

INTERCESSORY PRAYER GUIDE  
FEBRUARY 2017

Partners in prayer,

Once again I want to thank you for taking time to attend to God's word and God's presence. I don't know how much you sense it, but God is definitely doing something great here at Four Mile. I am more excited than ever to be a part of this church and step with you into the future God has in store. But I am also keenly aware that we can miss it what God has; we can experience defeats and setbacks God doesn't intend; we can go off course. Prayer is what keeps us connected. Our time in prayer is the place where God will point us on true north. Our diligence in praying is where kingdom victories are won, kingdom enemies will fall and kingdom doors will swing wide. This month my heart is drawn toward looking at what the bible shows us about God's healing power at work in our lives. Let's pray.

Martin

February 1 – Read Isaiah 41:10

***So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.***

People are afraid. Really afraid. And the list is long. Afraid of flying, Afraid of traveling abroad. Afraid of terrorists, gang members, bullies and bosses. People are afraid of diseases, spouses, living alone and global warming. All that just for starters. People are afraid. And lots of reasons for it. Christians are afraid. For many of the same reasons and a few unique ones of their own. Christians are afraid of liberals, afraid of conservatives. Christians are afraid of churches and theologies and politicians. And that's just for starters. Christians are afraid. And lots of reasons for it. And one good reason against it. **'So do not fear'** Isaiah writes. Do not fear. It is a command. An imperative. A divine stake in the ground. **'DO NOT FEAR.'** But we do. We do fear for two reasons. We forget our history. And we forget our God. **Do not fear FOR I AM WITH YOU; do not be dismayed FOR I AM YOUR GOD.** God covenanted with Abraham; trashed Pharaoh; drove out enemies so His people could have a home; He worked through flawed kings and guided through impassioned prophets. God defeated enemy forces, preserved faithful remnants, guided history – sent a Messiah, offered a Son, established an eternal kingdom – defeated the works of the devil and promised life. **'Do not fear, FOR I AM WITH YOU.'** Makes sense doesn't it? But Christians still fear. A lot. Old age, retirement funding, a child's safety, the empty nest, vocational advancement, stress, family DNA, rejection, failure, being found out – Christians fear. We forget. Or maybe our fear is not a matter of early or selective memory loss. Maybe it is more a matter of never really knowing. Not knowing our history or our God. God command - **'So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.'** -has a 'so' at the start. Did you see it? 'So.' What comes before the 'so' is the justification for the command. 'So' better have a look. **"But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.** Christians fear. A lot. But maybe it's possible it is not that we have forgotten our history or forgotten our God. It may be, apart from the information aspect of it, we never knew our God and therefore don't know the history. God says – **I HAVE CHOSEN YOU. YOU ARE FAMILY. I CALLED YOU. I APPOINTED YOU A PLACE IN MY HOUSE. I HAVE CHOSEN YOU – I HAVE NOT, WILL NOT REJECT YOU. SO!!!! DO NOT BE AFRAID.** Reread those before the 'so' words. Consider them. Is that God your God? Is that history your history? If so – then **So, do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.** If that God is your God, and that history your history, then whatever is going on in your life, whatever is happening in the world, whatever is taking place in your circumstances – God's got it. And God's got you. **'SO'**..... Pray about that today. Any fear lurking in your heart? Any worries haunting your thoughts and robbing you of peace? Any life-parameters that are actually life-prisons in your spirit which have been constructed by fear? Take time

today and know God. Know your history. **SO** you can enter the future fearless. Pray today as we move forward as a church and follow the Spirit's leading that we will as a church be both wise and *fearless*.

February 2 – Read James 5:13-16

***Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.***

I'm laughing right now. Here is where I wonder if we ought to put these prayer guides on an interactive web forum. There are enough places in these few verses to create enough controversy and confusion in the church to occupy it for a long time to come. Now that I think of it – they already have quite a long track record – that's not all that pretty. These verses have split churches and shaped 'theologies.' They have fired up as much opposition as they have movement in the kingdom of God. People's 'understanding/interpretation' of these verses have spawned renewal and released 'crazies' in the name of Jesus. So let's just let it settle for a moment. God preserved these words. For His church. For us. Let's admit that some of what is there is confusing. Some of it, far from the norm of life in the church as most of us have experienced it. So let's look at the clear parts. First, in the church then and now there will be plenty of 'trouble' as well as 'happiness' among God's people. In the church, there will be both health and sickness. That's the nature of the church in the time between its birth at Pentecost and its full restoration on the day of Christ's return. That's not unusual. That's not surprising. What is unique are the responses. In trouble – pray. Happy – sing praises. Sick – call on the elders, more prayer. Fallen into sin – don't hide from each other – confess to each other. Now pause – imagine that in your mind. Picture what that looks like! If you can do that you will begin to see the true wonder of the people of God. An entire community – caught up in singing praises, praying to God, praying for one another, admitting sin, owning failure, encouraging repentance, reconciling relationships, seeking God, pursuing righteousness. End result: faith is exercised, God's family is united, righteousness is pursued and the healing power of the Lord flows to bodies and souls. So here is the key to breaking through all the confusion – the passage is not offering a formula for power for the Christian – rather, it is painting a picture of an environment where the power of the Lord will be both present and effective. So today anyplace you need encouraged? Healed? Forgiven? Raised up? Want to see God work in His church and in the lives of His people the way you know He is able? Do you need to see Him work in your own life in a deeper and more powerful way? You know what to do. It's not a matter of mustering up the right amount of faith or foaming up the right level of passion. According to James, it is engaging in the right kind of community. So today consider where you need God's power to work in your life – then if you are experiencing trouble, pray. If happy – sing songs of praise. If sick, track down an elder. If stuck in sin – find a spiritual friend to be open and honest with. Pursue righteousness. Then get ready – the Lord will forgive sin, break bonds, heal bodies and respond to prayers. Several weeks ago as a church we wrote down names on orange post-it notes declaring that these were people God wanted us, as a church, to reach and help find their way to His saving grace. This month – I would like to ask each of you to find a partner and at least two times to come out to the church and spend at least 15 minutes praying over those names – asking God to work in their lives and to work through ours to help them find a seat in our church so they can find their place in His kingdom banquet.

February 3 – Read Matthew 11:28-30

***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”***

Picture it!! Renewed energy! A lightened load! Less stress and more rest! Do you even know the last time you experienced 'soul rest'? That deep peace, tangibly at ease in both your own skin and in the world. Imagine getting up each day knowing that all that is before you is 'doable!' What would it be like looking ahead not just

at your day – but at your life knowing for sure there is nothing that awaits that you cannot handle – there is no burden that can bring you down – ever! Think about having a schedule and a calendar that is manageable, marked with a rhythm that is life-giving, not life-draining. What would it be like to be able to respond when asked ‘how are things going?’ to be able to respond with something else than ‘really busy’ or ‘crazy’? Think of living your days energized instead of exhausted! What would it be to wake up each morning enthused, instead of with dread – and to fall into bed satisfied rather than drained? Read the verse again. This is Jesus calling! Now read it again. Consider first this question – do you believe what He is promising here is even possible? Do you believe Jesus understood the challenges of parenting, going to work every day, risking love, having responsibilities, etc., when He issued that call and made those promises? Do you believe such a life is possible if you would answer His call to come? Do you believe you and your life, your personality, your issues, your challenges are included when He says ‘all you....’? If so, then why do so many live life burdened, faltering, weary, worried rather than energized, peaceful, and quite manageable? I think that is largely so because we take the first step, but not the second. Specifically we come, but fail to take. **Come to me....take my yoke.** To experience the life, to know the provision, to receive the help – requires both the coming and the taking. **Take my yoke,** Jesus says. To be yoked is to be tied together. To be yoked is to surrender the right to lead. To be yoked is to adjust pace, set course, carry loads, based on the wisdom and choice of the one you are yoked to. To wear another’s yoke you must surrender your own. So to live in the life Jesus promises here is a two step process. Come to Him. Take His yoke. Then you will find the yoke easy and burden light – because it is His to choose and His strength will always accompany His choices. Today sit with Jesus and look at places where you are weary, worn out, over-burdened, etc. I am sure you have prayed about those. I assume you have asked Jesus to help, bring relief – to show up!! So perhaps the problem is not that Jesus is not there and not that you have not come to Him – but maybe the burden remains heavy because the yoke has not been taken. Jesus’ promise is not to give you strength to bear your burdens – but to give you strength to bear His. **MY YOKE is easy. MY BURDEN is light.** Maybe it’s time for switching out of the yoke – yours for His. Pray about that today. Tonight is Married Life Live at the church. Pray that God would move in that meeting and couples would surrender their marriages to Jesus’ yoke.

February 4 – Read Philippians 4:19-20

***And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.***

Most of you know this verse. Maybe someone spoke it to you at a time in your life when you were in great need. Perhaps you have spoken them to yourself during such a time. ‘**My God will meet all your needs...**’ Comforting. Encouraging. Hope-bringing words. Life-giving promise. True. But the God-given promise is also God conditioned. ***According to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus.*** Simply that means that God’s meeting our needs isn’t according to our desire or for our comfort or even ultimately to help us out in our circumstances. It is all given, and for that matter it is sometimes withheld, ***according to and for the purpose of His glory.*** But that, my friend is a good thing. For God’s glory is always for our best. So today consider the places where you need, and perhaps have been asking, God to provide. What would it look like to reshape both your desire and your prayer along the lines of ‘according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus.’ If you need a helper – try this. Start your prayer along these lines – Father, I want to bring glory to your name in my life, and in this circumstance, so would you.....’ Today is men’s breakfast at 8 am and Red Cross blood drive at 9:30. Pray for full participation at both!

February 5 – Read Luke 23:40-43.

***But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”***

Interesting, this man was experiencing the horror of a Roman death sentence. No appeals. No last minute reprieves. No technical mishaps – the Romans knew how to end a life. He was in his own words ‘getting what he deserved.’ Matthew adds an interesting observation in His gospel – he identifies this man and the other criminal as ‘robbers.’ Kind of a stiff penalty for a bit of thievery, don’t you think? Perhaps – but the problem was Rome was in charge. So a breaking of the law was an offense and rebellion against Rome. So they decided the penalty. In this case – for these two – it was death by crucifixion. ‘We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.’ At least this guy was honest about it. But in that moment this guilty thief justly condemned had a moment of remarkable clarity. He realized that in his moment of dying – right next to him was the only one who could make that a good thing. Right next to him as his life ebbed away was the only one that could protect him from ‘getting what his deeds deserved’ not just in this life, but in the next. So - helpless, justly condemned, facing an imminent death – he made a plea: ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise!’ Pardon granted. Justice averted. In the moment of death – sentence commuted and life given. Forever. Talk about a last minute save!!! So let me suggest that this criminal on the cross was one blessed dude. He faced his own death with the giver of life right next to him. Anyone who would do otherwise would be a fool. So today I want to ask you for a moment of clarity like the thief. Have you asked Jesus to commute your death sentence, not on the basis of what you think you might deserve, but on the basis that His death provides the only way for your entry into His paradise? Have you made ‘the ask’ so you can receive the pardon? If not, would you? Pray about that today. Pray also about those you know and love – any who are might be making the tragic mistake of facing their death without Jesus next to them? If in doubt – find a way to ask.

February 6 – Read Proverbs 4:20-22.

***My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; Keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them And health to all their body.*** Studies show that people pray. Some studies indicate they pray a lot. That’s a good thing. But studies also show that much of the praying is an appeal for problem solving. A crisis hit. A relationship has gone sideways. The bank account is running dry. Aunt Myrtle’s knee has gone bad. The xray showed something. Etc. Those prayers aren’t bad. God invites us to cast our burdens upon Him. He cares. But those prayers and even God’s at times miraculous answers to them are not the substance of faith. Nor are they the path to health. ***give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; Keep them in the midst of your heart.*** God’s word gives life. Do you believe that? What if we treat God’s word the way we sometimes treat our body? We ignore it. Feed on junk. Overlook signs of breakdown. Then when the pain is unbearable or the crash comes or signs of disease are undeniable we hit the panic button and call on the docs to work a miracle. But what if God is telling the truth. Attend to God’s word, listen to its reading and teaching. Keep them before your eyes, anchor them in your thoughts, let them form your perceptions, guide your decisions and let them settle deep into your heart - ***For they are life to those who find them And health to all their body.*** What if it were true that that kind of lifestyle would do more for your physical health and well-being than all the supplements, ointments and attempts to conjure up a miracle combined? I once received a sage piece of advice from a friend. He said if you want to know how something is supposed to work – talk to the one who made it. And if you can’t do that, he said, read the directions. Huh. Read God’s directions for health again in these verses. Then today consider your relationship with His word and what it might just do for your life and body. Pray this week for our elders as they start to work through the findings from the REVEAL study. Essentially it gives us a snapshot of the health of our church body.

February 7 – Read Exodus 15:25-27.

***There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there He tested them. And He said, “If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His***

***commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the Lord, am your healer.”***

***Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the waters.***

If you know the story of Exodus and you read those words you would think everyone in that moment would have stood and shouted and agreed – “we are earnest, we will listen, we will do what is right in your sight, we will listen to and keep every command and rule you give! Amen, amen amen and praise God! Amen.” After all they just saw what God was capable of doing. They had front row seats to the dismantling of the Egyptian ruler. They watched water become blood. The invasion of the frogs. Boils for everyone. Fiery hail. Flies, locusts and gnats so thick you choked on them. They watched as the angel of death moved through the a nation and by-passed them. So when God says ‘here’s the deal listen to what I say. Then do what I say’ you would think the people would have replied with a resounding ‘done! You betcha! Praise Jesus. No-brainer. Amen.’ But they didn’t. And they did. They didn’t listen. They didn’t keep. And they did suffer for it. Time and again. Did you note how God named Himself? ***I, the Lord, am your Healer.*** Interesting – that right after He tells them how to live safely and how to be protected from the ‘diseases’ He unleashed on Egypt – God tells them ‘He is their Healer.’ Guess He knows who He is dealing with. Then. And now. So God offers the way of life and wholeness. But He also shows the remedy for when we choose paths of death. ‘I, the Lord, am your healer.’ It’s an open invitation. It’s a standing offer. It’s a sure cure – for whatever ails you. But notice – He is not saying a miracle awaits the moment you realize the need. He is not offering a promise to claim or a verse to recite or an elixir to rub. ‘I, the Lord, am Your Healer.’ The remedy – the offer – the cure - is Himself. So just like the Prodigal son – you can ask the Father for His stuff, get some power, get some resources, get some provision from Him and still live a good distance away from Him. So eventually even the good you did get will give way and the ‘good life’ you had will leave you bunking with the pigs. You can go that route – and many professing Christ followers live just that way with the Father. Or you can wise up like the prodigal – ‘I will return to my Father’s house.’ He humbled himself, admitted his foolishness and journeyed home. And there he didn’t just get some of the father’s stuff – he got the father, himself.

***for I, the Lord, am your healer.*** – so today consider this in your prayers. Have you been living in a way where you are seeking the Father’s stuff more than the Father Himself? What would it look like to shift your praying away from so much asking for things and to a more focused asking for Him? What would it look like to tell God – what you desire most from Him is to be and live as close as possible with Him? The writer of Hebrews put it this way – Without faith it is impossible to please God – for anyone who comes to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those **who earnestly seek Him (11:6)**. Pray that as a church community our first priority and greatest focus and effort will be on seeking and being with Him – not getting His stuff.

February 8 – Read Psalm 107:17-20

***Fools, because of their rebellious way, And because of their iniquities, were afflicted. Their soul abhorred all kinds of food, And they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble; He saved them out of their distresses. He sent His word and healed them and delivered them from their destructions.***

Another piece of sage wisdom from a voice in my past – ‘if you find you’re in pit over your head – stop digging.’ ‘Fools’ – they get stuck in their rebellious ways even though they are warned by people who love them; they continue in patterns of sin even when it is bringing shipwreck to their lives; they complain about the misery of all their self-inflicted wounds. They ‘abhor’ the offers of good food, life-giving choices and much needed help. They flirt with death literally and figuratively, feel its grasp and cry out to the God they ignore and even sometimes blame!! Fools. They seem to be everywhere. Wallowing in self-inflicted ‘distresses’ and stuck in self-made messes. Easy to spot. Until you are one. To fools – godly wisdom sounds ridiculous; better choices feel impossible; loving intervention feels attacking or judging. A helping hand - in a pit over your head – we take the Dory approach – ‘just keep digging, just keep digging, just keep digging...’

February 9 – Read John 9:5-8.

***As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth....While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?"***

Do Jesus' miracles ever confuse you? They do me. Sometimes it is who He heals and who He doesn't. Sometimes it is how He heals. His healing of this blind man – (blind from birth the story tells us) is particularly befuddling to me. The disciples want to have a theological discussion about whose fault it is that this guy is blind. The crowd wants a show. The religious sorts are looking for reasons to discredit Jesus. All the while Jesus is hockering on the ground and stirring it up in the dirt. He then takes the muddy saliva mix and sticks it on the blind guy's eyes. So this is where – Christians can get weird – 'let's bottle the mix and market it! Holy Spit! With healing powers.' Start a new movement - the Jesus saliva face mask movement. But Jesus doesn't explain His method. Even though He said the situation was for God's glory – nothing miraculous happens at the scene. And the connivers in the group go home empty handed – must not have been a law against spitting in the dirt and rubbing it on someone's face. Oh well. But look at what happens next – after the spit clay application. ***"Go, wash in the pool of Siloam"*** So, what you say? Read it again. Now do you see? I hope so – because the blind guy can't! And that's the point. The command to 'Go' was given while the guy still could not see! The miracle had not happened yet! So now, not only is he still blind – if he blinks he probably gets some dirt in there to make matters worse. So Jesus sends a blind guy through a town where he was not welcomed, through streets he could not see to a pool that was outside the city walls down a flight of stairs without any railing – to wash. Now the good news is he went and when he returned, he returned able for the first time in his life to see his way around. But back to my question – 'do Jesus' miracles ever confuse you?' Think about that – but consider this. Sometimes, might it be that the miracle Jesus has for us requires us to 'go' blind. What if, like for this guy, the blessing or the miracle or the wisdom or the provision God has for you requires that you first go where he has told you to go - without it? What if the Divine provision won't be received unless you are willing to exercise some 'blind' obedience? Pray about that today. Often I find that God's miraculous work in my life follows the lines of his work in this man's life. I can sit and wait forever, I can keep calling out until my voice fails, I can ask for more applications of healing spit, I can pray harder, longer and more fervently than ever in my life – even throw in some fasting! But the miracle only comes after some 'going' blind happens in my own life. Any place in your life that you are waiting and hoping for God to work a miracle that perhaps the real hindrance is He is waiting for you to 'go' blind where He has told you to go? Pray about that today.

February 10 – Read Exodus 23:25

***You shall not worship their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their deeds; but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their sacred pillars in pieces. But you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water; and I will remove sickness from your midst.***

God had just promised Moses and the people of Israel that He would destroy their enemies in the land He had promised them. He would drive the enemies out – make a safe entry possible. But even though the people would be gone – a major risk would remain. Idols. Spiritual hacks. Bogus divinities. Divine imposters. Religious sirens – calling, singing, wooing – right smack into shipwreck. Idols – dangerous buggers. The One true God is hard on them – 'don't worship them' – 'don't dare serve them' – 'don't act like them.' Rather destroy them. Utterly, completely. Annihilate them and the places they linger. But did you notice? God warns against them but does nothing about them. Why – do you think – he would drive out enemy armies but leave behind idol encampments? Why if God is so set against these idols does He not put His hand to routing them out? Why if they are so dangerous to His people does He not do the overthrowing, crushing and annihilating? Here is why – by nature of how God made you – your worship is your choice. Your spiritual allegiance, the matter of your heart's devotion falls in the realm of 'your pick.' And be aware – and this is why the potential for idol worship

is always present – to choose NOT to serve the Lord your God IS to choose an idol. Your spiritual allegiance – your heart’s devotion never stands neutral. There is no ‘unengaged’ territory to retreat to. You decide. Consciously and deliberately. Or casually and blindly. **You decide.** And your decision has consequences. **But you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water; and I will remove sickness from your midst.** So today consider – maybe the problems you face, the breakdown you are experiencing in your joy, in your job, in your character; maybe the reason you can’t break loose from that addiction or overcome that dysfunction; maybe the reason there seems to be so much ‘sickness’ in your life, and want in your soul is not because of bad luck, the wrong upbringing, a tough past or an unfortunate choice – maybe the real reason for the messiness and calamity lies here – in your true spiritual allegiance, in the allocation of your heart’s deepest affections – maybe the root of the problem or problems you just can’t seem to shake, ultimately comes back to your worship. I’ve heard it said – ‘worship – it’s a deeply personal decision.’ True that! It is also an immensely powerful life-shaping one as well. And it is truly - by nature and design of the One who made you - **your** decision. So in the book of Deuteronomy God says to His people ‘see, I have set before you life and death – choose life.’ No middle ground. No tertian quid. No ‘well, let’s see what is behind curtain 3.’ No – ‘I think I will just take a pass.’ The choice is there. It is clear. And the choosing is both yours AND inescapable. Pray about that today. Pray that as a church community we will understand not only the choice but the consequences of it – and that we will heed God’s advice and do battle with idols and be singular in our devotion and our worship.

February 11 – Read Psalm 30:1-4.

***I will extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up, And have not let my enemies rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to You for help, and You healed me. O Lord, You have brought up my soul from Sheol; You have kept me alive, that I would not go down to the pit. Sing praise to the Lord, you His godly ones, And give thanks to His holy name.***

So today fill in the blanks and pray what follows – God, I want \_\_\_\_\_ and if you don’t give it to me you better watch your back. God, if you do \_\_\_\_\_ for me then I will help you out over here where you asked me. And God, you gave them a new car – and that couple has a great marriage – and look at him, God, how happy they are, how successful they are – and popular – God, you must be mad at me or just unfair.... Ooops stop! Stop! It says I will ‘extol’ You, O Lord. I thought it said I will ‘extort’ You, O Lord. Big difference. Right? Extort means ‘to force, extract, exact, wring, wrest, screw, squeeze, obtain by threat(s), blackmail someone for something.’ Nobody in their right mind would do that! Right? You don’t cut deals with God. You don’t shame Him into crying ‘uncle.’ You don’t bargain, barter or bully to get what you want with God. Right? That’s to ‘extort.’ The passage says ‘I will extol You, O Lord. ‘Extol’ - praise enthusiastically, go into raptures about, wax lyrical about, sing the praise of, acclaim, exalt, adulate, rave about, enthuse about/over. Big difference. We all have ample reason for such – correct? After all, has He not lifted you a time or two? Who can begin to count the enemies He delivered you from, defeated for you and all the ones you never saw because He was busy protecting you from them before they were even in sight? Has He not heard your cry for help? Does He not keep you alive – breath by breath? Has He not healed you along the way? So today consider – well, first remember we have the green light in these verses from God to cry out to Him for help and the testimony that He will answer and come, at times, ‘with healing in His wings’ – but consider the tone of your praying. And also examine the content of your prayers. Is ‘extolling’ as much, or even more, a part of what leaves your lips as you address our God than ‘appealing?’ Does the abundance of it fall into the clearly ‘extolling’ the Lord side? Or perhaps you have drifted into some form of ‘extorting’ the Lord? One makes sense and is utterly appropriate. The other – is just plain crazy – even though far too common. Pray today that God would open your eyes and our eyes as church to even get a small glimpse at the magnitude of mercy and blessing and provision and goodness He has and does pour into our lives each day. And pray that that would settle deep into our hearts such that the abundance of our prayer would fall on the extolling side of things. By the way – I think making that adjustment, as crazy as it seems, goes further in getting God to respond to our cries for help than increasing the volume, frequency and extortion factor on their behalf ever does. Just sayin’

February 12 – Read Isaiah 53:4-6

Before you read - Picture this scene: nice sunny day – you are cruising down the street of a small town window shopping and some actual shopping. Arms full of purchases. A fresh cup of coffee in hand. Enjoying a relaxing time – cares to the wind. You round a bend take a turn to where you think you left your car. A short cut – some cross between an ally way and a path. And after only a few steps there you see it. A man – a full grown healthy – well-built man – and a boy. The boy cowering and covering – the man pounding and pummeling. Bruises and welts appear with every blow. Tears flow with moans. Yet the blows continue. It is absolutely merciless and unbelievably brutal. The boy falls and the blows are joined with kicks. The agony is so fierce it has your heart about to explode and your stomach already beginning to wrench. And the beating continues. You are appalled at once and yet frozen. You can't act – you don't know what to do. So you cry out – stop, stop – you are going to kill him!!! 'I know' – he responds – 'I intend to!' Again you respond – 'stop! There is nothing he could have done to deserve something like this!' Again still laying out the horrible beating – the man – you know have come to know is the boy's father – responds – 'he has done nothing at all to deserve this.' And the kicks and blows continue to not only bruise but to disfigure. The boy's breaths come hard – his body and face are now nothing but wounds, swelling and other signs of the horrific beating. Apart from the occasional soft moan – he is silent. Still there is no let up, no softening, no end in sight. And you fully realize that the father's comment was not hyperbole or jest – but was in fact intention – he was intending to kill his son. So, again as the beating continues you try to intervene – 'he doesn't deserve this!!!!' you cry! Without looking the Father continues – 'no – he doesn't – but you do' he says. You are confused by the comment. 'Please, please – let him go' you plead. And now for the first time the father turns his head – and with tears covering his face – he says 'I can't. Cause if I let him go, then I can't let you go. If he lives, you must die. I love you too much not to finish.' And the beating continued in all its horror and might. Wounds inflicted. Wrath poured out – fiercely, fully. Innocent life – not taken, but given. And understand this - the Father's unabated horrific wrath upon his Son was fueled not by an anger toward **him** but by the father's love for **you**. Now read today's verses.

***Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.***

My apology for the graphic depiction. But sometimes I think the truth God reveals to us somehow becomes fairy tale for us. A distant – cute – far away story – rather than the heart-thumping, soul-wracking sometimes gut-wrenching truth it is. How else could you explain attempts to take verses like these and turn them into some magic wand or secret formula we can use to conjure up power to cure our colds and relieve our aching backs? And how else can you explain not only our casual winking at our sin, but our attempts to excuse it or justify it or believe that God is okay with it and will simply tolerate it? When the apostle Paul says in Romans 12 that 'in light of God's mercy' we ought to have no reservation and no hesitation in offering our lives fully to Him as living sacrifices – this is the image 'in light of God's mercy' should call us to. Whenever and wherever we want to hold out or hold back – in service or obedience – this is where our thoughts should take us. Whenever your love and devotion for God begin to wane, or your ability to persevere in His church fades because people act dumb or do hurtful things, etc., this is where your heart should go to be refueled, refocused and re-fortified. He - the Son – was punished by God, the Father - stricken, fiercely and mercilessly afflicted. Pierced, crushed, punished, wounded and killed – for us.

Pray about that today. Let it in. Let it all the way in. Don't get me wrong, I believe God heals. I have seen it. I have received it. And at times I have been used as His instrument for it. But if all that I ever received from God in life and for eternity is what He did, depicted in these verses – He would ever be worthy of my trust, my allegiance, my gratitude, my sacrifice, my praise and my worship. Don't you agree? Pray about that today.

February 13 – Read Psalm 103:2-4

***Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits— who forgives all your sins, and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, and crowns you with love and compassion,***

Hardship is hard. Suffering stinks. Being sick sucks. I know the proverb 'misery loves company' – I think it is a lie. When I am miserable, I want nothing more than to be left alone!! And especially by someone else who is miserable!! My misery is enough when I am miserable – I don't care about someone else's. I just want to focus on my own! And that's the danger, isn't it? My misery can affect my memory. ***'Forget not all his benefits...'*** I am prone to that. Are you? I mean a simple cold that won't go away or a back that won't go back in place can – if I am not careful – blacken out years worth of blessings and goodness I have received from God in my life! I am such a wimp. Show of hands - any others? I mean I get a toothache and begin to imagine I am Job. I have a setback and start to think that God has forsaken me or set His hand against me! I ask God for help or appeal to God for a healing – it doesn't come (like immediately) and I start to question my faith or wonder about His faithfulness – do I hear an 'Amen' out there? Maybe you are more stalwart than I. Perhaps you endure the hardships and setbacks and brokenness and illness of this life with an overflow of nonstop praise and wonder and worship. If so – you can stop reading now and just go praise some. But for the rest of us - the psalmist offers a critical tool for our well-being and a remedy for our forgetfulness that sometimes accompanies life's hardships and illnesses. Praise. Yep – praise. I know, I know – last thing you feel like doing when you are running a fever, nursing an injury, feeling the pain or blowing your guts – is to break out in a rousing chorus of 'here I am to worship...' That's why the appeal – well, actually in the Hebrew language, the command – to praise is directed not to the emotions but to the soul. Because emotions are tied to the moment – feelings are a response to the circumstances, they are an unfettered reaction to conditions – so, to that degree they are blind historically. But the soul – it has greater depth and a richer life than your feelings and, a longer, more stable memory, as well. So the psalmist in the midst of hardship, struggle, disease, pain, suffering – sounds the trumpet to the soul – wake up – 'forget not all his benefits' – remember the sin He has forgiven you, remember the countless times your body recovered and was restored, remember the Lord's redemptive work in your life and lastly remember that the final word and finishing touch in all of this life is the Lord will lift your life ***from the pit – any and all pits - and crown you with love and compassion.*** And if, in the midst, or in a jiffy, or through a process, He once again heals and restores - you crank up the volume of your praise and lodge one more 'benefit' into the already overflowing portfolio of wondrous things He has done for you. Pray about that today – seriously consider this critical matter of our forgetfulness. Sometimes it is not the searing pain of the onslaught of an illness or disease, sometimes it is not the in-your-face-horror of a major setback or loss – sometimes it can be the slow eroding effect of things moving along just okay that can lull our hearts to sleep and drift our minds to the oblivious forgetfulness of all His benefits toward us. So ask the Holy Spirit for help here – Jesus said the Spirit would come to help us 'remember.' And as you remember – don't just greet the memory of the benefit with a grunt, 'oh yah' or 'sorry God.' Give your soul a wake-up call – and put the memory into a declaration of praise. You will be better and healthier for it – not to mention the benefit to those around you!!!

February 14 – Read Psalm 41:2-4

***Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the Lord delivers them in times of trouble.***

***The Lord protects and preserves them— they are counted among the blessed in the land— he does not give them over to the desire of their foes. The Lord sustains them on their sickbed and restores them from their bed of illness. I said, "Have mercy on me, Lord; heal me, for I have sinned against you."***

So - question for you – would you like to see God's delivering power at work when you find yourself in trouble? How great would it be to have God's protective covering over your life? Would it excite you to know that God holds blessings in store for you? And would you like to know that when you are sick and laid up that God notices and reaches out with grace and healing? If so, here is the key God gives to open those doors - ***Blessed are those who have regard for the weak...*** 'Regard' for the weak. It's not just to feel bad, it is not simply to notice in passing. To regard is to 'see' – take notice, to value. To regard in the Hebrew means 'to engage.' Like the story Jesus told about the 'good Samaritan.' All three passersby saw the man in trouble. All

three took note. My guess is all three felt some sense of sorrow and empathy for his plight. But only one had 'regard' for him. His 'regard' for the man beaten and robbed and left to die motivated him to do something. His 'regard' for this one who was 'weak' cost him something. He went out of his way. He took a detour. He touched this man's wounds. He transported him to a place that could care for him. He covered the costs from his own resources. **Blessed are those who have regard for the weak...** So here is the equation – have regard for the weak and God will have regard for you = 'blessed are those who have regard for the weak.' And interestingly and amazingly God goes right ahead and itemizes some of those blessings for us!! I guess He wants us to know that our goodness and regard for the weak will never exceed God's regard for those who regard! And by the way, this is not the 'extorting' of God you read about a couple days ago. But when you order your life along the lines God directs, it is perfectly legit to ask Him to honor your faithfulness and obedience with His regard. Even Jesus, near the end of the course God set for Him, prayed – 'Father I have completed the work you sent me here to do, now, glorify Your Son...' So today consider how to live your life 'with regard' for the weak. And today thank God for Four Mile – a church community that always gets excited and comes through when we have opportunity to show 'regard' for those in need. Now consider the final verse in the scripture you read - **"Have mercy on me, Lord; heal me, for I have sinned against you."** I hope it is habit for you – not if you sin – but when you sin – to exercise humility and authenticity and go before God and admit, and own, and repent of that sin. That is an essential part of honoring God and living life anchored to the cross. But I wonder – when was the last time when you confessed your sin, received God's pardon, that you then asked God to heal you because you had sinned? I think that is an important part of living the new life. It takes us further and deeper. Such a prayer opens the door not only to have our guilt expunged and the record wiped clean. It opens the door to moving past the focus on sins' symptoms tended, toward appeals to God to remove sins' power over us!! **'Heal me! For I have sinned.'** God's desire for you and the power of Christ's sacrifice for you is meant for far more than enabling you to live a life of 'sin management.' 'Heal me!!' is a plea for a cure! A true remedy. Not a containment of sin symptoms but a victory over sin's source. So why not start to add that to your appeal before God? Absolutely continue to call out to Him to remember Christ's redeeming blood over your life. But why not see what God will do if you begin to ask Him for the healing power of the resurrection life in you? Some of you might remember this from an old tv commercial – 'try it, you'll like it.' The psalmist certainly thought it was worth the ask.

February 15 – Read Psalm 147:3

***He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.***

Life is life. Our faith does not automatically, and I don't think ever, fully protect us from its brokenness. Christians and non-Christians alike live in a broken world. At times its brokenness intersects with our lives. We experience broken relationships. Some Christians will live through the tragedy of a broken home. We feel the blow of broken trust. I've lived through life with broken-down cars! Some souls are deeply wounded when vows and promises get broken. Sooner or later the body you inhabit will break down. Communication breakdown is a constant battle. Dreams – good dreams - sometimes fall broken to the ground. Hopes get shattered. The world we live in is broken. One day all will be restored – that's a promise to hold fast to. But in the meantime – we will not only see brokenness but, at times, live in it. But with all its many faceted faces – and inescapable presence – there is one brokenness more tragic than all – one wound that runs deeper than any – to be brokenhearted. Ever been there? If so, you know its darkness. If so, you have tasted of its despair. If so, you know the emptiness of its infection. But read the verse again. ***He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.*** God may not always deliver us from the brokenness of this life – but He has promised healing to the brokenhearted. That is one wound He will always address. **'Brokenheartedness'** – it's a horror. It's dark. It hurts like no other wound. But there is a remedy. **HE HEALS** – He – the one who creates and sustains. The one who numbers the stars and whose power has no limit. **HE HEALS – the brokenhearted.** He heals – because He knows. ***For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help***

**us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16)** He knows. So He heals. Pray today for someone – perhaps yourself who is living with the darkness and ache of a broken heart. Bring them before the throne of our God who knows and who heals. Ask Him for it.

February 16 – Read Jeremiah 17:13-16.

**Lord, you are the hope of Israel; all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water. Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise. They keep saying to me, “Where is the word of the Lord? Let it now be fulfilled!” I have not run away from being your shepherd; you know I have not desired the day of despair. What passes my lips is open before you.**

Confession – I have an aversion to lines. Not lines like the ones down the center of the road – although I have been accused of an aversion to parking my car between lines – but that’s not what I am talking about here. Nor am I talking about the lines you are supposed to stay inside of when you color – well maybe I am a bit averse to that as well. And even though some have drawn them before me – and challenged me with them – I am not referencing the lines some want to draw in the sand. And maybe I might be a little.... Never mind that. Those are still not the lines that really bug me and are not the lines I am talking about – my aversion to lines is probably linked to some degree of lack in the patience department. I have an aversion to lines of people – waiting. I do my best to avoid them at all costs. It’s why I don’t get enthused about trips to the amusement parks. It’s why I walk out of crowded restaurants with ‘waiting lists.’ This aversion of mine drives me to getting tickets in advance, making reservations when possible and walking out of fast food places chock full of slow lines. But there is one place where I take my aversion and put a lid on it. There is one arena where I will wait and wait and wait as long as necessary. And wait without losing hope or looking for another venue or diverting to a different source. The psalmist says it best – **Heal me Lord, and I will be healed.** Now I understand and bear witness to the fact that the Lord can do that work in a million different ways. But know this – if it’s not from the Lord – keep it. I think the psalmist lived with a similar resolve on this one. He goes on to say – Lord, my praise is to you and you alone whether the healing comes in an instant, or in a week or a decade or has to wait until you return and restore all things – I’m waiting and praising you only. He says even if everyone else thinks I am crazy, believes I am holding on to a false hope, a failed word or suggests the long wait is because you either don’t care, won’t listen or can’t do anything about it – I’m holding fast in my trust in You and keeping high my hope in You. I know Lord, you promised so it’s coming. So I’ll just stuff my ears if I have to and I’ll wait my place in line for my healing to come in this life, or the next. And did you notice – he doesn’t stop there! **I have not run away from being your shepherd; you know I have not desired the day of despair. What passes my lips is open before you.** Lord, just because you aren’t operating on my timing, I’m not bailing out, not going to use this as an excuse to pout, or as a reason to stop serving you or as a justification for caving into despair and living my life as a victim and turning my heart from praise to singing a dirge song of ‘woe is me.’ **What passes my lips is open before you...** Oh what a wondrous thing! What a beautiful faith! **Heal me Lord, and I will be healed.** And Lord, just so you know – if it is delayed by your will and wisdom – I’ll wait for it. So where is it you need, or perhaps have asked, God for His healing? And where is it perhaps you are considering giving up, or are weary of waiting, or have justified turning away from God, or stopped serving God, or decided not to trust God, or grown bitter or complaining – because the desired healing has you waiting? Maybe you share my aversion for lines. Maybe the wait has far exceeded anything you imagined. Maybe you have simply grown weary in asking and your hope has long since withered. Would you let the psalmist’s words reinvigorate you in your waiting? Would you let these verses renew your conviction that only the Lord’s healing work will bring true healing? Would you renew your trust today and stand before the Lord who is the spring of living water and renew your faithfulness – Lord, however long it takes to heal this body, to heal the relationship, to heal that hurt, to heal that marriage, to heal that trust, to heal that area – Lord – I won’t turn away, I won’t stop praising you, I won’t abandon the ministry you have given me, I won’t grow cold in my love, I won’t grow sour in my spirit, I won’t act as if Your power and your grace was not sufficient, I won’t let my words go south... Lord **Heal me, and I will be healed.** I would like it

now – or at least soon – but come what may – I’ll wait for it. Pray today for an area in your own life where you have been asking and waiting for the Lord’s healing for a long time. Also today, consider someone you know that, from what you can tell, has been holding on to hope for healing for a long, long, time. Ask God to heal them definitely – but also ask Him to give the resolve to wait if necessary.

February 17 – Read Matthew 8:5-17

***When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?” The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, myself, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”***

***When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment.***

***When Jesus came into Peter’s house, he saw Peter’s mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.”***

Wow, huh? Can you imagine being there for all that!? A gentile pagan makes the connection between recognizing authority and carrying out commands. Jesus is shocked and the man’s servant gets a long distance healing. Pete gets on the good side of his mother-in-law by bringing Jesus home, and a touch of the hand and the fever breaks. Word must have gotten out because that night the demon-possessed and bodily broken showed up in droves and went home healed and free. Quite a day! Don’t you think? Amazing! I mean who would not want in on that gig?? I’m surprised anyone went home at all – I figured they all would have volunteered to be part of the team! And who knows when next time you might need some of that authority exercised on your behalf – best to keep close, I would think. And so did some others – read on. **(18-22)** ***When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”*** They wanted to be a part of action – until they realized that getting a miracle was not the same as joining the team. The offer to join the team sounded great until the realization came that it meant leaving the familiar. The excitement of the volunteers seemed to quickly dissipate when they understood that getting in on some of the benefits of grace and witnessing some of the action of the Father’s kingdom was a far cry from signing on as a partner to the Lord of grace. Witnessing authority, rubbing shoulders with authority, reaping the benefits of authority and even exercising authority is always more exciting, more tantalizing and more appealing than living under authority. That is why so many choose to drop in for the show – pay a visit for the benefit – watch from a distance and retreat right back to life as it was. Better for it, sometimes blessed through it, often excited about it – but still opting for life under their own control over life surrendered to His authority. Happens. Lots. Then and now. But in the end – whatever sense of comfort, or degree of control, or touches of grace they may have received – it is a tragic and immense net loss to what Jesus came to offer and to all they could have received. ‘Lose your life and you will find it.’ Life – as God designed it to be and as only God can fashion it to be - That is the true prize and the really amazing grace He offers. And losing this life as you have made it is also the only way to experience the new one He will fashion. So today consider your own relationship with Jesus. Are you settling for some grace that is less than ‘following’? Are you missing out on

the full richness of living with Jesus because you are holding on to maintaining control or looking after comfort in some way? Or perhaps you have always thought that if you are getting the benefits and blessings from God then you must be part of the community of God. Pray about that today. Pray today also for all those who receive grace and blessing through the faithful service and ministry of this church – ask God to work in their lives such that they desire the ‘more’ He has for them, called discipleship. Pray also for yourself and everyone who is part of our church and our church community as a whole – that every blessing God pours out – every ounce of grace will not only ignite gratitude in our hearts but will also fortify our resolve to pay any price, and endure any discomfort that following as disciples may require – knowing that it is always worth it.

February 18 – Read Mark 5:34

***He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”***

This was a woman who for 12 years had experienced the hell of unstoppable hemorrhaging. She was forced to live in isolation. She was not welcome in the temple. Nobody dared touch her. She was unclean, unwanted, and incurable. She had spent her life and her resources to find a remedy. She had been likely cheated and certainly abused by quacks and charlatans and predators alike. She depleted all of her resources. Instead of seeing even small improvement the scripture tells us she was worse now than before any of the so-called treatments. So now she is truly alone – not even sycophants had time for her because she had nothing left they could take. She was anemic. Pale. Weak. Vulnerable. Most likely, diseased. And still under siege from her original uncontrollable bleeding. Who knows, maybe we have record here of an early record of a slowly progressing Ebola case. She likely thought a quick end would be better than this enduring decline. But somewhere – somehow - a long-shot hope crept into her desperate plight. And the most amazing part of the story, if you ask me – was that rather than sloughing it off, giving a wave and a declaring a ‘why bother’, instead of wallowing in a ‘nothing ever works for me’ mindset – which by the way, would have been justifiable for her – somehow – maybe the greatest miracle of the story – she received the word and mustered up a ‘what have I got to lose’ spirit! And understand – apart from all the failed and sometimes brutal remedies of medics and witchdoctors alike, I am sure she prayed and pleaded, I am sure she was prayed for, prayed over – probably had some anointing and casting out and the whole works administered. Yet, nothing. Don’t know how she did it – but somehow she went beyond a – ‘well, let’s just pray now’ or a ‘see if he will put me on his prayer list,’ or even ‘I’ve asked God already – I guess somehow this will work out for somebody’s good’ – she pulled together the courage as well as the stamina – with a single thought. I’m going close. Forget the crowds. Disregard the reactions. Endure the discomfort. Push through the weakness and light-headedness. Ignore the looks. Press through the crowds. Run the risk. Get close, and get close as possible. In her mind a hope had awakened – long shot, for sure. Crazy thinkin’ – no doubt. But somehow this urge had a different tone. It was something more than her own inner longing. This came not just from her own inner longing – it had the appeal of a Spirit’s urging. Get close – as close as possible. Mark puts her drive this way - ***because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.”*** She does. And she did. It was not a permission-seeking touch. It wasn’t a desperate grab or clinging. In fact, the whole thing was kind of a stealth touch. Nobody noticed. No one saw it go down. No one brought her before Jesus – it was a solo venture. Desperate. Driven. Difficult. And defined – get close – as close as you can. She did. And in her touch, she got touched. Nobody noticed. No one caught it. But Jesus felt it. ‘Who touched me?’ He asked. The disciples were puzzled – ‘who touched you? Jesus have you noticed this sea of people? In the last five minutes hundreds of people have touched you!’ ‘No, who ‘touched’ my clothes?’ Jesus explained – while He searched the faces in the crowd. ‘Someone touched my robe!’ I felt power being released through me.’ He continued to ask, continued to look – and finally she confessed. Afraid, worried, trembling, unsure of what would happen next – but certain that THAT touch got her healed. The bible says she fessed up ‘told Jesus the whole truth.’ And waited for the chips to fall. Jesus heard her out. And sent her on her way. But between the hearing her out and the sending her off – He made an observation – ‘daughter, your faith has healed you.’ Now that single comment of Jesus gets distorted, twisted, misunderstood and misused to painful degrees. ‘Your faith has healed you.’ But the story is clear – Jesus healed her. ‘the power went out from Him.’ She had faith before she ever left her home. She held to the

hope every painful inch of the journey. What her faith did, was empower her pursuit; what her faith did, was drive her at whatever cost to get as close to Jesus as possible. What her faith did, was tie her hopes to a source greater than anything the world could provide. So faith has no power of its own – but for the Christian, the object of our faith does – in fact, all power and all authority belongs to Him. What faith does, is drives us, launches us, propels us on a journey and a search to get as close to Jesus as possible – close enough to touch – no matter what the cost. Let faith do that in you and you might find yourself in the midst of a miracle or two as well. Pray about that today. Pray for faith in you and in us as a church that drives us to nearness with God.

February 19 – Read 2 Kings 6:17.

***And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.***

Meet Elisha’s servant. Unnamed. Faithful as anything. Witness to amazing things. You should read the story. Axe heads floating. Thwarting enemy attacks against Israel. Healing Kings. Healing leprosy. Parting the Jordan. Filling a hoard of empty jars with miraculously supplied oil to help out a widow. Raising a dead child back to life. Multiplied a couple loaves and grain to feed 100! And Elisha’s servant was privy and witness to it all. That is quite a discipleship pathway. So on this particular day – the servant of Elisha gets up – does his yoga stretch – heads out to get the morning coffee going – looks up to the hills and forget the sunset – what he sees is a massive, surrounding army who were not there to bless and protect. So what’s a servant to do? He panics! His heart jumps to his throat. He puts on his doomsday hat. His palms sweat. His eyes blink. His mind races – this is it! We are done! Death not by a thousand cuts but by thousands of soldiers!! So he runs – informs Elisha of their situation and their peril and their likely quickly coming end. Elisha listens politely – then asks ‘hey is that coffee ready yet?’ ‘WHAT?’ The servant is befuddled. ‘Maybe you didn’t hear or misunderstood. There is an army out there – not a detachment, not a brigade an entire army! We – the entire city is surrounded. And there is no white flag. They are here on a mission to do business. And your name is the hit list – and likely mine too cause I’m with you.’ Elisha – points and says, ‘hey would you toss me that cream and a couple splendas?’ His servant is dumbfounded, bewildered and still worried and anxious as all get out. Elisha then seeks to reassure the servant. ‘Don’t worry. We have them outnumbered. What kind of coffee is this – I like it. Be sure to stock up on this.’ The servant is not just doubtful of Elisha’s claim. He is beginning to wonder about Elisha’s sanity. Elisha looks at his servant – senses the continued fear and absolute doubt. And he prays. ‘God, let him see.’ Then Elisha suggests his servant go and check on the condition of things around the city again. He does. ***Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.*** Jesus said – ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ He also said that He commands the entire host of the heavenly warriors. Where are you acting or reacting not in light of that? Where do you need God to ‘open your eyes so that you may see?’ Where do you feel afraid, or alone, or doomed, or outnumbered, or out-maneuvered? Maybe the prayer you need to pray is Elisha’s prayer for His servant – ‘Lord open this servant’s eyes.’ Then I would suggest you take a closer look.

February 20 – Read Luke 8:49-56

***While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” he said. “Don’t bother the teacher anymore.” Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.” When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John, and James, and the child’s father and mother. Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. “Stop wailing,” Jesus said. “She is not dead but asleep.” They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But he took her by the hand and said, “My child, get up!” Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.***

Interesting – at least, I think so. Jairus’ daughter is dead – at least from our perspective. Breathing stopped. Body cold. No pulse. No heart beat. Brain waves flat. It’s all over. Dead. And so in our attempts to ease the blow, soften the truth and address the reality in a way that is as sensitive as possible in those situations –

doctors do it, family members do it – all the symptoms of death are there - resuscitation attempts fail - so the news comes, and is more often than not framed in these words – ‘so sorry – there was nothing we could do - they are gone.’ Huh. What if our attempt to soften the blow is really a more accurate statement of the reality of death than the way we normally picture it. **‘Your daughter is dead – let’s go – no reason to bother the teacher [Jesus] any more.’** Insensitive – but direct and to the point. Heart beat silenced. Blood pressure zero. Brain waves flat. Respirations stopped. Body cells already starting the process of decay. Dead. Nothing more could be done. Life is over. Leave Jesus alone. Jesus interrupts and suggests an alternative plan based on a different perspective. What if dead is not over – but what if dead is just gone? What if the body’s demise has no real impact on the person’s life? What if the revitalization of a stopped heart, flat-lined brain, zero respiration, decaying body is as easy and possible for Jesus as you waking up a kid from an afternoon nap? Ought to change some things about how we not just understand life, but live it – don’t you think? **‘Stop the wailing’ Jesus tells the gathered friends – ‘she is not dead, but asleep.’ They laughed at him.** You know – I wonder if we would, too. Laugh. Feel insulted. Accuse him of being totally insensitive – let alone being a bit whacko. But what if dead is not over – but dead is simply gone?

You know something that has always amazed me about this story and others like it. Jesus raised up this little girl’s body from death. Lazarus received the same. Then you have the son of the widow from Nain whose funeral procession Jesus stopped and ended with the boy’s resurrection. Then of course you have that mass of people whose bodies were resurrected when Jesus’ was, and who showed up and wandered about in the city. Then you have Don Piper who wrote a book about being dead and in heaven for 90 minutes. And that little boy who got to hang out with some ‘dead’ relatives and Jesus before he awoke ‘undead.’ You know, unless you happen to be in a bible study that is reading these stories, you hear very little about these people. There’s no great movement to declare them as gods or goddesses. You don’t see shrines for the worship of Lazarus. Bet there is not a single book written trying to disprove the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter. No attacks that it was somehow a hoax or she was never really dead or the product of some mass delusion of grief. Then why all the fuss about Jesus? The attacks on the claims of His resurrection from the dead are relentless and range everywhere from absurd to remarkably crafty. Books, blogs, rants and reasonings have been assailing, and continue to assail the claim – the dead man rose. So why all the indifference to the countless claims of Jesus resurrecting lives of friends, strangers, just died and long dead, and the fierce and furious assault on the claim that Jesus’ life was resurrected? One difference and one difference only – Jesus and the others believed in the resurrection. Jesus and the others experienced resurrection. But Jesus, and Jesus alone, claimed to be the one who wielded the power of resurrection. Game changer.

**“Stop wailing,” Jesus said. “She is not dead but asleep.” They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But he took her by the hand and said, “My child, get up!” Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up.** So what if ‘dead’ is only gone? What if death is more akin to sleep, than to being over? What if Jesus was right about death – hers and yours? What if Jesus not only understood death better, but did and does, in fact, have power and control over it? Death is real. It happens. But may I suggest an alternative plan? Don’t join the ranks of the wailing. Don’t follow the advice of family and friends who drastically underestimated the bounds of Jesus’ ability and power. And plug your ears to the scoffers who know only what they have seen. Instead, bother the Master. Believe what He says is true, to be true. And welcome Him in – not just to your home but into the inmost chambers where you feel most afraid, and are the most helpless. **‘Her spirit returned.’** And so shall yours. Pray about that today. Ask Jesus for the courage to believe – not in a miracle, not in a sign, not in a power or a force – but in Him and what He says to be true. Ask Jesus to speak to your spirit about your life – the one here, and the one ahead. And ask Him to give you the utmost confidence that your death, when your life belongs to him, is but sleep. Sleep with a wondrous awakening and a forever ‘getting up’ ahead. Today consider not the wonder of Jairus’ daughter’s resurrection – but the controversy of Jesus’ claim to hold that power over all life. May I make a bold assertion – if that is so – and I firmly believe it to be so – best not to face either the end of this life, or the reality of the waking into the next without Jesus by your side. Today, ask God to build in our church community a genuine trust and accurate understanding in the scope and extent of Jesus’ power over all creation. Pray that our ‘belief’ would relieve us of our fear, our anxiety, and our living and

understanding of life, like everyone else whose understanding and hope in Jesus is restricted to the bounds of the physical world as we see it and understand it.

February 21 – Read Revelation 21:4

***‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’***

This passage tears at my soul. It stirs in me at once a deep longing and a fearful dread. Oh to live life without the sting of death, to engage each day without ache or pain or disease! To know tears of joy undiminished by the dark of grief or the heaving sobs of brokenness and loss. A new order. A new day. The kingdom of heaven consuming all that is not - with its richness, vibrancy and life. Ohhhh I long for it - regularly. But at other times and sometimes at the very same time – I dread its coming. My soul quakes. My heart shudders. Not at all because I fear I might miss it. My place in that kingdom is sealed. It is a done deal. When it arrives I shall fully enjoy its riches. Jesus has seen to it. Nor do I dread its coming because I have developed some fondness for the world of death, grief, crying, pain, loss, etc. Every time I see such, every time I feel such – the cry arises from my deepest parts – ‘This is not what life is meant to be. There must be more.’ No – my joy is accompanied by my dread because of the last phrase in this verse – when the new comes - ‘the old order of things passes away.’ Yes ‘the old order of things’ has to do with the laws of entropy, the curse on nature that includes natural disasters, physical diseases and relational turmoil. But the ‘old order of things’ also includes all those who have not, through faith in Jesus Christ received ‘new life’ ‘new birth’ – those who have resisted or rejected or delayed ‘the new order’ of things that we enter when we, by faith, become a son or daughter of God. The new order that Jesus not only brings, but where He is also the center. My soul quakes because there are those I know, those I see, those I love who still resist the ‘new order of things’ and insist on holding to the ‘old order of things.’ So as much as I long for the new order to come, for the tears to stop, the grief and sorrow to come to a final end – I also will willingly accept them, and in faith courageously endure them – in hopes that while there is yet time – many will come to faith and be saved. For now, I will shed the tears. For now, I will enter into the suffering and hardship of this broken world. For now, I will at times quake with grief and wrestle with sin’s ugliness. For now, I will long for the ***‘there will be’*** moment of the coming of the new order of the fullness of the kingdom. But mostly for now – I will live with my heart torn, with it set both on the hope and great joy of the coming kingdom, and its willingness to spend and be spent in service here and now to my King and His mission to seek and to save those who are lost. Yes – ‘come, Lord Jesus!’ but not yet in fullness. Come, Lord Jesus, now in the guise of the foolishness of the gospel which has the power of salvation... This I do, knowing and longing for that moment when my Father’s hand will hold my face and His thumb will brush below my eye – not to dry a tear but to wipe away every tear. I just want everyone I know and everyone I meet to be there for that moment. Don’t you? Today pray about the names our church placed on the little orange sticky notes. Pray about the names you wrote down. Ask Jesus to use us to help them find their way into the ‘new order’ of things.

February 22 – Read 1 Peter 2:24

***“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”***

Ever been healed? Even from a cold or a toothache? And whatever way – healed through the miraculous ability of the body to resist disease and mend itself, or through the miracle of modern meds and treatments or through the short-cut intervention of a direct miraculous touch from God. Kind of nice, isn’t it? Energy comes back. The world broadens beyond your ache and pain. Cheerfulness returns. You can’t wait to get back to stuff a month ago you complained endlessly about having to do! Ever been healed? Kinda cool – right? And the more significant the healing, the greater the expanse the recovery impacts. Right? You’ve heard of people who were essentially given the death sentence from doctors who recover and just aren’t the same any more! They live with joy. They invest in relationships they used to take for granted or ignore. They seek reconciliation. They jump out of airplanes and smell flowers. Healing is a great thing! In all of its forms. Now imagine this, you

or someone you know is sick. Very, very sick. Aches and pains. Debilitatingly so. No energy. No rest. No interest. Sick. The healing comes. Unbelievable. Unexpected. Undiluted. Healed. Then... you or they continue to lay around in bed. Take days off work. Moan in agony. Take meds your body doesn't need. Give no energy to the people around you. Hobble around, expect to be treated like nothing's changed, continue to live as if you were still sick, etc. You've been healed! But by the way you continue to live – no one can tell. Crazy ain't it? Who would do that? Healing not only heals things when it comes it releases things. Energy. Joy. Restored engagement. Refreshed perceptions. Healing releases life. And the greater and deeper the healing, the greater and broader the release. Who would ever be healed and continue to live and act like they were still sick? Read the verse again. **'By His wounds you have been healed.'** Yay, God!!! **'By His wounds you have been healed.'** Deeply. Miraculously. AND Purposefully. Yep, purposefully – He heals you – **so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.** No one would ever get healed and keep on living the same old way they did when they were sick – right? Pray about that today. Pray that for our church community that because Jesus bore our sins in his body, because Jesus healed us by his wounds – we would leave the old life-sucking, relationship-depleting, sickness-bound living of sin. And begin living for righteousness. Righteousness – life as God plans it, life as God created it, life as God commands it. Health. It is so goood. But maybe Jesus' question that preceded His healing of the lame guy at the pool of Bethesda needs considered – 'do you want to be well?' Because healing is not only great – it removes sickness and destroys disease. Healing is also powerful – it releases life. Healed by his wounds **so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."** It is a powerful thing. Ask God to move in us such that we would leverage our restored health for living His righteousness. Just makes sense. Right?

February 23 – Read Mark 2:1-12

***A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."***

***Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"***

Let's call the paralyzed guy 'Gadi.' We don't know his name but just go with it – I'm making one up. Gadi. Gadi is paralyzed. Confined to a mat. Legs atrophied. Wrestling with sores he can't feel but can fester. We don't know how he ended up in this plight. But again not explicit but implicit in the story – I think his four friends did. I think at one time there was a five-some known for their vigor for life. They worked hard and played even harder. No job was too hard to do. No adventure too risky to avoid. They laughed together. Made fun of each other. Sweated together. And each thought the other was just enough out of his mind to be worth following. The five of them lived life to the brim. And maybe that's where it happened. He didn't clear the jump. When he lifted up, something gave out. The hold held the first couple, but failed him. Maybe he said 'I got this' but didn't. Not sure but something happened. Something went wrong. Then things changed. Gadi's body broke. I imagine these four carried him as far as they needed to get the best help they could find. I bet these four were in the waiting room when the doctor delivered the news – 'he's going to live – pause – but he will never walk again.' I imagine them gathering around the bed that was to become the extent of his existence with feigned smiles, half-hearted jokes and the promise – 'we will get through this together.' I bet they still got together –

the five of them – retelling old stories. Laughing at each other. But then the awkward silence – ‘well, Gadi – great to see you man. You look good, dude. Well, we got to get going.’ And off they would go. To scale mountains, take on a tough job – launch into a new adventure. To laugh. To sweat. To play. To work. And to miss. Can you imagine the number of times the four said – ‘man, Gadi would love this’ ‘I wish Gadi was here, he could do this in a flash’ ‘do remember the time Gadi...’ Or I wonder how many times they discussed what they could have done differently, or how they should have gone first or stopped him or moved faster... Gadi was one of the five. He was loved. He had fun. He did live. But now he was paralyzed. Instead of living adventures he heard stories of them. Instead of getting jobs done, he watched. Instead of looking forward to a new day – Gadi endured them. That is until the four plotted a new adventure for the five. Just like the last time these four carried Gadi with fury – nothing could stop them. They couldn’t imagine their lives without their friend. Their friend was hurt – they were desperate and they were going to find help. It was risky. They had never done this before. They looked like fools. And maybe as before, Gadi had questions on where they were headed and why and the only answer he got were knowing smiles and a ‘you’ll see.’ And maybe the old familiar words so oft exchanged among the five ‘just trust us.’ That might have worked okay until their progress got stalled by the mass of people. These five had met obstacles before – and devised ways around or forced a way through. This time they came up with an ‘around’ plan. For Gadi – the ride to the rooftop must have been crazy enough – but when the ropes came out and the shingles came off – I am sure the protests came out! ‘You guys are crazy – get me out of here – this is insane – you are going to get me killed!!!’ I imagine one of the four looking down at Gadi as the ropes suspended him toward the floor – may have winked and said ‘Hey Gadi - break a leg.’ Far from breaking a leg, Gadi left that house walking on legs that had not functioned or felt for years. He came in lowered through the roof, and left carrying his mat no longer confined to it. And beyond that – he walked out no longer carrying the burden of his sin or being defined by it ‘your sins are forgiven’ Jesus told him. Imagine the reunion of the five outside. The laughs. The high fives. The telling and retelling of the story – how the plan got hatched, how problems got solved, how crazy seemed to make sense in the moment, how hope was met with wonder as Gadi was lowered before Jesus. I don’t know what else they did but somehow I think the five continued to have fun, continued to work hard and play harder – but I wonder and like to think that the five never backed down from the challenge of doing whatever it would take to get other friends in need before Jesus. So that’s the story. And here’s my point – Gadi is Hebrew. It means ‘fortunate one.’ And so is anyone with friends like that – ‘fortunate.’ Friends willing to risk, carry, do the crazy, press and dig through the barriers, ignore the protests and live and move with a sense of urgency and determination and courage and innovation of faith that Jesus has what their friend needs. Gadi. Fortunate. Have a friend or friends like that? We all at times need them. Are you a friend like that? Pray about that today. Pray today also for our church community – that we would be that kind of friend to each other and to our community.

February 24 – Read Acts 16:22-34.

***The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.***

***About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”***

***The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”***

***They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.***

Ever seen it? Ever been part of it, or victim to it? A crowd morphs into a mob. Gets crazy. Gets out of control. Gets frenzied. Gets ugly. Somebody gets hurt. That's what mobs do. Paul and Silas experienced one on the receiving end, not the being end. It hurt. Lots. They were falsely accused. Unjustly arrested. And furiously beaten . **'stripped and beaten with rods – severely flogged.'** That's no slap on the hands. That's not even close to a good beating. This was intended not to hurt but to maim and potentially even kill. But they survived, to not only end up behind bars, but to also be locked in the darkest cell, and just to make sure they didn't drag their bleeding, flesh-hanging, bone-exposed bodies anywhere – they slapped them in irons! What would you do? What would your instinctive reaction be in the face of such injustice and such unmerited violence? Paul and Silas turned from being evangelists to being praise team - **About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.** Bet that didn't come up on your potential responses. But think about it for a moment. It was their love for, dedication to, and service for God that landed them there. Now they could have shouted at the jailer. Organized a prisoner protest. They could have cried out for justice and against the injustice. They could have explained to all the other inmates that they were not really criminals and were completely innocent. They could have hunkered down and licked their wounds and had a giant pity party. But they opted for praise instead. Which seems crazy until you look long and hard enough to see that it makes sense. Perfect sense. Situation was clear. The mob unfairly attacked them. The authorities falsely arrested them. The enforcers mercilessly beat them to within inches of their lives. The jailers unjustly locked them away. Their flesh was torn, their blood dripped, their muscles spasmed, they may not make the night, they could wake up to an execution. They could be handed back over to the mob. So why praise? Paul and Silas had been around and functioning in the kingdom of heaven long enough to know that their praise wasn't just meant to be a response to God's power, it was often the trip wire that released it. Not that that was why they did it. I'm sure neither one thought or said anything along these lines – 'hey, let's sing that new worship song we been doing in church and maybe the doors will pop open and these chains will unlock.' Nope. Didn't happen. But what did happen is they were able to see their situation in light of the faith they professed. They were not alone. The mob was not in charge. Their healing would come. God knew what was going on. And was still quite in control. And 'church' was mightier than prison and where two or more were gathered... So with all the gusto they could muster in their broken down, locked up, poorly treated bodies – they reminded themselves of the greater reality of who God was, who was in control, who they were in Christ and what really mattered in this world – and they praised. And the inmates listened. How do I know that's how it went down? Look at what happened next. They praised. Prison doors flew open. Chains fell off. The guard was asleep. And nobody moved!! You see when you genuinely praise God, escape is not your end game – God's mission and God's glory is! And that, my friend, is why your praise is often the trigger that releases God's power. Pray about that today. Where are you acting 'confined' by your circumstances? Any place where your pain, or someone's unjust treatment of you is blinding you to the greater realities of life as God's son or daughter? What would happen, do you think, if you shifted focus and turned that prison into a place of praise? Not praising God for the mess, but having the ability and faith to praise Him in it. What would happen if you began to praise God in spite of your hurts, rather than ignoring Him because of them? What if, like Paul and Silas, you were able to shrink your circumstances, your hardship, your suffering, fear, etc., to their rightful place as circumstances where your true purpose of furthering God's mission and giving God glory can still take place? Pray about that today.

February 25 – Read 2 Kings 5:1-14

**Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the**

*king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."*

*As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"*

*When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."*

*But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.*

*Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy*

Pride is a cruel master. It prompted Eve to take a bite, and Adam to join in. It led David not only to his adultery but to think he could cover it up with a few strategic murders. It led the people of Israel to believe that their God would be okay with companion gods. Well, pride is what caused the human mess in the first place – Satan, the devil – once one of the most majestic creations in all heaven – wanted not just more, but wanted what was not his to have. Pride came. Then the mess. Pride is a cruel taskmaster. And God hates it. Not just hates it but opposes it, both Peter and James tell us 'God opposes the proud...' God hates it. Naaman had leprosy. Dreadful condition. Slowly eats away at flesh and nerves. Brings a host of complications. Naaman had it and had it bad – and he hated it. But Naaman had another condition far more insidious – way more destructive. And Naaman had it and had it bad. And he loved it. Naaman was infected with pride. So Naaman heard of Elisha and his God-given ability to sometimes be an agent of healing. So Naaman talked to his boss, got some time off, assembled an entourage, filled up chests full of cash, assembled a wardrobe fit for a king, got a letter of commendation from his king, lined up his chariots, saddled up his horses and loaded up his sorry sick body for a long ride and headed for Israel to both impress and get help. His arrival scared the beejabsers out of the king of Israel who thought it was a trap. Elisha sent a note to the king to chill and for Naaman to come on over. Which he did. Show and all. But Elisha not only wasn't impressed – he didn't even bother. He just sent his servant to Naaman with the remedy for his sickness – the physical one. ***"Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."*** Naaman, far from elated, was ticked. The cure for his physical sickness sent his spiritual sickness into a raging outbreak. He was offered the cure, but was offended by the perceived slight – ***I thought he would have surely come out to me – waved his hand around, waved a wand, spun in circles, reminded everyone of how important I am, how powerful I am, and what's with the Jordan river – they think their water is better than ours?!*** You see Naaman came both to impress and get healed. He flouted in his pride. He despised his leprosy. And his acceptance of the first nearly cost him the healing of the second. You won't receive much from God if you come before him to both impress and to get. God can spot pride miles away and in parts per trillions in a human spirit. And He hates it. So today consider any place in your life where God has graciously given you the remedy for some malady that ails you – some restoration you long for - but your pride has been blocking you from receiving it? Pride is a cruel master. And if allowed to linger it grows and it will – bank on it – at some point, rob you of the very blessing or healing God has for you.

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, **“This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”**

Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, **“Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.”** And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: **“Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.’”**

Then Isaiah said, **“Prepare a poultice of figs.”** They did so and applied it to the boil, and he recovered.

It’s one thing to have a sit with your doctor and have him or her say – ‘best you get things in order.’ Not sure how long, but pretty certain not long and you are going to die. That’s got to be stunner. But when God sends a message and says **“This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”** That’s a bummer. I mean who do you go to for a second opinion on that one!! Hezekiah was clear on the message. He was clear on the source. He didn’t fly into a rage and turn on the messenger. ‘Get me a better prophet in here and throw this bum out!’ He rolled toward the wall and had a heart to heart with the only One who could do anything about the diagnosis. Hezekiah cried and rather than plead – he appealed.

**“Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.”** May I suggest that is a wise and honoring way to come before God – not pleading but appealing. Hezekiah so to speak pulls out his resume of faithfulness. Rather than pointing to his condition. God knows he is sick. God knows, barring His own intervention, this sickness will be unto death. So Hezekiah simply reminds God that over the course of his life and his leadership he has faithfully and wholeheartedly served God. So ‘after further review’ God gives Hezekiah some bonus years. Why not – good help is sometimes hard to find! So consider praying that way before God – sure, remind Him of the need (He already knows, but ask anyway) but then remind Him of both your past record of faithfulness and your future intent to use any blessing He may give – be it health, marriage, job, promotion, education, house, etc. etc. for the sake of doing His will and honoring His name. Who knows, might get you a bonus!! Oh – by the way – if you do not have a stellar record of faithfulness and wholehearted devotion to point to – why not start building that portfolio today? Whether you get the bonus years or not, it will be amazingly rewarded. Pray about that today. Pray today about our church community – remind God of the years of faithful service represented over the history of this faith community. Ask Him for many more years of His favor and life to be upon it.

February 27 – Read Mark 10:46-52

***Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”***

***Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”***

***So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.***

***The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.***

Tenacious Bartimaeus! Sounds like a new song someone should write. But tenacious he was. He heard stuff he couldn’t see. Someone said something about Jesus being in the crowd. Enough said – for Bartimaeus – he didn’t have eyes that worked but sure had lungs that could. And work them he did!! So much so that **many rebuked him and told him to be quiet!!** Which for him was sign to crank up the volume a few more decibels! I mean – come on! Crowds are noisy! Especially these ones – prophecies and pronouncements; praise songs

and petitions; naysayers and critics – normal crowd; all there – all with something to say – and like usual at such gatherings, all saying it all, all at the same time. But above it all is the volume of Bartimaeus crying out to a Jesus he couldn't see. And everyone around him 'shushing' him. He ignored it all – everyone else's noise, his own blindness, those near him who thought his crying too loud and out of place. Bartimaeus wasn't shutting up, wasn't quieting down, wasn't giving up – if there was a chance that Jesus was there and if there was any shot Jesus could hear – he was going to give his lungs the workout of their life! Tenacious Bartimaeus. And it paid off. For Bartimaeus and for Jesus. Bartimaeus gained his sight. Jesus gained a follower. That's the way gifts from God are always supposed to work I think. Tenacious Bartimaeus. Blowing out his lungs to get the attention of the Jesus He couldn't see in hope of finding help for a problem he couldn't fix. ***"Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.*** And then what follows – ***'what do you want me to do for you?'*** Jesus asked that question. Bartimaeus didn't hem and haw; he didn't 'if you will Jesus...' he didn't bargain or barter or make promises he didn't intend to keep, he didn't go theological on Jesus – well you know everything even before I speak it and so I really don't need to tell you' – he just flat out put it out there – and I don't think he whispered it either. ***'Rabbi, I want to see.'*** Done. And healer gains follower. And I don't think for one second Bartimaeus was quiet about the whole deal!! ***"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"*** became ***'look what Jesus, Son of David, did for me!! I once was blind but now I see!!'*** And I don't figure anyone tried to shush that up! Tenacious Bartimaeus.

I imagine some months later after Jesus had been executed and raised and the new fledgling Christian community gathered by the thousands near the temple for praise and the apostle's teaching – more than one newcomer asked on the way home – 'who was that guy singing his lungs out over by the wall?' Followed by a chuckle – 'oh that was Bartimaeus – and don't ever tell him to tone it down – because for him that is an invitation to crank it up!

***What do you want me to do for you?*** Will you let Jesus ask you that question today? It will take some faith – maybe even a certain level of desperation. But if you want a little hint – just shoot straight.

February 28 – Read Luke 17:11-19

***Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"***

***When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."***

Can I just say it outright – it doesn't take faith to get healed. Happens all the time – through the miraculous natural as well as through the simply miraculous. I've seen it. The bible puts it on display (see story of Naaman the Assyrian general above). And check out 9 out of 10 of these previously leprous gents. All ten make the appeal – maybe it was some sort of early small group or support group?! ***'Jesus – Master – have pity on us!'*** He did. Not immediately – but as they obeyed they were healed. (that's a whole other thought to follow) But all ten – probably initially a bit bummed – figuring if Jesus healed, it had to come complete and immediate. But for whatever reason this one didn't come that way – but it did come ***'as they went... they were cleansed.'*** Imagine that – one leper looks at the next and notices – 'hey your face – its like looking better! Look at your hands – those fingers – you didn't have one there before! Check this out – my legs – smooth as a baby's butt! We're healed! He did it! This is incredible! Do you know what this means!?! Whatta we do? This is unbelievable! Can't wait to see my kids! What should we do – he said we should go show the priests. Yeah – but maybe stop by the house first – its on the way – kinda...' Then in the midst of the celebration, in the midst of the unbelief and shock, in the midst of the planning and deciding – one – ONE – say, 'I'm going back.' 'What?? look we're healed! We got what we asked for! He told us to go show the priests. You can't go back –

look you are still wearing these old leper rags...' Without turning, the one continues – 'you guys do what you want – I'm going back. I've got to thank Him.' He did. He tracked Jesus down.

***came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."***

Friend, there is a vast difference between getting healed and being made well. And the sure sign that it's the latter and not the former is the presence and expression of genuine gratitude. By that I mean a gratitude that takes you out of your way, a gratitude that drives you back to the Jesus who healed, a gratitude that includes 'praising God in a loud voice' and a grateful spirit that falls at Jesus' feet and with words, with emotion, with vigor – thanks Him. There is a vast difference between getting a healing you want, or healing you need, or a blessing you hope for from Jesus, and getting made whole by Him. And you can always tell. Oh – by the way – so can Jesus. ***'Were not all ten of you cleansed? Where are the other nine?'*** So I'm guessing you in your life have been on occasion touched by Jesus, healed by Him – blessed by Him. So, based on the evidence, were you only healed or have you truly been made well?