

September 1

Titus 1:10-16

There are also many rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision; they must be silenced, for they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach.

It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said,
“Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.”
That testimony is true.

Rebuke them sharply, so they may become sound in faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth.

To the pure all things are pure,
but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure.
Their minds and consciences are corrupted.
They profess to know God, but they deny God by their actions.
They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

* Rebuke them sharply. They must be silenced! Are there rebellious people, unbelieving and corrupt, within religious communities today who must be stopped? How does one decide that? How would one stop them?

* How do you think about “to the pure all things are pure” and “to the corrupt nothing is pure?”

True and righteous God, guard us from disobedience. Keep us from our own unbelief. Keep the church in your care that it may be protected from deception and corruption. Shape us by Christ’s cross. Amen.

September 2

Titus 2:1-8

As for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine. Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance.

Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us.

* With a word for both genders and each age group, the writer is concerned about this young faith community living with credibility. In our contemporary culture, what instructions should be the same? Different? How might your faith community covenant together to live with “credibility,” not hampering others’ *credo*, belief in Christ Jesus?

*Turning from third to second person, the writer urges Titus to be a model of integrity and good works. How do you see your life as giving opponents “nothing evil” to say about the Christian faith?

God of mercy, we know that we are saved not by our good works, but through your grace alone. Shape us as your people around the cross and resurrection of Christ Jesus. May the Spirit sanctify us so that through our words, actions, and our very lives we might witness to your love. In Christ, Amen.

September 3

Titus 2:9-15

Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters
and to give back, not to pilfer,
but to show complete and perfect fidelity,
so that in everything they may be an ornament
to the doctrine of God our Savior.

* This passage for centuries was used only to justify slavery. If one does *not* use it in that way but applies it to all of us, what might it say to you about your living faithfully? And what does that have to do with the doctrine of God our Savior?

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,
training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions,
and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives,
while we wait for the blessed hope and manifestation of Jesus Christ
who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity
and purify a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority.
Let no one look down on you.

* What is the great mission call in these words? What is the vocational call?

We wait for the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior. How can we thank you, God, for your redemption in Jesus Christ? Give us the zeal to share this good news with those in our local community and those around the world who do not yet know salvation in Christ Jesus. We pray for them. Amen

September 4

Titus 3:1-8a

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient,
ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one;
to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone,
We were once foolish, disobedient, led astray,
slaves to various passions and pleasures,
passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.

* From the lack of gentleness and courtesy, to malice and despicable hatred – how does sin not only lead us astray but cut us off from God and from one another?

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,
he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness we had done,
but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth
and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit was poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,
so that, having been justified by his grace,
we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.
The saying is sure.

* When, in the midst of despicable sin, have you experienced the utter amazement of God's mercy? How is the truth that we are saved not by our righteousness but through the coming of Christ the core of your faith and life?

* What can you say about the work of the Holy Spirit through the waters of rebirth in your own life? What can you say about it to others who may still be seeking God's mercy?

Thank you, merciful God, for our justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The saying IS sure. Amen.

September 5 Titus 3:8b-15

Insist on these things, so that those who believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works;
these things are excellent and profitable to everyone.
Avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions,
and quarrels about the law,
for they are unprofitable and worthless.

After a first and second admonition,
have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions,
since you know that person is
perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.

* Have nothing to do with such people? How do we know how long to admonish? When to avoid and when to engage?

When I send Artemas to you, or Tychicus,
try to come to me at Nicopolis,
for I have decided to spend the winter there.
Make every effort to send Zenas the lawyer
and Apollos on their way,
and see that they lack nothing.

Let people learn to devote themselves
to good works to meet urgent needs,
so that they may not be unproductive.

* In what ways can we tend the faith community, build it up in good works, and help it be productive? What specific urgent needs does your faith community need to attend? What about urgent needs of brothers and sisters in the faith in another part of the world?

Pray with and for a faith community dear to your heart: All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with all of you. Amen.

September 6 Philemon 1-7

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker,
to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to the church in your house.

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

When I remember you in my prayers,
I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints
and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective
when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.
I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love,
because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

*How do we hear such a long, flattering greeting? When has someone called you to put your faith into effect, into action? How did you receive that call?

*From whom have you received much joy and encouragement? Whom do you remember in your prayers? What further act of faith might you call forth from them? How could you do that?

Thank you, loving and gracious God, for the refreshment in faith you have brought us in beloved sisters and brothers in Christ. Increase our faith. Open our hearts and homes and lives to callings we may not yet know. In Christ, Amen.

September 7 Philemon 8-16

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ
to command you to do your duty,
yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—
and I, Paul, do this as an old man,
and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus,
whose father I have become during my imprisonment.
Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.
I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.

I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me
in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel;
but I preferred to do nothing without your consent,
in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while,
so that you might have him back forever,
no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—
especially to me but how much more to you,
both in the flesh and in the Lord.

* “I am sending him, my own heart, back to you.” What does that mean to you
in your relationships and in your calling?

* “No longer a slave...” What separations do you see here? What is going on?
What separations exist in our own culture? In our own lives? How do we
receive someone back as a beloved sister or brother?

*O God, who in Christ Jesus appeals to us beyond duty, beyond owing and
owning, liberate us in love, redeem our relationships, creating new ways to
receive one another, and to serve one another. In Christ, our brother, we pray.
Amen*

September 8 Philemon 17-25

So if you consider me your partner,
welcome him as you would welcome me.
If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything,
charge it to my account.

I, Paul am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it.
I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.
Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord!
Refresh my heart in Christ.
Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you,
knowing that you will do even more than I say.

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me,
for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,
and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

* On what basis does Paul make his appeal? How does his boldness and his
confidence create opportunity for Philemon to have a completely new
relationship with his slave?

* Paul asks Philemon to prepare a guest room. How does our new relationship
in Christ create space to receive one another no longer as burden but as guest
and gift?

* How does becoming brothers and sisters in Christ carry us across barriers of
station, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and any barriers we might create?

*Gracious God, open our congregations to receive one another in totally new
ways. Open our hearts to the stranger and to the estranged. Change our minds
and move us to change societal structures. May the grace of the Lord Jesus
Christ be with our spirit. Amen.*

September 9 Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors
in many and various ways by the prophets,
but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son,
whom God appointed heir of all things,
through whom God also created the worlds.

The Son is the reflection of God's glory
and the exact imprint of God's very being,
and God sustains all things by God's own powerful word.

When the Son had made purification for sin,
he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,
having become as much superior to angels as the name he inherited
is more excellent than theirs.

* The God who created the worlds has spoken to us by God's own Son. How does this both humble us in awe, and strengthen us who through Christ are now also heirs? What does that mean for your life of praise? What does that mean for your life of service?

* The Son, Jesus the Christ, who is not yet named, is the reflection of God's glory and the imprint of God's very being. How do you image the Christ?

* The One who made purification for sin now sits at the right hand of Majesty on high. How is Christ in your life both human and glorified—"superior to angels"?

Long ago, O God, you spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days you have spoken to us by the Son. May we begin each day with matins of praise, centered on your Word, grounded in prayer in Christ Jesus. Amen.

September 10 Hebrews 1:5-9

To which of the angels did God ever say,
"You are my Son; today I have begotten you"?
Or again,
"I will be his Father and he will be my Son"?
And again, when God brings the first born into the world, God says,
"Let all God's angels worship him."

Of the angels God says,
"God makes the angels winds,
and the servants flames of fire."
But of the Son God says,
"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

* If some people need to have the case made for them that Jesus is not just another prophet or a good man or one of the angels, how does the writer to the Hebrews do that? How is Christ viewed by people you encounter? What do they need to hear about this Jesus?

* What is central about this anointed one having loved righteousness and hated wickedness? What do we learn about the nature of God?

God of righteousness, whose only begotten Son is worshipped by angels, we, too, bow before you and praise your most holy name. May we be filled with gladness and dwell in your presence now and throughout eternity. In Christ Jesus, we pray. Amen.

September 11 Hebrews 1:10-14

“In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like clothing;
like a cloak you will roll them up,
and like clothing they will be changed.

But you are the same, and your years will never end.”

But to which of the angels has God ever said,
“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?
Are not all angels spirits in the divine service,
sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

* Have we not at times forgotten the range of God’s realm? The length of God’s time? The ultimate depth of God’s creative work? Take some of your time to contemplate that God alone founded the earth, created the heavens and eternity itself.

* Pursue the metaphor that God’s work, the heavens and the earth, will wear out like clothing. How might we misuse this, taking it out of context, to justify our own destructive actions and lack of care for the environment? What central meaning does this metaphor have in this text?

* And what about angels? How are they to serve for the sake of our salvation?

O God, whose years are without end and whose work is beyond our comprehension, we give you thanks for your creative care. May we, like your angels, serve you and all those whom you have created, in the name of the Christ in whom we have salvation. Amen.

September 12 Hebrews 2:1-4

Therefore we must pay greater attention
to what we have heard,
so that we do not drift away from it.
If the message declared through the angels was valid,
and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty,
how can we escape
if we neglect so great a salvation?

It was declared at first through the Lord,
and it was attested to us by those who heard him,
while God added testimony by signs and wonders
and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit
distributed according to God’s own will.

* Therefore! Since the all-powerful, eternal God spoke to our ancestors and since the angels themselves were sent to serve for the sake of our salvation, why in the world would we not pay attention? In what ways do we, too, drift away from the message?

* It is not like passing up a bargain at a store’s post-season sale; to neglect so great a salvation is to attempt to by-pass God’s own self. Where would we go? To whom or to what would we turn?

Great God, we have transgressed your law and disobeyed your will. We do deserve a just penalty. And yet, you shower us with salvation. Open our hearts by the power of your Spirit to receive your salvation anew, to share it, proclaim it, declare it. In Christ, Amen.

September 13

Hebrews 2:5-9

God did not subject the coming world to angels,
But someone has testified somewhere,
“What are human beings that you are mindful of them or
mortals, that you care for them?”
You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting all things under their feet.”

* Have you ever said, “Someone said somewhere”? Well, look up Psalm 8. What does it say? What does it mean for our call to care for the earth and all of humankind? How is that different from presuming we are to rule everything for our own benefit?

In subjecting all things to them,
God left nothing outside their control.
As it is, we do not yet see everything is subjected to them,
but we do see Jesus,
who for a little while was made lower than the angels,
now crowned with glory and honor
because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God
he might taste death for everyone.

* How do we see and how do we not see things subjected to humankind? What powers do human beings have?

* In this midst of issues of power, rule, and subjugation, why is “seeing Jesus” so important? How is his suffering related to subjugation? What does it mean to you, and for mission, that Jesus “tasted death for everyone”?

God of the universe, who has placed the care for the world in our hands, keep us centered in Christ and his suffering, death and resurrection. Mindful of us, give us the mind of Christ—humility. Amen.

September 14

Hebrews 2:10-13

It is fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist,
in bringing many children to glory,
should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

* If seeking perfection has been a goal of humankind through the ages, how is the pioneer of our salvation, Jesus Christ, being perfected through sufferings very different? How does this include and incorporate all human beings in all kinds of suffering?

The one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.
For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,
“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

And again,
“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,
“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

* Why does not only being brothers and sisters in the faith with one another, but brothers and sisters of Christ Jesus, completely change our relationship with God?

* What is the relationship between shame and trust? When have you felt shame? When have you shamed another person? Or been ashamed of them? If Jesus is not ashamed of us, how does that give us a foundation and a freedom to trust God and, in that trust, to build trusting relationships with family and friends and congregations?

Oh God, in whom all things exist, we give you thanks that our glory is in the suffering Savior, Jesus the Christ. Turn our lives from seeking solace or validation anywhere else. We present ourselves, and our families to you, gifts of grace. Make us holy, for we trust in you, in Christ. Amen.

September 15 Hebrews 2:14-18

Therefore, since the children share flesh and blood,
he himself likewise shared the same things,
so that through death he might destroy the one
who has the power of death, that is, the devil,
and free those who all their lives were held in slavery
by the fear of death.

It is clear that he did not come to help angels,
but the descendants of Abraham.

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect,
so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God,
to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.

Because he himself was tested by what he suffered,
he is able to help those who are being tested.

* In your daily life, and over the course of your lifetime, ponder how Jesus shares in who you are and what you feel and do. Are there times that you feel distant from Jesus? What does it mean to you that he became like you—and all human beings—in every respect?

* What is it about death that you might fear? How can fear of death enslave someone? In your own life, how does Christ's resurrection free you from fear?

* Who is this high priest in the service of God, whose sacrifice can atone for sin?

Christ Jesus, you were tested beyond what we can know. Even though we cannot fathom your sufferings, help us in our own suffering so that we may not be tested beyond our strength. And by the power of your Spirit, join us to the sufferings of others that we may have the courage to work for justice to alleviate pain in the world. In your name we pray. Amen.

September 16 Hebrews 3:1-6

Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling,
consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,
was faithful to the one who appointed him,
just as Moses also “was faithful in all God's house.”

Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses,
just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself.
(Every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.)

Moses was faithful in all God's house, as a servant,
to testify to the things that would be spoken later.
Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son,
and we are God's house if we hold firm the confidence
and the pride that belong to hope.

* Why take so long to mention Jesus by name? How have all of the words thus far prepared the Hebrews to see who Jesus really was? How, in our own outreach ministry, do we—might we—present Jesus?

* We *are* God's house! How? Servants in the house, like Moses? The people God “built”? Who then is Christ? How does this image relate to your congregation? (All metaphors have their possibilities and limitations.)

Faithful God, creating, building God, we give you thanks for the pillars of faith gone before. Construct us into a people who live and work and serve in the world (not just in our own building). May we open the doors wide to those who yet are far off and open our hearts to your ongoing work among and through us. In Christ we pray. Amen.

September 17 Hebrews 3:7-13

As the Holy Spirit says,
“Today, if you hear God’s voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
as on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors put me to the test,
although they had seen my works for forty years.

Therefore I was angry with that generation,
and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts,
and they have not known my ways,’
as in my anger I swore, “They will not enter my rest.””

Take care, brothers and sisters,
that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart
that turns away from the living God.
Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,”
so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

- * What does it mean to put God to the test? In what ways do we do that?
- * Again and again we have experienced God’s covenant faithfulness and unconditional love. Then why, in the world (whatever our wilderness may be), do we go astray?
- * How awesome and awful to have an unbelieving heart. How is sin deceitful? How does it harden one’s heart? Why would we turn away from the God in whom is life?

We pray, O God, that our hearts may not be hardened by sin. May we not put you to the test. Once more we ask that you not be angry with us. In your mercy, find us when we go astray. Keep us from self-deception and from being deceitful. Each and every day may we exhort one another in the name of Jesus, the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

September 18 Hebrews 3:14-19

We have become partners of Christ,
if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

As it is said,
“Today, if you hear God’s voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious?
Was it not all those who left Egypt
under the leadership of Moses?
But with whom was God angry forty years?
Was it not those who sinned,
whose bodies fell in the wilderness?
And to whom did God swear that they would not enter God’s rest,
if not to those who were disobedient?

So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

- * What is the nature of your own disbelief?
- * There has been no generation that has completely held fast to the faith. Why then, do you suppose, does God continue to be faithful to the covenant when we are not? Why does God continue to offer unconditional love to us who are rebellious? How do you respond to such a God?

God, in your mercy, you have joined us to Jesus Christ through his incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection. What a joy to be partners with him and with one another through the work of the Holy Spirit. May we, all of us, hold our confidence firm and hold one another close to Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

September 19

Hebrews 4:1-7

Therefore, while the promise of entering God's rest is still open,
let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.
The good news came to us just as to them;
but the message they heard did not benefit them,
because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

We who have believed enter that rest just as God has said,
"As in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter my rest,"
though his works were finished at the foundation of the world.

In one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows
"And God rested on the seventh day from all God's works."
And again in this place it says,
"They shall not enter my rest."

Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it,
and those who formerly received the good news
failed to enter because of disobedience,
God sets a certain day called "today,"
saying through David much later,
"Today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts."

* How does the writer to the Hebrews combine creation and the children of Israel wandering in the desert with the present open opportunity to turn to Christ?

* What are the various meanings of "rest" here? What is the open invitation "today"?

Creator God, you have guided your people through the wilderness and you guide and seek after your people yet today. May we not harden our hearts, but respond to your grace and unconditional love in Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

September 20

Hebrews 4:8-13

If Joshua had given them rest,
God would not speak later about another day.
So then, there still remains for the people of God
a Sabbath rest like God's resting on the seventh day.
Let us then make every effort to enter that rest so that no one fail,
as they did, because of lack of faith.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Before God no creature is hidden,
but all are naked and laid bare
to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

* In our effort to stress God's unconditional love, how do we sometimes avoid the need to talk about the piercing nature of the word of God? How is letting the Word do its judging work actually helpful?

* How do you feel knowing that none of your secrets are hidden from God?

* Knowing that it is God who makes every effort so that people are not excluded when they lack faith, to what persistent action does that call us in our ministry among people who live in all sorts of tenuous relationships with God?

Living Word of God, you know our every thought and action. Pierce our hearts too, so that, having experienced the turmoil of judgment, we might truly know our need for rest in you alone. And give us the wisdom and strength and courage and love to be agents of your Word, making every effort to reach others in their need for you. In Christ, Amen.

September 21 Hebrews 4:14-16

Since we have a great high priest
who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God,
let us hold fast to our confession.

For we do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect has been tested
as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help in time of need.

* Why is it significant that Jesus is presented as the Son of God, and as a great high priest? What did this say to the receivers of the letter? What does it say to you?

* What does it say to you and to your ministry that this high priest is not one who cannot sympathize with weakness?

* How does Jesus, having solidarity with the weak, leave no one outside God's mercy? How does this relationship give strength to the weak?

* During your life, in what great time of need have you found yourself? What is your time of need now? How have you—or might you—approach the throne of grace with boldness?

God of grace and mercy, may we hold fast to our confession. We know that you, Christ Jesus, have been tested, beyond what we can understand. Therefore, give us boldness to seek your help in our need. And increase our own ability for empathy and sympathy that we might hear the cries of those in need and respond with your mercy and care. In Christ. Amen.

September 22 Hebrews 5:1-6

Every high priest chosen from among mortals
is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf,
to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward,
since he himself is subject to weakness.

He must offer sacrifice for his own sins
as well as for those of the people.

One does not presume to take this honor,
but takes it only when called by God, as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest,
but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son, today I have begotten you”;

and, also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

* Can you imagine what it would mean if priests and ministers today had to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people and for their own sins? What freedom and power for servanthood does Christ, the sacrificial lamb, provide for our ministry?

* Christ is the sacrifice for all sins, but Christ did not call himself. Contemplate the call of Christ. Contemplate your own calling. How does our call in Christ keep us from seeking honor? How is your calling still being revealed? How is it constant?

We, too, are subject to weakness, O God. May we find our strength in Christ Jesus alone. May we be so united in him that we deal gently with people, yes, through our common humanity, but, most importantly, through our mutually being joined together in his cross and resurrection. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

September 23 Hebrews 5:7-10

In the days of his flesh on earth
Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,
with loud cries and tears
to the one who was able to save him from death,
and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Although he was a Son,
he learned obedience through what he suffered;
and having been made perfect,
he became the source of eternal salvation
for all who obey him,
having been designated by God a high priest
according to the order of Melchizedek.

(Mt. 26:36-46; Mk. 14:32-42; Lk.22:39-46)

- * Think of all the times that we hear in Scripture that Jesus prayed. In what way do you hear his prayer in Gethsemane? His crying out on the cross?
- * Jesus was not saved from death, but his cries were heard. What do you think about Jesus' cry on the cross asking why God had abandoned him? What was Christ's reverent submission?
- * "Obedience" is used twice here. What does obedience mean to you? How might you think of Christ's following God's will and complete faith as obedience?
- * The Hebrews can relate to having a high priest. What transition is needed for them to see Jesus as the ultimate high priest with no further sacrifice needed? What is needed for you to really believe no other sacrifice is necessary for your salvation?

Christ Jesus, you put on flesh for us, suffered and died for our salvation. Take our cries of suffering and enfold them in yours that in your loving arms we may trust your care for us now and throughout eternity. Amen.

September 24 Hebrews 5:11-14

About all of this we have much to say that is hard to explain,
since you have become dull in understanding.
For although by this time you ought to be teachers,
you need someone to teach you again
the basic elements of the oracles of God.

You need milk, not solid food;
for everyone who lives on milk,
being still an infant,
is unskilled in the word of righteousness.

But solid food is for the mature,
for those whose faculties have been trained by practice
to distinguish good from evil.

- * When people are baptized as infants, their faith is a gift of God through the water and the word in the company of the congregation. What is the "milk" on which infants and those young in the faith are nourished?
- * This passage, of course, is urging adults to be adults, no longer dependent. And yet, how do adults and long-time Christians also, at times, need once again to be taught the basics? What teachers in the faith do you still have? What teaching do you need now?
- * What solid food is needed in order that maturing Christians might become teachers of the faith, skilled in the word of righteousness, trained by practice?

Wise God, when we become dull in our understanding, teach us once again. Fill our minds with curiosity, stimulate our thinking to probe the depths of your word, build our skills to practice the faith, and teach us to teach others so that your church may grow toward maturity of faith. In the name of Christ, the teacher, we pray. Amen.

September 25 Hebrews 6:1-8

Therefore let us go on toward perfection,
leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ,
and not laying again the foundation:
repentance from dead works and faith toward God,
instruction about baptism, laying on of hands,
resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.
And we will do this, if God permits.

It is impossible to restore again to repentance
those who have once been enlightened,
and have tasted the heavenly gift, and shared in the Holy Spirit,
and have tasted the goodness of the word of God
and the powers of the age to come,
and have fallen away, since on their own
they are crucifying again the Son of God
and holding him up to contempt.

Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly,
and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated,
received a blessing from God.
But if it produces thorns and thistles,
it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed;
its end is to be burned over.

* How do we teach for sustainable faith? If it seems impossible to restore to repentance those who have fallen away, how do we teach? How do we minister? How do we pray?

God, who creates the good ground, the falling rain, the useful crop, bless your people that all who have tasted the goodness of the word of God may remain in Christ. Amen.

September 26 Hebrews 6:9-20

Even though we speak in this way, beloved,
we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.

* “Even though!” When we hear—or speak—the harsh words of God’s righteousness, wherein does our confidence lie? What are the things that belong to salvation?

God is not unjust; God will not overlook your work and the love you showed for God’s sake in serving the saints as you still do. We want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

When God made a promise to Abraham, because God had no one greater to swear by, God swore by God’s own self: “Surely I will bless and multiply you.” Thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves. An oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. When God desired to show the unchangeable character of God’s purpose, God guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things we who have taken refuge might seize the hope set before us.

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (Gen. 14; Ps. 110:4)

* If the two unchangeable things are God’s promise and the oath that confirms it, how do we take refuge and seize the hope that is set before us?

Faithful, merciful God of our salvation, by the power of the Holy Spirit may we grow in diligence, that we realize the full assurance of hope in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

September 27 Hebrews 7:1-10

King Melchizedek (“king of righteousness”) of Salem, (“king of peace”) high priest of God met Abraham returning from defeating the kings and blessed him. Abraham apportioned one-tenth of everything. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, resembling the son of God, Melchizedek remains a priest forever.

See how great he is! Even Abraham gave him one tenth of the spoils. The high priests of the tribe of Levi collect tithes from the people, their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man, not of their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises.

It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In one case tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

* How is this mysterious character, Melchizedek, whose ancestors are not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, someone like Christ? Beyond genealogy, beyond being linked to Abraham, what is God doing, and how is God doing it?

O God, who has neither beginning nor ending, you have given us new life in Christ Jesus, whose resurrection from the dead gives us life without end. May we not only live in your promises but share them with all. In Christ we pray. Amen.

September 28 Hebrews 7:11-17

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood-- what further need would there have been for a priest arising from the order of Melchizedek rather than the order of Aaron? When there is a change in priesthood, there is a change in the law as well.

Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, one who became a priest not through a legal requirement of physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. It is attested of him, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

- * What if, today, we needed to live by the law and that law was determined through a particular priesthood? How would our lives, our ministry and our hope of salvation be different?
- * How are the readers carefully readied to see the difference in how Jesus came to be our great high priest?
- * Who is this Christ who became a priest not through a legal requirement of physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life? How do you present this Jesus to others?

We give thanks, O God, for Jesus Christ, our great high priest, who is our saving Lord not through the requirement of physical descent or tribe or tradition, but through your grace alone. May the one who lived an indestructible life fill our lives with saving grace and meaning and hope and service. In him, Amen.

September 29 Hebrews 7:18-23

There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect). There is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.

This was confirmed with an oath; other priests did not take oaths. This one became a priest with an oath because of the one who said to him, “The Lord has sworn and will not have a change of mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’” Accordingly Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

* If the law, particularly as received in the commandments, was a gift from the God of covenant faithfulness, how did it become weak and ineffectual? How is the law viewed today by various Christian communities, by society in general—by you?

* This Jesus, this better hope, this guarantor of a better covenant, is not disconnected from the law. What is the connection? How do we help people make the distinction and the connection?

* What does it mean for the life of the church that Christ lives eternally? How is our priesthood, whether as ordained clergy or as part of the priesthood of all believers, centered in Christ’s priesthood?

Eternal God, who has brought salvation not through our own keeping of the law, but through Christ himself, shape our lives in his life. Hear our intercessions through the one who unceasingly makes intercession for us, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

September 30 Hebrews 7:26-28

It was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself.

For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

* What would it be like to have our salvation depend upon simply another human being? How is it very different to have a priest—a high priest—who is without sin?

* How can “once for all” be heard? How can the completion and certainty of that statement sustain us? How can the mission implication of that statement challenge us?

* Who is this Jesus Christ for you? Both very human and yet sinless! How is he both separate from us and connected to us? How does his being holy, blameless and undefiled give us, and all people, the assurance that no sin is outside the realm of being forgiven?

We thank you, O God, for sending us your Son who, in having been made perfect forever, through his suffering and death and rising from the grave has completed our salvation. We continue to sin. You continue to forgive. In Christ Jesus, shape our lives for service. Amen.