

February 1 **Romans 9:1-5**

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying;
my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit.
How great is my sorrow, how endless the pain in my heart.

I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ
for the sake of my own people, my kindred.

They are Israelites.
To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants,
the giving of the law; the worship, and the promises.

From them comes the Messiah, who is over all,
God blessed forever. Amen.

* Can you imagine anyone saying, “I could wish that I were cut off from Christ” for the sake of someone who does not recognize Jesus as Savior? For whom have you anguished over their disbelief?

* The very people who passed on the faith now do not see God’s merciful fulfillment of the promise among them. What people in your own life does that bring to mind?

* We *could* wish we ourselves were cut off from Christ for their sake; rather, what *could* we do with the energy of that anguish and that deep care for them?

Anguishing God, you know our sorrow over people who do not know Christ, including those who have fallen away from their faith. Increase our concern so that you can deepen our care. Bless them. Give us the wisdom we need to minister evangelically in the name Jesus, the Messiah. Amen.

February 2 **Romans 9:6-18**

It is not as though the word of God had failed.
It’s just that –
not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,
and not all Abraham’s children are his true descendants.
It is not the children of the flesh that are children of God,
but the children of the promise are counted as true descendants.

What then are we to say?
Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!
God said to Moses,
“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

So it depends not on human will or work
but on God who shows mercy.

Scripture said to Pharaoh, “I have raised you up to show my power in you,
so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” (Ex. 9:16)
God has mercy on or hardens the heart of whomever God chooses.

* Consider (vs. 9-13): The surprising birth of Abraham and Sarah’s son Isaac; God choosing Rebecca’s oldest son, Esau, to serve his younger brother, Jacob, God throughout history works out promises in unexpected ways. What do you think about that? How might this be good news in our world?

God of the centuries, history is your history. Call, compassion and mercy come from you alone. Use us for your purposes that your name may be proclaimed and your will done in our generation. In Christ, the Word, we pray. Amen.

February 3

Romans 9:19-26

You will say to me, “Why then does God still find fault?
Who can resist God’s will?
But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God?

* Who are *you* to argue with God?

A clay pot does not ask the one who made it,
“Why have you made me like this?”
Has not the potter the right to make two pots from the same lump of clay,
one for special occasions, and another for ordinary use?

* Are we not also clay pots? What do we say to our maker?

What if God has endured with much patience the objects of God’s wrath?
What if God did so to make known God’s glory
for the objects of God’s mercy,
including us whom God has called,
not from the Jews only,
but also from the Gentiles?

Hosea: “Those who were not my people I will call my people.
Those not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’
Those in every place who were called ‘not my people’
shall be called children of the living God.” (Hos. 1:10; 2:23)

* In every place where people are dismissed as nobody, what is *God* doing?

We do not know who we are, God. Really, we dare know nothing except that you who is a God of judgment is also a God of profound and unimaginable mercy. Shape us, mold us, breathe into us the breath of life that we who are called your “people” may live out this amazing re-creation in love for all. In Christ, who was dismissed for dead but who is alive we pray. Amen.

February 4

Romans 9:27-32

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “Though the number of children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; for the Lord will execute a sentence on the earth quickly and decisively. Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left survivors to us, we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorrah.” (Is 10:22)

Gentiles who did not strive for righteousness attained it through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling the law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone.

See: I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble,
a rock that will make them fall,
and whoever trust in it will not be put to shame.

* What is this cornerstone for Zion? Read Isaiah 28 about the “foundation stone,” precious and sure. What kind of foundation is this where honesty will be the plumb line and justice its measurement?

* What does it mean for our lives, personally and communally, to strive for righteousness based on faith?

All wise God, we do stumble. Thank you for the foundation rock of Jesus Christ. May our faith be sure, wise and consistent, especially during the most trying of times. Amen.

February 5

Romans 10:1-10

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

* Who is "them?" For whom is Paul aching? For whom do you ache?

They have zeal but it is not enlightened.
Ignorant of righteousness from God, seeking to establish their own,
they have not submitted to God's righteousness.

* How do we try to establish our own "righteousness"? Who, within the congregation as well as in the community, needs ongoing Christian education to continue to learn of God's grace in Christ?

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness
for everyone who believes.

Moses wrote that whoever obeys the commands of the Law will live.
But what does scripture say about being put right with God through faith?
*Are we to ask who gets into heaven and who doesn't?

No, God's message is near you, on your lips and in your heart.
That is the message of faith that we preach.
If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart
that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
One believes with the heart and so is justified,
and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

* Paul is not simply against the Law but is yearning for those who think they are justified by the law. For the sake of mission, how can we teach salvation in Christ in a way that people are freed from the bondage of being under condemnation and under self-justification?

We yearn, O God, for those who are burdened by trying to justify themselves. We confess that we, too, continually slip back into trying to establish our own righteousness. Teach us. Save us. Free us. Open our hearts and shape our words to confess you alone, Christ Jesus. Amen.

February 6

Romans 10:11-17

Scripture says that no one who believes in Christ will be put to shame.
There is no distinction between Jew and Greek;
the same Lord is lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.
Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?
And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!
But not all have obeyed the good news.

Isaiah says, "Lord who has believed our message?" (Is. 53:1)

Faith comes from what is heard, and
what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

* This is all about mission. Are you willing to be sent? Sent again? Sent further?

* Are you prepared to proclaim? To speak the Good News in daily encounters?

* Do you minister as though there really were no distinction between Jew and Greek? Do you minister inclusively among all peoples?

Generous God, we call on your name. Sharpen our ears to hear your Word. Grow our skills to proclaim your grace. Increase our zeal to reach out to all. In Christ we pray. Amen.

February 7 Romans 10:18-21

But I ask, have they not heard?
Indeed they have.

Psalm 19:4 “[Heavens’] voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.”

Again, I ask, did Israel not understand?

Deuteronomy 32:21 “They made me jealous with what is no god, provoked me with their idols. So I will make them jealous with what is no people, provoke them with a foolish nation.”

Of Israel God said:

Isaiah 65:1-2 “I was ready to answer my people’s prayers, but they did not pray. I was ready for them to find me, but they did not ever try,” and, “I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices.”

* Think about what Paul said about God: “I have been found by those who did not seek me. I was ready for them to find me, but they did not ever try. All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”

* What is mission for those who have never heard? What is mission for those who have? Do you find yourself impatient, even resentful of those who have heard but are no longer worshipping, or who have drifted away from church?

* What is our own idolatry? Rebellion? How do we provoke God?

God of steadfast love, we do test your patience. And we are contrary and disobedient. For this we ask forgiveness. Forgive us, too, for forgetting those who have left the church. For the sake of mission, we ask for your reconciling grace and outreaching arms of love. In Christ, Amen.

February 8 Romans 11:1-12

I ask, then, has God rejected God’s own people? By no means!

*Paul is writing as a descendent of Abraham, an Israelite, an insider of the faith and he reminds us of Elijah, a prophet protected by God in a time when the faith was being persecuted. (vs. 1b-4) What does that mean for us?

At the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.
But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works,
otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.
The elect obtained it but the rest were hardened.

“God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear, down to the very day.” (Is. 29:10)

*Paul quotes David from the Psalms saying to let people stumble, their eyes be darkened and their backs be forever bent (v. 9-10). How harsh are these words?

So, I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means!
But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles.
Now if their stumbling means riches for the world,
and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles,
how much more will their full inclusion mean?

* How hard it is to understand people turning their back on God! Are we not tempted to say, “Their loss; our gain”? To what does Paul call us?

Steadfast God, thank you for continuing to reach out to an ever larger circle of people to include in your grace. Keep us, too, from a sluggish spirit, from having eyes that refuse to see and ears that will not hear. Use us as instruments of your far-reaching grace in Christ. Amen.

February 9 Romans 11:13-24

I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. If their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!

If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, the branches also are holy. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps God will not spare you.

Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in God's kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

* Paul in writing to the Gentiles through this extended analogy warns them not to become proud of their own new place on God's "tree." In this, a different time, a different configuration of Christianity, what do you see as dangers? How might we stand in awe of both God's severity and God's kindness? How does this call us to mission?

God of the olive tree, root us deeply in you alone; that your branches, both natural and grafted, might bear much fruit. In Christ, Amen.

February 10 Romans 11:25-36

So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery:
a hardening has come upon part of Israel
until the full number of Gentiles has come in.

And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,
"Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob...
and this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins." (Is. 59:20-21)

As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake;
but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors.

The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

* What does this mean? What does this mean for mission?

Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,
so they have now been disobedient in order that,
by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that God may be merciful to all.

* What does this mean? What does this mean for mission?

*Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of you, O God!
How unsearchable are your judgments and how inscrutable your ways.
We cannot know your mind, O Lord; we cannot be your counselor.
There is no gift we could give you to receive such a gift as yours in return.
From you and through you and to you are all things. To you be the glory forever. Amen.*

February 11 Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,
by the mercies of God
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good
and acceptable
and perfect.

* In this, one of the three great “Body of Christ” chapters in the Epistles (along with I Corinthians 14 and Ephesians 4), we, who have been joined with Christ in his body through his sacrificial death and resurrection, are invited to present our bodies, our entire selves, as a living sacrifice to God. What does this mean for your life? How does such living become a spiritual worship?

* What does not being “conformed” to the world mean in terms of our having other gods that we fear, love and trust above all things? Each day the Spirit through Christ renews and transforms us. How, on this day, will you discern what is good, and acceptable, and perfect?

Merciful God, renew and transform us that we, living as part of the body of Christ in the world, might not only discern your will, but do it, for the sake of our neighbors, those near and those around the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

February 12 Romans 12:3-8

By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you
not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think,
but to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members,
and not all the members have the same function,
so we, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophecy, in proportion to faith;
ministry, in ministering;
the teacher, in teaching;
the exhorter, in exhortation;
the giver, in generosity;
the leader, in diligence;
the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

* Visualize the faith community of which you are a part. Picture the gifts of the members in motion. How do you see the Body of Christ in ministry?

* Think about the entire body of Christ, globally and historically. Even though these members of the body seem far apart in time or place, unable to know or touch one another, consider how we are members one of another. What is your picture of the body of Christ?

We who are many are one body in Christ. We find this hard to picture in the complexity and conflict of our life together. Creator God, give us eyes to appreciate the diversity among us. Redeeming God, make us one, forgiving and reconciling us. Spirit of new hope, fill this body, your body, with energizing life to be in mission. Amen.

February 13 **Romans 12:9-15**

Let love be genuine;
hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints;
extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you;
bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice,
weep with those who weep.

* As the body of Christ, the church, and filled with the Spirit, how are we now liberated to love one another? And how does this body of faith love those in need? How might we rejoice with those who weep beyond this faith community in the world all week long?

* Think about, write down, give thanks for specific times when you have witnessed someone extending hospitality, people outdoing one another in showing honor, a whole community contributing to the needs of the saints in parts of the church in need.

Christ Jesus, we are your body at work in the world. Bind us together in love that we might indeed weep and rejoice, contribute and care, and in so doing strengthen the church itself while we are engaged in mission and ministry. Spirit of the Living God, give us zeal so that we serve with compassion and courage. Amen.

February 14 **Romans 12:16-21**

Live in harmony with one another;
do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
Beloved, never avenge yourselves,
but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written,
“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (Deut. 33:35)

No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this
you will heap burning coals on their heads.” (Prov. 25:21-22)

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

* Yesterday’s text focused on the ministry of the body of Christ honoring, loving, serving and rejoicing. In this part of Romans 12 we hear how we are to respond to evil and relate to one’s enemies. Think of specific times when you have experienced someone or a whole community refusing to repay evil for evil, but choosing a different response.

* When have you been overcome or almost overcome with evil? Recall the feelings. How did God or how might God now give you wisdom and peace, through the body of Christ, so that God might overcome evil with good?

God of justice and mercy, take our haughtiness, our vengeance, and our animosity and transform them through the death and resurrection of Jesus into new, daring acts of sacrificial love and reconciliation. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

February 15 **Romans 13:1-7**

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities;
for there is no authority except from God,
and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.
Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed,
and those who resist will incur judgment.

Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.
Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good,
and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good.
But if you do wrong you should be afraid.

Authority does not bare the sword in vain!
Authority is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.
One must be subject not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.
For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servant.

Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due,
revenue to whom revenue is do,
respect to whom respect is due,
honor to whom honor is due.

- * How do you interpret, "There is no authority except from God"?
- * So, in what frame of mind do you pay taxes? Who or what are we respecting when we pay revenues?
- * We are to respect governing authorities. But what if the authority is unjust? At its heart, what is civil disobedience? How does one change systems that are unjust to the oppressed?

O God of governments, you have authored the earth and given authority to human beings. May we always seek your righteousness. Give us the wisdom, concern and energy in our participatory democracy. Guide the nations of the world and all in authority. In your most holy name we pray. Amen.

February 16 **Romans 13:8-14**

Owe no one anything, except to love one another.
The one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
The commandments are summed up in this word,
"Love your neighbor as yourself."
Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love is the fulfilling of the law.

You know what time it is. . . .the moment for you to wake from sleep.
for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

The night is far gone; the day is near.
Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.
Let us live honorably as in the day,
Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in immorality or indecency,
quarreling and jealousy.
Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ,
and do not pay attention to your sinful nature and satisfying its desires.

- * How is "love your neighbor as yourself" the fulfilling of: "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder, not steal, not covet?"
- * What does the image of Christ's death and resurrection being "the night is gone; the light has come" mean for our own lives? How are we freed from not simply seeking to gratify our own dishonorable desires? From quarreling and jealousy? What does "the night is gone; the light has come" mean in our calling to love the neighbor?

O God of immeasurable love, we thank and praise your name for the love we have received in Christ Jesus. Fill us with your Spirit and free us from darkness to love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

February 17 **Romans 14:1-6**

Welcome those who are weak in faith,
but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain,
and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat;
for God has welcomed them.

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?

It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall.
They will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.
Some judge one day to be better than another,
while others judge all days to be alike.

Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.
Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.
Those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God.
Those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord, and give thanks to God.

* Who is weak in faith? Who is strong in faith? Who are we to judge another's faith or another's faith practices? What faith practices threaten to divide congregations or church bodies today? How do we welcome one another without judgment?

* How can adherence to a faith practice impede honoring God? How do we honor and give thanks to God through our practices?

Welcoming God, may we truly welcome one another without judgment, and may we grow in faith. We give thanks to you for this new life we have together in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

February 18 **Romans 14:7-12**

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.
If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord;
so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

For to this end Christ died and lived again,
so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

* How has God set us free in Christ's cross and resurrection for our dying and for our living?

Why do you judge and despise your brother or sister?
We all will stand before the judgment seat of God.
It is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God." (Is. 45:23)
Each of us will be accountable to God.

* Our freedom for salvation is in Christ Jesus. Living in this freedom, we still judge and despise one another. Why? If not for our salvation, for what are we accountable to God?

* What is the power of the cross to change the ways we live with one another?

God of the living and of the dying, may we so trust you that our lives are transformed by the power of your Holy Spirit to giving, not judging, loving not despising. May we bow before you alone, O God, and give praise to you all the day long. In Christ, our Living Lord. Amen.

February 19

Romans 14:13-23

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another,
but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block
or hindrance in the way of another.

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus
that nothing is unclean in itself;
but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

If your brother or sister is injured by what you eat,
you are no longer walking in love.

Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.
Do not let your good be spoken of as evil.
The kingdom of God is not food and drink
but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The one who serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.
Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.
Do not for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.
Everything is indeed clean,
but it is wrong to make others fall by what you eat;
it is good not to do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.
The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God.

* In your own background what things marked a person “not a very good Christian”? How did that affect the community?

* In what ways do we put stumbling blocks to faith in front of people by what we do or do not do? If you find yourself asking if you should be doing something, should you be doing it? What is life above reproach?

* In Christ we have freedom from old purity laws. But how are we now called by God to acts of faith, even to refraining from things that might offend a brother or sister, so that the body of Christ might be built up?

Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. O God, you alone make us holy; in you alone we place our trust. You alone are judge. Give us such love for our brothers and sisters that what we do, or refrain from doing, draws them to Jesus Christ and to life together in the church. In Christ we pray, Amen.

February 20

Romans 15:1-6

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak.
We should not just please ourselves.

*How do we help people carry their burdens, and not just when it is convenient, or to serve our own ends, or to make us feel good?

Each of us must please our neighbors, for their good,
for the good purpose of building them up.

For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written,
“The insults which are hurled at you have fallen on me.” (Psalm 69:9)

That which was written in former days is for our instruction,
so that by steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures
we might have hope.

* Who among your family, friends, and faith community is having a difficult time? What is your call to ministry to help them be strengthened in their faith?

* Recall an insult that was hurled at you, perhaps recently, or one that is still burning from long ago. Focus on Christ. Know that those insults, and those which we hurl at others, have fallen on Christ. How can you let them go?

* How is your study of scripture going? How does it instruct, encourage and give you hope? How might it?

O God of steadfastness and encouragement, grant us your grace to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together we may, with one voice, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

February 21 **Romans 15:7-13**

Welcome one another, therefore,
just as Christ has welcomed you,
for the glory of God.

Christ has become a servant of Israel
on behalf of the truth of God,
in order that God might confirm the promises to our ancestors
and in order that the Gentiles might praise God for God's mercy.

As scripture says:

"I will praise you among the Gentiles." (2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49)

"Rejoice, Gentiles, with God's people." (Deuteronomy 32:43)

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all peoples praise God." (Psalm 117:1)

"The root of Jesse shall come;
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles,
in him the Gentiles have hope." (Isaiah 11:10)

* Whom might you serve? For whom might you pray? To whom might you tell about God's mercy in Christ Jesus? Whom might you welcome as Christ has welcomed you?

May the Risen One, the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

February 22 **Romans 15:14-21**

I feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters,
that you are full of goodness,
filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

* About whom are you confident that they have grown in knowledge so that they are now able to teach others in the community of faith?

Nevertheless, I have written you boldly as a reminder,
because of God's grace to me
to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles,
in the priestly service of the Gospel of God,
so that the offerings of the Gentiles might be acceptable,
sanctified by the Holy Spirit.
In Christ Jesus I have reason to boast of my work for God
for I will not speak of anything except what
Christ has accomplished through me
to lead the Gentiles to obey God, by word and deed, by the power of signs
and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God,
so that from Jerusalem as far around as Illyricum
I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ.

* About what do you speak boldly? Where is your zeal? What is your mission? Where is your mission beyond where people are already believers in Christ in their own church?

I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news,
not where Christ has already been named,
so that I do not build on someone else's foundation.

We pray Paul's words from Isaiah 52:15: "Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand." May it be true, and may it be true through us, Christ Jesus. Amen.

February 25 Romans 16:17-20

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.

Such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive innocent people.

So, I want you to be wise to what is good, and heedless to that kind of flattering evil.

And God, our source of peace, will soon crush Satan under your feet.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

* Who within your faith community causes offenses and dissensions (including yourself)? How do you all “keep an eye” on each other? Helpfully? Not so helpfully?

* Who among us has not been tempted to serve our “own appetites” rather than Christ? What are those appetites?

* How is flattery helpful? How is it not? How do we use “smooth talk and flattery” to deceive? Who within your faith community is the most innocent and vulnerable?

* How is God making you both good and heedless? To what end?

* We could misuse the promise of the power that God “crushes Satan” under our feet, but how might God be doing exactly that in our ministries of peace-making and justice-building?

In the midst of all of these realities—and more—may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us and all churches everywhere. Amen.

February 26 Romans 16:21-25

*The ministry of the faith extends far beyond our own locale. People who are familiar to the church at Rome send their greetings of encouragements with Paul. Fill in the names of people in your faith community who send greetings to other churches as you together share the Gospel across the globe:

Timothy, _____, _____, my co-workers greet you.
Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, _____, _____, my relatives, greet you.

I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord
Gaius, host to me and the whole church, greets you.
Erastus, the city treasurer,
our brother Quartus, _____, _____, _____ greet you.

* How has God been able to strengthen you through the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Who are the people from whom you are separated whose greetings encourage you to continue your ministry?

* How is God’s revelation still a mystery in our age? How might the prophetic writings be made known even more fully to those who are still outsiders?

* What does “obedience of faith” mean? What does having a wise God mean to you?

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my Gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. Amen.

February 27 **1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

From Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus
and from our brother Sosthenes—

To the church of God that is in Corinth,
to all who are called to be God's holy people,
together with all people everywhere
who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to God because of the grace
God has given you in Christ Jesus.
In union with Christ you have become rich
in all things, including speech and knowledge.

The message of Christ has become so firmly established in you.
that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift
as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.
God will keep you firm to the end
so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.
God can be trusted, the God who called you
to fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Lord.

* How does the church in your place give thanks for all people everywhere
who worship Jesus Christ?

* What difference does it make that Christ is "our Lord and theirs"?

* Do you believe God can be trusted to keep your faith community "firm" to
the end? When is it hard to believe that?

*Lord Jesus Christ, as we wait for your coming again, keep us growing in
knowledge and speech, that we may not only be blessed, but be a blessing to
Christians everywhere. Keep us firm in our faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

February 28 **1 Corinthians 1:10-17**

By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ
I appeal to you to agree in what you say,
so there will be no divisions among you.
Be completely united, with only one thought and one purpose.
I've heard there are quarrels among you.

Each of you says something different.
"I follow Paul" "I follow Apollos" "I follow Peter"; "I follow Christ."
Christ has been divided into groups!

Did Paul die for you on the cross? Were you baptized as Paul's disciples?
I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius
So that none can say that you were baptized in my name.
(Oh yes, I baptized two others, but I can't remember
if I baptized anybody else.)

Christ sent me to tell the Good News, and not with eloquent wisdom,
in order to make sure Christ's death on the cross
is not robbed of its power.

- * There aren't divisions among you, are there? What is their root cause?
- * How do some people become unduly attached to a certain leader?
- * How is Christ's death on the cross "robbed of its power" among us?

*Christ of the cross and resurrection, these are hard questions and hard times
when we divide ourselves from one another. Forgive us. Redeem us.
Transform us. Unite us. Amen.*