, the little children. And they weren’t even necessarily seeking God out.

Don’t get caught up asking the wrong questions of Jesus. He is plainly the Messiah.

**God, thank you for the way you reveal yourself in so many ways. Today, I ask that you show me one of the 1200 clues for you I just haven’t picked up on before. Amen.**