

"Walking as a Child of God in 2021"

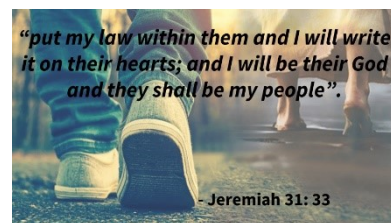
December 31, 2020



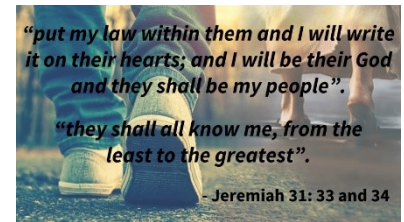
In our first scripture for tonight, from 1st Peter 1, is a call to holy living. In the text, we heard Peter's call to prepare our minds, to discipline ourselves, and to set our hope on the grace that we find in Christ Jesus. As we practice the means of grace we live in obedience to God. For Peter, our obedience leads us to *"have mutual love"* and to love one another *"deeply from the heart"*.

As people of faith, we are called by the one who is holy to *"be holy ourselves in all our conduct"*. When we make it our intentional choice to be holy, to live godly lives, then we are born anew, *"not of the perishable but of imperishable seed through the living word of God"*. It is to holy living that we commit ourselves this evening. As we delve deeper into this idea, let us begin with a word of prayer to the Lord our God...

Our second passage for tonight came from the Old Testament, from the book of Jeremiah. In chapter 31 Jeremiah speaks of the new covenant. Through the prophet, God pledges to make a new covenant, one in which God will *"put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people"*. God's law, God's ways, become a part of us when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. It is

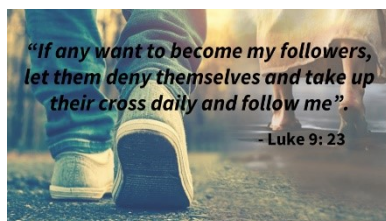


then that the Holy Spirit takes up residence within our hearts, becoming God's law written on our hearts. With the Spirit residing inside us, we are God's people. God says, in verse 34, *"they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest"*. This idea was the main theme of Pastor Kris Mutzenberger's message from last Sunday. If you joined us last Sunday for the Dakotas Conference "A Very Dakotas Christmas" you heard Pastor Kris remind us that the manger is for all people. The manger invites young and old, rich and poor, homed and homeless, men and women, to the manger. Through Christ, God invites all people to know him, from the young to the old, from the rich to the poor, from the least to the greatest.

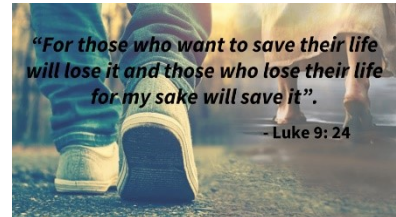


The third passage that was selected for tonight came from Luke 9. This passage contains Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus telling about his death and resurrection. As the passage opens, Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is. After hearing these answers – John the Baptist, Elijah, maybe another prophet – Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is. Peter responds, saying, *"The Messiah of God"*. Jesus then reveals that he will undergo suffering and rejection and death. But he will rise on the third day.

Then he said to his disciples and to us disciples gathered here tonight. *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me"*. To truly practice the holy living that I spoke about at the beginning of the message tonight,



denying self and taking up our own cross is where we begin. If we are to share a deep love and mutual affection for all of our brothers and sisters in the world then we must begin by denying our own selfish desires and wants. Only then will we give of ourselves in the mutual love that Jesus calls us to. Concluding the third passage, Jesus says, *"For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it"*. Only when we surrender self and begin to walk in Jesus' ways, only then, do we find true life and the salvation found in Christ.

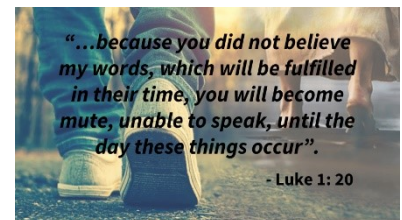


In our Colossians passage that was just read, Paul explains the new life that we find in Christ. In order to find this life, in verse two Paul commends us to *"set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth"*. To practice holy living, to allow the Spirit within to guide and lead our lives, we must put to death the things within us that are earthly – *"greed, impurity, evil desire"* – and rid ourselves of earthly emotions such as *"anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language... lies"*. To put these earthly things to death, to set aside these human emotions, requires divine intervention. This is what Jesus meant when we lose our life. When we give up the things of this earthly life, then we find life in Christ, we are saved. Once we *"clothe ourselves in Christ"*, we are wrapped in *"compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience"*. Clothed in Christ, we pass on the forgiveness that we find in Jesus and we allow God's love to be that which binds everything together. Living with these characteristics guiding our holy living, we exhibit the new covenant of God, as described by Jeremiah, written on our hearts.



At times in our lives, it is easier to practice holy living, to honor and keep our side of the new covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ, to walk as a child of God. At other times, it is not so easy, is it? As we draw 2020 to a close tonight, I'd guess most all of us are eager to leave it behind. The past nine or ten months have been quite a challenge to us in many ways. So, maybe more so that in many years, we look forward to 2021. We long for a return to "normal", whatever that will end up looking like. Whatever it looks like, we hope in means a return to many of the things that we loved in life. But we are not the first people to go through such a season of isolation and distancing.

In Luke 1: 8-20 we find the foretelling of John the Baptist's birth. The main character of this passage is Zechariah. As a priest in the temple, he was walking as a child of God. An angel comes to Zechariah, John's father. In verse eight we read that Zechariah was *"chosen by lot... to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense"*. Once inside the angel Gabriel tells him, *"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John"*. But Zechariah doubts the news, he questions God. In that moment, with this news, it was not easy for Zechariah to walk as a child of God. Because of his doubt, Gabriel pronounces, *"because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."* John is struck deaf until John is born nine months later. He cannot speak a word. John spends the next nine months in silence, probably often lost in his own thoughts. Has anyone else been there in this past nine or ten months? At times I have felt powerless, unable to utter a word to God or to



others. This has been part of my pandemic experience. But silence has also been fruitful at times.

In John's silence, as mine and perhaps yours have, his thoughts must have often turned to God. In the quiet times of these past months, in the loneliness, grief, and other struggles, haven't your thoughts turned to God? Presbyterian pastor James Faris shares these thoughts on John's time of silence:



"In the quiet of his own soul during those nine months, he must have mused deeply on the word of God in his challenging circumstances. He likely prayed fervently with anticipation. Whatever exactly was going through his mind, his Lord was busy in him, working faith in Zechariah. When his tongue was set free, he didn't gripe about his circumstances. Rather, he blessed God! Those nine months were the most fruitful of his life up to that point, and he rejoiced in the goodness of God".

As I reflected on these words that I read just after Christmas, I feel like we have all been here frequently during these pandemic times. Have you "prayed fervently with anticipation" for healing of friends and loved ones, for better days? Have you "deeply mused" about your faith and God during these hard times? If you are like me and others that I have talked with, yes, you have found more time for your relationship with God and with your faith.



That was one of Zechariah's blessings during his nine months of silence. It is one of the blessings of walking as a child of God. When John was born and named, Zechariah's tongue was able to speak again. He did not complain about his time of silence, but he blessed God. In those nine months, Zechariah grew closer to God. This led to his rejoicing in the Lord. Come 2021 and whatever our new normal is, will we respond like Zechariah did, with words of praise and worship to our God? Will we be thankful that our faith has grown and deepened during these times?

In the pastoral prayer from "A Very Dakota Christmas", Pastor Rebecca Trefz reminded me that we enter 2021 carrying the burdens, the hurts, the sufferings of the pandemic. This is so true. Her prayer reminded me that we bear the struggles of our nation and our communities – the awareness and pain of racial struggle and iniquity, the bitterness of division and polarization in politics and religion. As children of the covenant, as brothers and sisters of Christ, as witnesses to the love of God, we bear these burdens not as harmful or hurtful scars but as a sure call to holy living, to being Jesus' light and love in a hurting world, to denying self as we choose to build the kingdom of God here where we are planted as Grace United Methodist Church. The covenant renewal service calls us to holy living that transforms us and the world around us.

As I draw to a close, turn with me to Revelation 12, found in the closing book of the Bible. At times, and maybe especially as we turn from 2020 to 2021, it is good to remember this part of God's story. Ultimately it is part of our story too. Knowing that this is all part of the story gives us a hope and a strength as we

seek to grow closer to Jesus and to transform our world to better reflect God's love for all people. I will be reading verses four, five, nine, and seventeen.

⁴ The dragon's tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. ⁵ And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne...

⁹ The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world — he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him... ¹⁷ Then the dragon was angry with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

Since the beginning of the world, Satan has been working to deceive the world. In a fit of anger, Satan swept down the stars and stood before the woman, waiting to devour the Messiah. Acting through Herod, many children were slain, but Jesus survived far away in Egypt. Satan returned and tried to defeat God by tempting the incarnate one with the things of this world. Although you and I would certainly struggle and do struggle when offered power and fame and wealth, the perfect one simply turned to God and found strength in the word.

We too can find strength in the word of God. That is why practicing the means of grace are so important. Reading and studying our Bibles helps plant the word of God in our hearts. Time with God deepens our faith and builds up the foundation for when the world challenges our faith. In Revelation 12, this is described in verse 17. Satan, temporarily defeated, *"went off to make war on the rest of her children"*. You and I are those children. Daily we face Satan's temptations and deceit. Only through the power of the Holy Spirit do we stand a change to withstand the attacks and to one day be found holy and righteous.

Returning to Colossians 3, verses nine and ten, we again read these words:

"you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self". As we move forward into 2021, this day we commit to walking as a child of God. Paul reminds us that this is



possible because through our faith we are *"being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator"*. As new creations in Christ, we are daily being made more and more like him, our creator. Only through the power of Christ alive in us are we able to live holy and righteous lives. In the next verse, in verse eleven, Paul gives us this encouragement:

"Christ is all and in all"! As we turn to this prayer of commitment, we rejoice that Jesus is our all in all. Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.

