



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 31, 2023**

### **Weekly Prayer**

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Thank you God, for sending your Son to live among us. As this new year begins, draw me nearer to you, that I may know and love you more deeply. Guide me to serve you with joy-filled love, every day of my life. Amen.

### **Monday, January 1**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16**

You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

#### **Observation**

Happy new year! As we begin 2024, may these words of Jesus offer guidance for the coming year. As we lit candles on Christmas Eve, we celebrated the gift of Jesus who is the light of the world. Today, we remember that Jesus calls all of us to be bearers of this light, shining the love and goodness of God into our world. How is Jesus inviting you to be a light-bearer in 2024?

#### **Application**

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, began every year by remembering his baptism and invitation from Jesus to "be the light." This has become a tradition among Methodists, to begin the year in prayer. Today, I invite you to pray the words of Wesley's Covenant Prayer, asking God to guide you in this new year:

#### **Prayer**

##### ***Wesley Covenant Prayer***

I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,  
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
to thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."

## **Tuesday, January 2**

### **Scripture: Mark 1:4-11**

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

### **Observation**

In this passage, we read of Jesus' baptism. It begins with familiar words about John the Baptist, who we've spent time with through Advent, and ends with Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River. God responds to this act with words of love and grace: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

### **Application**

I find passages where God acts as a loving parent to be quite meaningful. For some of us, these words God spoke to God's own Son are echoed by words we've heard from our own parents. And for some of us, these are words we've only wished we could hear so clearly. But here is the good news: just as God took delight in and "dearly loves" Jesus, so too, does God delight in and dearly love you. You are part of the beautiful family of God. And in your smile, your hopes, your gifts and presence, God finds happiness in you.

### **Prayer**

Loving God, who is as a parent to us all: thank you for your love. Let it wash over me, as a comfort and guide for my life. Help me to live as one marked by you, your "dearly loved" one. Guide my words and actions, to share your love with others, that all might my find comfort and belonging in you. Amen.

## Wednesday, January 3

### Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*" After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me." Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

### Observation

After Jesus' baptism, he quickly begins his public ministry. In Matthew's Gospel this begins by his being tempted in the wilderness. The devil tempted Jesus with bread, power, and worldly recognition. Each time, Jesus confesses his faith, cites scripture, and trusts in God.

### Application

Not even Jesus is free from temptation. This reminds me that the One who saves us is familiar with being human. Jesus knew what it was to be tested, to want, to grieve, to love. And so however you might feel tested today, or in ways that you feel longing or grief, or lonesome, remember this: you are not alone. God took on flesh, in Jesus, to be with you, and to love you. Christ knows deeply your longings and hopes, your joys and sorrows. And Jesus loves you, continuing to invite you to follow him.

### Prayer

Almighty God, you are steadfast, faithful, and true. Turn me toward you, again and again. Make me steadfast, faithful, and true in my love of you. Give me strength today and remind me of your love. Amen.

## Thursday, January 4

### Scripture: Matthew 4:12-17

Now when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he went to Galilee. He left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, which lies alongside the sea in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. This fulfilled what Isaiah the prophet said:

*Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
alongside the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,  
the people who lived in the dark have seen a great light,  
and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death.*

From that time Jesus began to announce, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!"

### **Observation**

Like many prophets, John the Baptist's ministry was not without danger or consequence. Today, we read of his arrest and later (Matthew 14) he will be killed. But Jesus does not falter or fear, and continues in his own ministry. As he does, he even shares words that John, himself, had preached: "*change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!*" (V17).

### **Application**

The kingdom of heaven is here! John's work of *preparing the way* has finished, and Jesus is here. The kingdom of God is here. And still, there is more to do: more love to share, more invitations to give, more people to reach. Jesus' ministry has begun. As it does, he grounds himself in the words of the prophet Isaiah, too: "*the people who lived in darkness have seen a great light, and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death*" (v16).

### **Prayer**

Dearest Jesus, light of the world and of my life. Thank you for inviting me to follow you. Help me to know what it is you'll have me do. Give me strength and courage, that like you, I can declare the presence of heaven right now. Amen.

## **Friday, January 5**

### **Scripture: Matthew 4:18-22**

As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," he said, "and I'll show you how to fish for people." Right away, they left their nets and followed him. Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

### **Observation**

Jesus does not work alone! God has created and called us into community, not only to experience friendship and love, but because it is through relationships and community that we experience and see God at work among us. As we heard at creation, and again at Jesus' baptism, God finds happiness and delight in God's children.

## **Application**

And so today, we read as Jesus calls the first disciples. Those who were first to hear the invitation to “come, follow me.” They dropped their nets, they left their familiar lives, and they set out to build up the community of God here on earth. How is Jesus inviting you to create spaces of community and belonging? How is Jesus inviting you to “come, follow me”?

## **Prayer**

Everlasting God, since the beginning of time you have invited your children to follow you, and to live in your love. Thank you for your persistence throughout time, and for loving me so deeply. Help me to make my home in you, amen.

## **Saturday, January 6**

### **Scripture: Acts 8:26-39**

An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, “At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. The Spirit told Philip, “Approach this carriage and stay with it.” Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you really understand what you are reading?” The man replied, “Without someone to guide me, how could I?” Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. This was the passage of scripture he was reading:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter  
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent  
so he didn't open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was taken away from him.  
Who can tell the story of his descendants  
because his life was taken from the earth?*

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?” Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, “Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?” He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Lord’s Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.

## **Observation**

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he continued to invite people to follow, to grow in faith, and to build of the kingdom of God among them. This is the mission of the church, too. In the story of Acts, we hear about the early church. And today, we meet a man who isn’t given a

name, known only to us as the Ethiopian Eunuch. His heart, to use Wesley's words, was "strangely warmed" and he found himself *immediately* desiring to be baptized.

### **Application**

"See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (V37). I've always loved the enthusiasm the man shares in this voice. He is confident and passionate about following Jesus. It reminds me of the line from the movie, *When Harry Met Sally*: "*I came here tonight because when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.*" The Eunuch knew then how he wanted to shape his life and wanted that to start as soon as possible. When last did you feel this tug in your heart? Has the story of God in Christ moved you so deeply that you have ever felt such urgency? Perhaps God is inviting you into something new today -- a new friendship or ministry, a new spiritual habit, or a way of serving. And perhaps you'll ask, as the Eunuch, with passion, "*what prevents me?*" Let's start today!

### **Prayer**

Good and loving God, speak to me today, that I might listen. Call me to follow you with urgency and passion, that my whole life and heart is tuned to sing your grace. Give me courage, clarity, confidence, and joy today and always. Amen.