

December 1 2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the morning star rises in your hearts.

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God.

- * How do we discern the truth of our teaching? How do we help individuals and faith communities sort out the messages they hear from various information sources?
- * What is the significance of the Transfiguration in the middle of Jesus’ ministry and of the voice from heaven? How is the Word continually confirmed in *our* midst? Are we attentive, really attentive to the Word, as a lamp shining in a dark place?
- * How do you understand biblical inspiration and interpretation?

God of truth, may we be attentive to your Word and speak your Truth in Christ. Amen.

December 2 2 Peter 2:1-3

False prophets arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned.

In their deep greed they will exploit you with deceptive words. Their condemnation, pronounced against them long ago, has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

- * How might we read these words and think about ancient times, about New Testament times (the people to whom this letter was addressed), about many times throughout the history of the church, and about our present time? When have false prophets arisen?
- * How do false prophets operate? What are their motivations? How are their opinions destructive? When might we, too, be in danger of becoming false prophets?
- * Why do people follow false prophets? And how is the way of truth maligned?
- * Picture this poignant image: “...their condemnation, pronounced on them long ago has not been idle.” Ponder the tragedy that their destruction “is not asleep.” What does that mean to you? What does that mean for the church? How, then, do we minister and lead?

Righteous and gracious God, save us from our own greed. In our ministry and in our leadership, may we not exploit those who are growing in faith. By the power of your Spirit, give us wisdom for the difficult task of guiding your Church. In the name and for the sake of our Master, Jesus, the Christ, who bought us with his blood. Amen.

December 3

2 Peter 2:4-10a

God did not spare the angels when they sinned,
but cast them into hell and committed them
to chains of deepest darkness
to be kept until the judgment.

God did not spare the ancient world,
even though God saved Noah, a herald of righteousness,
and seven other people,
but brought the flood on the world of godless people.

God condemned to extinction the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah,
making them an example of what is coming to the ungodly.
God rescued Lot, a righteous man, living among them day after day,
and tormented as he saw and heard their evil actions.

And so the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from their trials
and how to keep the unrighteous under punishment
until the day of judgment—
especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust,
and who despise authority.

* One cannot separate the God of the first testament from the God of the New Testament. How is God's righteousness consistent?

* What is the warning here? What is the good news here?

* When do you wonder about the lawlessness and wickedness you see around you (and in which we sometimes participate)? What is your prayer? What are your actions?

Righteous and holy God, we become discouraged, anxious and angry living in a world that does not outgrow its propensity for evil. We see no end to it all. We worry and we are afraid. May we take comfort knowing that you know how to rescue us from these trials and that in Christ Jesus you have. Give us peace; also give us courage. Amen.

December 4

2 Peter 2:10b-16

Bold and willful, they [false prophets] are not afraid
to slander the glorious ones, whereas angels,
though greater in might and power, do not bring against them
a slanderous judgment from the Lord.

These people, however, are like irrational animals,
mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed.
They slander what they do not understand
and when those creatures are destroyed, they also will be destroyed,
suffering the penalty for doing wrong.

They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime.
They are blots and blemishes, reeling in their dissipation
while they feast with you.
They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin.
They entice unsteady souls.
They have hearts trained in greed.
Accursed children!

They have left the straight road and have gone astray,
following the road of Balaam son of Bosor,
who loved the wages of doing wrong,
but was rebuked for his own transgression;
a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice
and restrained the prophet's madness. (Num. 22:4-35)

* These descriptions are horrific. We have been taught that judgment belongs to the Lord alone. Why, then, describe people this way? What is their danger to a faith community?

* Read the story from Numbers. What do you see there?

Righteous and Holy God, the human capacity for hearts trained in greed, and for slandering what we do not understand is enormous. Steady our souls in Christ. Amen.

December 5

2 Peter 2:17-22

These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm;
for them the deepest darkness has been reserved.
They speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh
they entice people who have just escaped from those who live in error.
They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption;
for people are slaves to whatever masters them.

If after they have escaped the defilements of the world
through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
they are again entangled in them and overpowered,
the last state has become worse for them than the first.

It would have been better for them
never to have known the way of righteousness
than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment
that was passed on to them.

It has happened to them according to the true proverb,
“The dog turns back to its own vomit,” (Prov. 26:11)
and “The sow is washed only to wallow in the mud.”

* Consider the images: waterless springs, bombastic nonsense, entanglements,
slaves of corruption. What corruption and temptation have you seen and
experienced recently?

* What false promises of freedom circulate in your world? Who or what are
our masters?

* What could it mean that one would be better off never to have known the
way of righteousness than to have turned away from it? What hope is there?

*Blessed, Holy God, you give springs of living water. In the death and
resurrection of Jesus Christ we have true and lasting freedom. May we
continue in the faith and speak your truth in the world. In Christ, Amen.*

December 6

2 Peter 3:1-7

Beloved, this is the second letter I am writing to you.
In them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention
by reminding you of the words
spoken in the past by the holy prophets,
and the commandment of the Lord and Savior
spoken through your apostles.

First of all you must understand this,
that in the last days scoffers will come
scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying,
“Where is the promise of his coming?
For ever since our ancestors died,
all things continue as they were
from the beginning of creation!”

They deliberately ignore this fact,
that by the word of God heavens existed long ago
and an earth was formed out of water,
and by means of water,
through which the world of that time
was deluged with water and perished.
But by the same word the present heavens
and earth have been reserved for fire,
being kept until the day of judgment
and destruction of the godless.

* Do we understand the consistency of God’s intentions from the beginning of
creation until now? What do we say when scoffers challenge us?

* Recall the many ways in which water is significant in the creation and
salvation accounts. How has water been significant in your life? How have the
waters of baptism shaped your life in Christ each day?

*May we remember, Holy God, that your Word existed long ago. And may we
constantly remind each other through learning and through ritual that your
Word was made flesh in Jesus the Christ so that our intentions might be rooted
in your promises. In Christ, Amen.*

December 7 **2 Peter 3:8-13**

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved,
that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,
and a thousand years are like one day.

The Lord is not slow about promises,
as some think of slowness, but is patient with you,
not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

The day of the Lord will come like a thief,
and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise,
and the elements will be dissolved with fire,
and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

* What sort of person ought you to be, in leading lives of holiness and
godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?

On the day of God the heavens will burn up and be destroyed,
and the heavenly bodies will be melted by the heat.

* Contemplate acts of destruction human beings have perpetrated. In God's
patience, about what should all of us repent?

* How is your sense of time part of God's time? How does that shape your
daily life?

In accordance with God's promise,
we wait for new heavens and a new earth,
where righteousness is at home.

*We wait, timeless God, and while we wait we work for justice and mutual
understanding and peace on the earth. Living in the new life in Christ, may
we help create places where righteousness is at home, until that time when we
live with you forever. In Christ, Amen.*

December 8 **2 Peter 3:14-18**

Therefore, beloved, while you wait for these things,
strive to be found by Christ at peace,
without spot or blemish.

* How do you wait? Waiting in a line at the store or waiting for a friend is
different than waiting on the Lord. Or, is it? How do you wait for Christ's
coming, at the end time, or at the time of your own death? Does it depend
upon how imminent you think that is?

* How do you live your life in the meantime? What does it mean to be without
spot of blemish (We know we continue to sin.)? Will you be found at peace by
Christ, within, and among your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.
So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you
according to the wisdom given him,
speaking of this as he does in all his letters.
There are some things in them hard to understand,
which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction,
as they do the other scriptures.

You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned,
beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless
and lose your own stability.

* What parts of these letters do people twist to their (our) own destruction?

* Surely there are times when we have been carried away with "the error of
the lawless" and lose our stability. What wisdom do we still need to acquire?

*May we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

December 9

1 John 1:1-4

We declare to you what was from the beginning,
what we have heard,
what we have seen with our own eyes,
what we have looked at
and touched with our hands,
concerning the word of life.

This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it,
and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father
and was revealed to us—
we declare to you what we have seen and heard
so that you also may have fellowship with us;
and truly our fellowship is with the Father
and with God's Son Jesus Christ.

We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

* The good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is a story told from one generation to the next. How did you first hear? Were you very young? A teenager? In your middle or older years? Recall who, through the Spirit, helped shape your faith and form your life in Christ. Who recalled the story for you at times of doubt or distress?

* We have not actually looked Jesus in the eyes nor touched him; however, what have you heard and seen with your own eyes and touched with your own hands concerning the Word of life?

* Why do you declare it to others? Or do we as often as we might? How does our caringly sharing the story grow the fellowship of faith?

We give you thanks, Christ Jesus, that we have eternal life with you through your incarnation, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection. By the power of the Holy Spirit, fill us with new life in you that we might make sure others, far and near, also hear and see and feel your love. Amen.

December 10

1 John 1:5-10

This is the message we have heard from Christ and proclaim to you,
that God is light and in God there is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have fellowship with Christ
while we are walking in darkness,
we lie and do not do what is true;
but if we walk in the light as God is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.

* God is light! What is "darkness" to you? Fears, lies, deception? How do we *walk in* darkness and what does that do to us and to our relationships?

* Image being in the light as God is in the light. How have you experienced that? What can you now see? Image the cleansing that Christ brings in life.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, the one who is faithful and just
will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar,
And God's word is not in us.

* We begin confession with, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." When have you been deceived? When have you deceived yourself? Others? How have you tried to deceive God?

* How does the assurance that we have forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus, encourage us—liberate us—to confess our sins?

May we walk in your light, holy God. We have sinned and have at times preferred the darkness. Open our eyes that we may see you. We confess our sins, those we know, and those that we hide even from ourselves. Forgive us that we might live in the light of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

December 11

1 John 2:1-7

My little children, I am writing these things to you
so that you may not sin.
But if anyone does sin,
we have an advocate with God, Jesus Christ the righteous;
and Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins,
and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

By this we may be sure that we know Christ,
if we obey God's commandments.
Whoever says, "I have come to know Christ,"
but does not obey his commandments,
is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist;
but whoever obeys Christ's word, truly in this person
the love of God has reached perfection.

By this we may be sure that we are in Christ:
Whoever says, "I abide in Christ," ought to walk just as he walked.
Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment,
but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning;
the old commandment is the word that you have heard.

* "Beloved." "Little children." What do these signs of endearment say to you?

* How does this key passage that Christ is our advocate, the atoning sacrifice for our sins and the sins of the whole world shape our ministry and mission globally and locally?

* How does the love of God reach its perfection? What is the connection between abiding in Christ and walking as Christ walked?

Merciful God, you have given us an advocate in Christ Jesus, for surely we do sin. Blessed Holy Spirit, you have led us to know Christ. May we abide in Christ and walk as he walked. In his name we pray. Amen.

December 12

1 John 2:8-14

I am writing you a new commandment that is true in Christ and in you,
because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.
Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister,
is still in the darkness.

Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light,
and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling.
But whoever hates another believer is in darkness,
walks in darkness, and does not know the way to go,
because the darkness has brought on blindness.

* What are some dark places in your faith community? How does living with Christ, the Light, among you, change darkness into light?

I am writing to you little children,
because your sins are forgiven on account of Christ's name.
I am writing to you, fathers, because you know the One
who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young people,
because you have conquered the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.
I write to you fathers,
because you know the One who is from the beginning
I write to you, young people,
because you are strong
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

* Why the repetition? To whom could you write (by whatever form of communication) in your congregation? What would you say to those who have moved on from your congregation, or who have simply left?

God, you bind us together in a new relationship because our sins are forgiven on account of Christ. Keep us one, even as you lead us more clearly into the light. In Christ, Amen.

December 13

1 John 2:15-20

Do not love the world or the things in the world.
The love of God is not in those who love the world;
for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh,
the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—
comes not from God but from the world.

And the world and its desire are passing away,
but those who do the will of God live forever.

Children, it is the last hour!
As you have heard that antichrist is coming,
so now many antichrists have come.

From this we know that it is the last hour.
They went out from us, but they did not belong to us;
for if they had belonged to us,
they would have remained with us.
But by going out they made it plain
that none of them belongs to us.
But you have been anointed by the Holy One,
and all of you have knowledge.

* What does it mean that we should not love the world? We are, of course,
also called to love the world. What is the difference? Who are our gods? What
is our mission?

* How have people through the centuries been quick to label someone whom
they do not like as the antichrist? Christ is not simply spiritual, or a spiritual
idea. Why do people try to deny the true incarnate identity of Christ?

*God of all creation, we realize that the world is passing away, and yet it—and
we—are still here. Forgive us our disbelief. May we who have been anointed
as ambassadors of your love and stewards of your earth do your will. Amen.*

December 14

1 John 2:21-27

I write to you not because you do not know the truth,
but because you know it,
and you know that no lie comes from the truth.
Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?
This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

No one who denies the Son has the Father;
Everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also.
Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you.
If what you heard from the beginning abides in you,
then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.
And this is what God has promised us, eternal life.

I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you.
As for you, the anointing that you received from God abides in you,
and so you do not need anyone to teach you.
As God's anointing teaches you about all things,
and is true and is not a lie,
and just as it has taught you, abide in Christ.

* No lie comes from the truth. What are some ways that you have seen people
misinterpreting or misusing the teachings of the faith? How have we done so?

* What does it mean to abide? When we, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
abide in the Father and the Son, what does that mean for our lives?

* Teaching is an awesome responsibility. Who are the teachers among you?
How does your faith community call forth and prepare people to teach? How
do you sustain them?

*God of truth, keep us in the truth. Teach us, guide us, nurture us. We believe
that Christ came in the flesh, truly human, truly God. We thank you for the gift
of calling to speak and teach and minister in the name of Christ Jesus. Keep us
faithful in him. Amen.*

December 15

1 John 2:28-3:3

Little children, abide in Christ,
so that when he is revealed we may have confidence
and not be put to shame before him at this coming.
If you know that Christ is righteous,
you may be sure that everyone who does right
has been born of him.

See what love God has given us,
that we should be called children of God;
and that is what we are.

The reason the world does not know us
is that it did not know God.

Beloved, we are God's children now;
what we will be has not yet been revealed.

What we do know is this:

When Jesus is revealed, we will be like him,
for we will see him as he is.

All who have this hope in Christ will purify themselves,
just as he is pure.

* What does it mean, really mean to you, to be called a child of God? To be born of Christ? To be called to live pure lives because Christ is pure? Sinners, though we are, what do you, as a Christian, look like to the world?

* If we do not know what we will be like when we are with Christ forever, how does that shape our lives now? Our ministry? Our care for the world, even if the "world does not know God?"

Jesus Christ, we wait for the time when we meet you face to face. And yet you have been revealed already in the incarnation. May we who have been born of you, who were born of a human mother, abide in you, that the world may see you through our lives. Amen.

December 16

1 John 3:4-10

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness.
You know that Christ was revealed to take away sins,
and in him there is no sin.

No one who abides in Christ sins;
no one who sins has either seen him or known him.
Little children, let no one deceive you.

Everyone who does what is right is righteous,
just as Christ is righteous.

Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil;
for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

The Son of God was revealed for this purpose,
to destroy the works of the devil.

Those who have been born of God do not sin
because God's seed abides in them;

They cannot sin, because they have been born of God.

The children of God and the children of the devil
are revealed in this way:

all who do not do what is right are not from God,
nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

* In Christ there is no sin; we are in Christ, and yet we still sin. How do you deal with the fact that you still sin? Is this of the devil? Are we not from God? What difference does it make—now—that the devil has been defeated?

* If we try to distinguish ourselves as Christian from others by thinking it is only Christians who do what is right and love others, what problems arise?

We thank you righteous and merciful God, that you revealed Jesus Christ to the world. We confess our sin, trusting that we no longer belong to sin, but to you. Loose the world from the power of sin that we might love and care for each other. In Christ, Amen.

December 17

1 John 3:11-17

This is the message you have heard from the beginning,
that we should love one another.

We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one
and murdered his brother. (Gen. 4:8)

* Why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Did he think so? Do we think that about our deeds?

Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters,
that the world hates you.

We know that we have passed from death to life
because we love one another.

Whoever does not love abides in death.

* Are we saved by our much loving? Or is it rather that when we abide in Christ we have his love living in and through us? When do we slip back into abiding in death-like ways?

All who hate a brother or sister are murderers,
and you know that murderers
do not have eternal life abiding in them.

We know love by this, that Christ laid down his life for us—
and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

* How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods
and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

* How easy it is to attempt to justify ourselves by saying we have never committed murder! But who among us has not hated someone? How do we kill each other "nicely" each day? What are the fruits of hatred?

Christ Jesus, in laying down your life for us, you have given us new life to share and freedom to care. Give us insight; give us courage to understand the world's need and seek justice. In your name we pray. Amen.

December 18

1 John 3:18-24

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech,
but in truth and action.

By this we will know that we are from the truth
and will reassure our hearts before God
whenever our hearts condemn us;
for God is greater than our hearts,
and God knows everything.

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us,
we have boldness before God;
and we receive from him whatever we ask,
because we obey God's commandment
and do what pleases God.

This is God's commandment,
that we should believe in the name of God's son Jesus Christ
and love one another, just as God has commanded us.

All who obey God's commandment abide in God,
and God abides in them.

By this we know that God abides in us,
by the Spirit that God has given us.

* Here we have the core of Christian faith and life. What does it mean to you and to your faith community that we are called to love in truth and *action*?

* Since God is greater than our hearts, why do we continue to berate ourselves? Since God knows everything, and forgives in Christ Jesus, why do we hang on to past hurts? How might you be more bold before God? What might God be calling you to do?

God, who is love, may we love, not simply in word or speech but in truth and action. By the power of the spirit, may the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ abide in us. May we together abide in him. Amen.

December 19

1 John 4:1-12

Beloved, do not believe every spirit; test them to see if they are from God.
Many false prophets have gone out in to the world.
Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,
and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.
This is the spirit of the antichrist that you have heard is coming
and now is in the world.
Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them;
for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.
They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world,
and the world listens to them.
We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us,
and whoever is not from God does not listen to us.
From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

* What are some “spirits” to which we should not listen?

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God:
Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.
God’s love was revealed among us in this way:
God sent God’s only Son into the world
so that we might live through him.
In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us
and sent God’s Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.
Beloved, since God loved us so much,
we also ought to love one another.
No one has ever seen God; if we love one another,
God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.

God of love, may we love one another as you have loved us in Christ. Amen.

December 20

1 John 4:13-21

By this we know that we abide in God and God in us,
because God has given us the Spirit.
We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son
as the Savior of the world.
God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God,
and they abide in God.
So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.
Love has been perfected among us in this:
that we may have boldness on the day of judgment,
because as Christ is, so are we in this world.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear;
for fear has to do with punishment,
and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.
We love because God first loved us.

Those who say, “I love God”
and hate their brothers and sisters are liars
for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen,
cannot love God whom they have not seen.
The commandment we have from God is this:
those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

* How does fear prevent us from loving? Whom or what do you fear?

* How hard it is to love all our brothers and sisters. How is God perfecting
God’s own love in us so that we can love in relationships where we hate?

*Spirit of the living, loving God, increase our trust so that we may confess that
Jesus is our Redeemer. Abide in us so that we may boldly love all peoples of
the world, especially those who are the hardest for us to love. In Christ. Amen.*

December 21

1 John 5:1-5

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God,
and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.
By this we know that we love the children of God,
when we love God and obey God's commandments.

For the love of God is this, that we obey God's commandments.
And God's commandments are not burdensome,
for whatever is born of God
conquers the world.

And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.
Who is it that conquers the world
but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

* In what way are God's commandments not burdensome? Think through the commandments (Ex. 20). Ponder just one or two, and consider how God's love—God's love of us and our love of God—can lift burdens.

* After all the passages about love, why are we now to think about *conquering* the world? What does "conquer" in this context mean? When did the church throughout history, "conquer for Christ" in ways that oppressed peoples? In a positive way, how does our faith conquer the world, releasing us from fear and hatred and greed?

Parenting God, strengthen our faith in Christ Jesus so that we may live according to your commandments. Forgive our sin, liberate us in love so that we may care for your world, not as burden, but as gift. Shape our lives for mission which draws people to you and to one another in your great love in Christ Jesus. Amen.

December 22

1 John 5:6-17

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ.
The Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.
Three testify: the Spirit, the water and blood, and these three agree.
If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater;
the testimony of God is that God has testified to the Son.
Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts.
Those who do not believe in God have made God a liar.
This is the testimony: God gave us eternal life in God's Son.
Whoever has the Son has life;
whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

I write these things to you who believe
in the name of the Son of God
so that you may know that you have eternal life.

This is the boldness we have in Christ, that if we ask anything
according to God's will, God hears us.
If we know that God hears us,
we know we have obtained the requests.
If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a moral sin,
you will ask, and God will give life to such a one.
There is sin that is mortal: I do not say that you should pray about that.
All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.

* How is believing in the Son the core of the Gospel? How do the Spirit, the water and the blood testify? How does Christ give life to your life?

* For centuries people have worried about what is a mortal sin. This passage does not say. How should we pray for life for those caught in their sins?

As we await the celebration of your birth, Jesus Christ, may we place our hearts in your hands. Prepare us to share this greatest of all gifts with everyone. In your name, Amen

December 23

1 John 5:18-21

We know that those who are born of God do not sin,
but the one who was born of God protects them,
and the evil one does not touch them.

We know that we are God's children,
and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one.

* Of course we sin. So how can we say that we do not? And how can we say that the evil one does not touch Christians? What is the point of this passage? How is it true in Christ?

* The world for 21st century Christians is very different than the New Testament world. What are the powers under which the world still groans? How can we be life-giving prophets and servants today?

We know that the Son of God has come
and has given us understanding
so that we may know God who is true;
and we are in God who is true,
in God's Son Jesus Christ.
Christ is the true God and eternal life.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

* How is idolatry the central sin in every age? Who or what are our gods? Who or what do we fear, love and trust above all things?

You have come, Christ Jesus, and you come again to the world as we move from Advent into Christmas. Increase our understanding, increase our faith, increase our love. Amen.

December 24

2 John 1-6

From the Elder
To the dear lady and to her children
whom I truly love
and not only I but also all who know the truth
because the truth remains with us and will be with us forever.

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us
from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son,
in truth and love.

I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth.
Just as we have been commanded by God.
But now, dear lady, I ask you,
not as though I was writing you a new commandment,
but one we have had from the beginning,
let us love one another.

And this is love, that we walk according to the commandments;
this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—
you must walk in it.

* On this Christmas Eve, we ponder Mary giving birth to Jesus. Just as John writes to the dear lady and her children, with whom do you want to share the truth of the love of God in Christ?

* Let us love one another! Let us walk in love. In the midst of whatever this day holds for you, how will you walk in love?

O God of Love, we give thanks for your coming among us in truth and love. May your grace, mercy and peace indeed be among us this night and always, in Christ Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem we pray. Amen.

December 25

2 John 7-13

Many deceivers have gone out into the world,
those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come into the flesh;
any such person is a deceiver and the antichrist!

Be on your guard so that you do not lose what we have worked for,
but may receive a full reward.

Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ,
but goes beyond it, does not have God;
whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone
who comes to you and does not bring this teaching.

Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink.
Instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face.
So that our joy may be complete.

The children of your dear sister send you their greetings.

* John calls those who do not confess Christ not only deceivers but the antichrist. And he warns these early Christians not to receive or welcome anyone who does not bring the teachings of Christ, lest they participate in their evil deeds. On this day of all days, we Christians want to practice hospitality. What might be John's warning to us today?

* In the early church seeing those far away who shared the faith was a rare and treasured thing. In this Christmas season, from whom have you heard? With whom will you talk? Whom (perhaps a stranger) might you welcome into your home?

O God, who has come into the flesh, may we not be deceived by idolatrous hopes or treasures of untruth. But rather, gather us around you closely and extend our arms to greet and to gather in love those for whom you were born, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

December 26

3 John 1-10

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul. I was overjoyed when some of your friends arrived and told me how faithful you are to the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Beloved, you are so faithful in whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you. They have testified of your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God. They set out on their trip in the service of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support them so they may become co-workers.

I wrote something to the church, but Diotrophes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. He refuses to welcome the friends and even prevents those who do so and drives them out of the church.

* To whom have you written lately (by any means of communication)? Over what do you rejoice? What concerns you? How are you connecting Christians in the faith?

* How do we sort out the truth, live out this truth in love, accept strangers as friends, and build up a faith community?

Christ, our living Lord, may you alone be the connection and the communication among all who love you. Give us the strength, love, courage and constancy to be wise leaders among your people. Amen.

December 27

3 John 11-15

Do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good.
Whoever does good is from God;
 whoever does evil has not seen God.

We, and everyone, have testified favorably about Demetrius,
 and so has truth itself.
You know that our testimony is true.

I have much to write to you,
 but I would rather not write with pen and ink;
 instead I hope to see you soon,
 and we will talk together face to face.

Peace to you.
The friends send you their greetings.
 Greet the friends there,
 each by name.

* Who, do you suppose, is Demetrius? What is his story? What might be the complexities in that story? And what are the complexities of stories within your own faith community right now?

* What is good? And what is truth? To what truth are you called to testify?

God, from whom all good comes, surround us with your truth that our writing and our speaking face to face might be grounded in you alone. We pray for peace, for those close to us and for the whole world. In Christ, Amen.

December 28

Jude 1-4

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James,
 to those who are called,
 who are beloved in God the Father
 and kept safe for Jesus Christ:

May mercy, and peace, and love be yours in abundance.

Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you
 about the salvation we share,
I find it necessary to write and appeal to you
 to contend for the faith.

Certain intruders have stolen in among you,
 people whom long ago the Scriptures predicted
 the condemnation they have received.
 people who pervert the grace of God into licentiousness
 and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

* Intruders! It would be so easy to quickly label people as “intruders” in our faith community. But, who among us (including even ourselves) does not in some way “pervert the grace of God”?

* Jesus Christ is our *only* Master and Lord. Ponder that. How do we cherish the gift of being called, beloved and kept safe for Jesus Christ?

We thank you, gracious God, for the mercy, peace and love which you have given us in such abundance. May we not be apathetic or complacent, but ready to speak forthrightly about the faith that was entrusted to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

December 29

Jude 5-12a

I remind you, though you are fully informed,
that the Lord who once for all saved a people out of the land of Egypt
afterward destroyed those who did not believe.
And the angels who did not keep their own position,
but left their proper dwelling
God has kept in eternal chains and deepest darkness
for the judgment of the great Day.

In the same way these dreamers defile the flesh,
reject authority and slander the glorious ones.
But when the archangel Michael contended with the devil
and disputed about the body of Moses,
he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him
but said "The Lord rebuke you!"

These people slander whatever they do not understand
and they are destroyed by things that, like irrational animals,
they know by instinct.
Woe to them! They go the way of Cain,
and abandon themselves to Balaam's error for the sake of gain
and perish in Korah's rebellion.

These are blemishes on their love-feasts,
while they feast with you without fear, feeding only themselves.

* Jude warns against the "blemishes on love-feasts," defiling the flesh,
rejecting authority, slandering, destroying, following Cain's way (Genesis 4:3-
8) abandoning themselves to "Balaam's error" (Number 22:1-35), and
perishing in "Korah's rebellion (Numbers 16:11-35)." What are our
blemishes?

*God of history and of history's rebellious, defiling people, we, too, as a faith
community, stand under your judgment. May we not only guard against
slandering, shameless people in our midst, but place ourselves at your feet of
mercy, in the name of Christ the Redeemer. Amen.*

December 30

Jude 12b-19

They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds;
autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted;
wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame;
wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness
has been reserved forever.

* Ponder waterless clouds, trees twice dead, wild waves, and wandering stars.
Really picture such images, such situations, such a people. Feel the depth of
anguish.

It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam,
prophesied: "The Lord is coming with ten thousands of God's holy ones,
to execute judgment on all,
to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness
they have committed and of all the harsh things
ungodly sinners have spoken against God." (Gen. 5:18, 21-24)

There are grumblers and malcontents,
indulgent in their own lusts;
bombastic in speech,
flattering people to their own advantage.

But you, beloved, must remember the predictions
of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ;
for they said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers,
indulging their own ungodly lusts." (2 Peter 3:3)
It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions.

* Are you at times distressed, depressed, by the grumblers, malcontents,
scoffers and those who cause divisions? What strength is God giving your
faith community?

*God of judgment, convict us, too, of our grumbling, discontent and
ungodliness that the Spirit might open our hearts once again to your mercy
and love. Build us together into the Body of Christ in whom we pray. Amen.*

December 31

Jude 20-25

But, you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith;
pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God;
look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ
that leads to eternal life.

Have mercy on those who are wavering;
save others by snatching them out of the fire;
and have mercy on still others with fear,
hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

Now to the one who is able to keep you from falling,
and to make you stand without blemish
in the presence of God's glory with rejoicing,
to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, power, and authority,
before all time and now and forever. Amen.

* How can a faith community help those who are wavering in faith and whose lives are filled with fear? How do you build yourselves up in the faith? Who helps you pray? Who could help you remember the love and mercy of God?

* Where do you stand on this last day of the year? God is able to keep us from falling. No matter the circumstances of the past twelve months, how has God done that this year?

God of all time, we praise your glory and we rejoice in your steadfast love. To you, God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, now and forever. Amen.