

**FOCUS
FIRST**

First Reformed Church

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**Loving Jesus
and Others**

January/February 2021

As I write this in late December 2020, one thing is certain for the year ahead: Jesus Christ is Lord. I don't say that to be trite, as much as it may sound so. "Jesus is Lord" IS what preachers are supposed to say, after all! I don't consider my statement trite for the following reasons:

We've spent the last 9 months in perhaps the greatest uncertainty as a society of my lifetime. Those who've lived through times of war where our entire nation was called to make sacrifices such as rationing and constant vigilance about an invasion or those who have seen brutal combat have perhaps known as much uncertainty or worse, but now we have all been traumatized. In any case it seems almost impossible for 2021 to be WORSE than this year has been. Then again, we have no guarantees. We can only live each day in trust because the God who created the world and dictated that the blessings of Eden be spread across it has not left us. He came in flesh to bring His plans for ancient Eden to ultimate fruitfulness. As members of Christ, you and I are still essential to that plan! Your prayers, your faith, your witness still play a vital part in God's plan.

Despite the setbacks of the last year, we still live at the greatest time in history as far as the material progress of the world, though it has certainly taken its "hits" in the last year. We also live in the greatest country in the world. Neither of these things have changed. When my family relocated from suburban Maryland to West Virginia in the 1970's, I recall people getting their drinking water from a pipe coming out of the mountainside. We remain so blessed by comparison, and we continue to remain blessed in the days ahead despite all that has happened.

How will we put our blessings to good use?

While there are always preachers who will choose to cry out "it's the end of the world" (usually to sell a book or draw a crowd) and do so by producing some splinter of allegedly "Biblical" evidence to prove their case, they are universally WRONG. They always pit a questionable fragment of the Word against the whole of God's Word! God didn't create the world and then redeem the world on the cross only to give up on it. That is our confidence. That's why we're REFORMED PEOPLE. For all our failings whatever they may be, God has set us here as an outpost of His kingdom. By His grace, He intends to let us display the love and faithfulness He intends for the rest of the world!

These truths do not mean we're not in a cosmic battle. The battle with sin and Satan has gone on since Eden and goes on today. Genesis 3:15 told us as much! God brings His blessings and evil seeks to distort them for its own purposes. Despite all this we are the people God has chosen to bless...and perhaps the greatest blessing beyond the Good News itself is the right to pray and be heard by heaven.

So while we acknowledge the battle ahead of us as a church, community, nation and world, let us not fear, let us not minimize the temporal and spiritual blessings God has given us, and let us not squander any more time while we could be praying.

George Mueller, the great intercessor, said the best way for him to pray in faith was to read the New Testament until his "heart was happy in God". Then prayer was easy. To that end let me encourage you to use the Bible Reading bookmarks we are providing and to spend time with Jesus each day until He amazes you and calls you to prayer! Then let us pray for His kingdom to come and His will to be done...for lives to be redeemed by Christ, for evil to be overcome, for wayward Children to come back to Christ, etc. etc.

Seize the year ahead my friends and family in Christ. God has called us for this hour. Let us have hope in a world that has been shaken so others may take hope in Christ too! God still has a job for us to do! So let's do it!

A Blessed 2021 to you all through Jesus Christ!

Pastor Chuck

JANUARY



- 1 - Carole Isenhart
- 6 - Joyce Hook
- 11 - Marion VanderVinne
- 12 - Jane Sissing
- 13 - Jason Zuidema
- 16 - Ron Pessman
Pam Vogel
- 17 - Larry Buikema
Sheila Huizenga
- 18 - Marcia Carter
- 23 - Bruce Christensen
Carol Dornbush
- Paul VanderVinne
- 24 - Amy Sikkema
- 27 - Matt Huizenga
Riley & Robert Sheckler

FEBRUARY



- 4 - Randy DeWeerd
- Matt Plumley
- 7 - Karin Bush
Lisa Whitmore
- 8 - Judy Vanderploeg
- 10 - Joyce Ottens
- 11 - Tracie Schipper
- 14 - Kevin Dornbush
Arnie Huizenga
- 21 - Amanda May
- 22 - Bud Foster
- 23 - Lynn Boelkens
- 27 - Kara Ricklefs
Larry Shipma
- 29 - Mark Krum
- Denny Becker

FEBRUARY



- 5 - Howard & Gertrude Huizenga
- 76th Anniversary
- 21 - Brian & Karin Bush
-- 23rd Anniversary
- 25 - Gordon & Jane Sissing
- 60th Anniversary

Greeters

	<u>Narthex</u>	<u>Chapel</u>
Jan. 3	Carol Janvrin	Allen Dykstra
Jan. 10	Phil Hook	Mark Krum
Jan. 17	Nancy Dykstra	Jan Ottens
Jan. 24	Eric Janvrin	Dave Sheckler
Jan. 31	Bruce Christensen	Peg Kilburg
Feb. 7	Ken Vanderploeg	Randy Dysktra
Feb. 14	Allen Dykstra	Carol Janvrin
Feb. 21	Mark Krum	Phil Hook
Feb. 28	Jan Ottens	Nancy Dykstra

Ramp Door

Jan. 3	Ken Vanderploeg
Jan. 10	Randy Dykstra
Jan. 17	Arnie Vogel
Jan. 24	Paul VanderVinne
Jan. 31	Dave Sheckler
Feb. 7	Bruce Christensen
Feb. 14	Larry Shipma
Feb. 21	Garry Medema
Feb. 28	Ron Pessman

Ushers

Jan. 3	Charlie Carter
Jan. 10	Paul VanderVinne
Jan. 17	Arnie Huizenga
Jan. 24	Charlie Carter
Jan. 31	Paul VanderVinne
Feb. 7	Arnie Huizenga
Feb. 14	Charlie Carter
Feb. 21	Paul VanderVinne
Feb. 28	Arnie Huizenga

Children's Sermon

Jan. 3	Nancy Dykstra
Jan. 10	Larry Senior
Jan. 17	Janvrin's
Jan. 24	Nancy Dykstra
Jan. 31	Larry Senior
Feb. 7	Janvrin's
Feb. 14	Nancy Dykstra
Feb. 21	Larry Senior
Feb. 28	Janvrin's

Nursery

Jan. 3	Chris Krum & Mary Gowan
Jan. 10	Maxine Whistler & Lori Neighbour
Jan. 17	Matt & Sarah Plumley
Jan. 24	Lara Bielema & Madison Krum
Jan. 31	Chris Krum & Mary Gowan
Feb. 7	Maxine Whistler & Lori Neighbour
Feb. 14	Matt & Sarah Plumley
Feb. 21	Lara Bielema & Madison Krum
Feb. 28	Chris Krum & Mary Gowan

Scripture Readers

Jan. 3	Larry Senior
Jan. 10	Carol Janvrin
Jan. 17	Art Kilburg
Jan. 24	Peg Kilburg
Jan. 31	Brenda Sheckler
Feb. 7	Nancy Dykstra
Feb. 14	Ron Pessman
Feb. 21	Arnie Vogel
Feb. 28	Larry Senior

Sound System

Jan. 3	Art Kilburg
Jan. 10	Bob Kuehl
Jan. 17	Dave Sheckler
Jan. 24	Ken Vanderploeg
Jan. 31	Art Kilburg
Feb. 7	Bob Kuehl
Feb. 14	Dave Sheckler
Feb. 21	Ken Vanderploeg
Feb. 28	Art Kilburg

Projector

Jan. 3	Phil Bielema
Jan. 10	Val Bush
Jan. 17	Brian Bush
Jan. 24	Candie Schipper
Jan. 31	Karin Bush
Feb. 7	Jerry Bush
Feb. 14	Brian Bush
Feb. 21	Phil Bielema
Feb. 28	Val Bush

Food Pantry

January

Bar Soap or Detergent
Helper: Ken Vanderploeg

February

Toothpaste or Shampoo
Helper: Elsie Foster

The Magi's story—and ours

The story of the Magi is our story. God has used his supernatural means to draw us unto himself. ... On one glorious day, when we were exhausted and wearied in our sin, God led us to gaze upon Jesus just as the Magi did. We see the glory of God manifested through Jesus Christ in the internal work of the Holy Spirit. We see our utter sinfulness and God's abounding grace offered in the Messiah. We are filled with joy as this grace sinks into our hearts.

We fall down on our knees and confess our need of this Messiah. We worship him and offer up our lives as our greatest offering to him. Then we continue on in our lives, carrying the truth about the Messiah.

—Travis Cunningham, tvcresources.net



A word for the year

Every January, some people pray and ask God to provide a word for their year ahead. Friends have shared theirs with me, but I was hesitant to embrace the practice myself. I'd love to receive a word like *flourish*; then again, I might be like the friend who heard *health* and then faced many physical challenges that year.

But I tried it for 2020 and heard *prepare*. My first reaction was that the word wasn't very exciting, which possibly confirmed I hadn't orchestrated it. Indeed, 2020 ended up full of significant, unexpected change for our family, with careers, school, church and friends. *Prepare* reminded me that amid chaos, God had prepared me for each moment and continues to prepare me for what's next.

Give it a try! Regardless of the word you receive or what lies ahead, you can trust that God loves you and is ultimately in control for 2021 and beyond.

—Janna Firestone

An ongoing goal

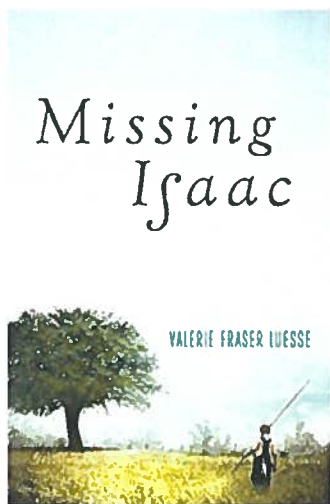
Still searching for a New Year's resolution? None is more worthy than becoming Christ-like. In fact, 19th-century evangelist Henry Drummond calls it "the only thing in the whole world worth caring for."

Two modern-day authors offer more insights. Stormie Omartian points out that we're either making progress or backsliding on this goal. "There is no neutral position in the Lord," she writes. "You are either becoming more like Christ every day or you're becoming less like him." And followers of Jesus must keep the goal always in focus. Christ-likeness is our "eventual destination," writes Rick Warren, but the "journey will last a lifetime."



New to the Church Library

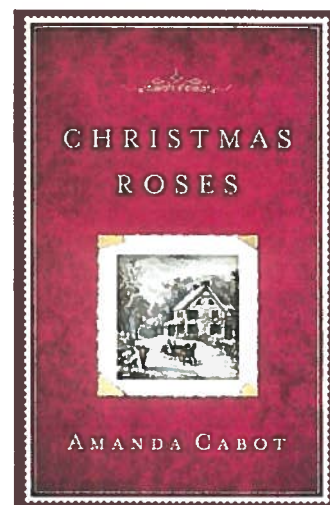
“Missing Isaac” by Valerie Fraser Luesse



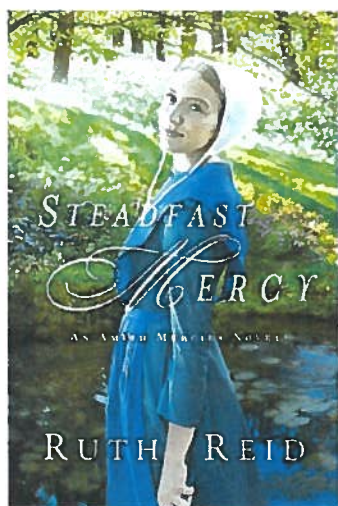
There was another South in the 1960s, one far removed from the marches and bombings and turmoil in the streets that were broadcast on the evening news. It was a place of inner turmoil, where ordinary people struggled to right themselves on a social landscape that was dramatically shifting beneath their feet. It is 1965 when black field hand Isaac Reynolds goes missing from the tiny, unassuming town of Glory, Alabama. The townspeople's reactions range from concern to indifference, but one boy will stop at nothing to find out what happened to his unlikely friend. White, wealthy, and fatherless, young Pete McLean has nothing to gain and everything to lose in his relentless search for Isaac. In the process, he will discover much more than he bargained for. Before it's all over, Pete will have to blur the hard lines of race, class, and religion. And what they discover about themselves may change some of them forever.

“Christmas Roses” by Amanda Cabot

Celia Anderson doesn't need anything for Christmas except a few more boarders, which are hard to come by in this small mining town. She certainly doesn't have a husband on her Christmas wish list. But when a wandering carpenter finds lodging at her boarding house, she admits that she might remarry if she found the right man--the kind of man who would bring her roses for Christmas. It would take a miracle to get roses during a harsh Wyoming winter. But Christmas, after all, is the time for miracles.



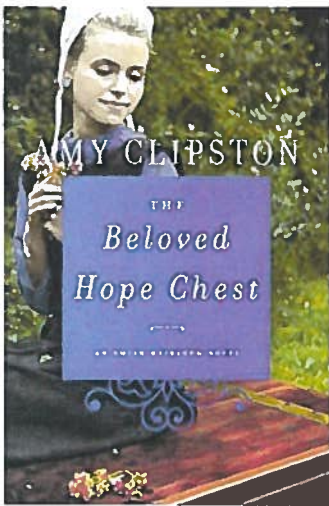
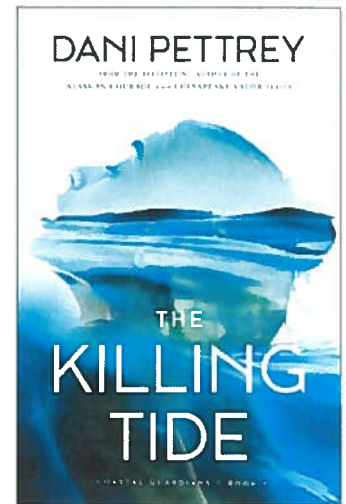
“Steadfast Mercy” by Ruth Reid



After the tragic death of her parents, Jonica Muller must return to the Amish community she left in shame five years ago. Tasked with settling her father's estate, she plans to keep her visit as brief as possible so she can return to Cedar Ridge and start a life with Ephraim, a widower who has offered her and her five-year-old son the stability of a family. But Jonica's childhood home in Posen, Michigan, won't let her go so quickly. Her father's sister, Edna, is showing signs of a slipping mind. To Jonica's alarm, Edna's begun entertaining a mysterious redheaded Englischer who has unclear intentions toward the aging woman and the Mullers' property. Caleb is a young farmer working Edna's land, trying to hide his own secret shame from his family and his girlfriend, Darleen. But when Jonica asks him to come to Edna's aid, she unwittingly sets events in motion that change everyone's ability to live in the shadows of their lives.

“The Killing Tide” by Dani Pettrey

When one Coast Guard officer is found dead and another goes missing, Coast Guard Investigative Service special agent Finn Walker faces his most dangerous crime yet. His only clues are what little evidence remains aboard the dead officer's boat, and the direction the clues point to will test Finn and the Guard to their limits. When investigative reporter Gabby Rowley arrives, her unrelenting questions complicate an already volatile situation. Now that she's back, the tug on Finn's heart is strong, but with the risks she's taking for her next big story, he fears she might not live through it. Thrown together by the heinous crime, Finn and Gabby can't ignore the sparks or judgments flying between them. But will they be able to see past their preconceptions long enough to track down an elusive killer, or will they become his next mark?

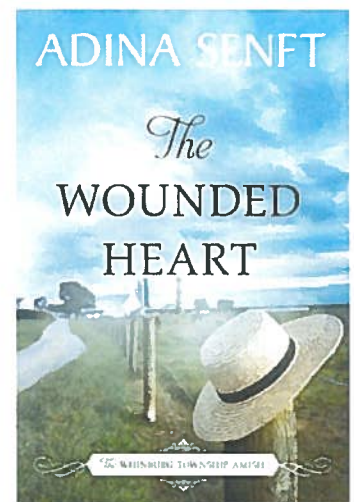


“The Beloved Hope Chest” by Amy Clipston

Mattie Fisher's three daughters know that she's been keeping a secret from them. With each item pulled from the beloved family hope chest, they've discovered a new clue about their mother's past. But there's a reason Mattie has been keeping her history hidden, and she's not sure she's ready to reopen old wounds. Will dredging up the past change the way her children view her? Or her marriage to their father? And can she handle the pain of revisiting the memories that preceded the last few happy decades?

“The Wounded Heart” by Adina Senft

Widowed a year ago and left with two small and energetic boys, Amelia Beiler is struggling to make ends meet. She is running her late husband's business, but it's not what she was raised to do, which is run a home and find joy in teaching her boys about God's love. When she puts the business up for sale and gets an offer from an English buyer as well as from one in the church, she unwittingly causes a furor in the Amish community. On top of that, another Amish man, Eli Fischer, wants more than just the shop--he's offering Amelia his heart, too. But her own heart is torn. When she goes to the doctor about her struggle with strange physical symptoms, he tells her it's multiple sclerosis. She's doing her best not to question God's will, but it's all too much. If she pursues the treatment she believes in, she risks going under the Bann. But how can she allow Eli to court her when she can't promise him a future?



CREATIVE CREW NEWS, ETC.

Submitted by Judy Vanderploeg

Oct. 14, 2020 - Well, we arrived bright and early on this chilly morning, and got to sewing in short order. Well... sorta. By just the third stitch, my temperamental substitute machine bound up once again, and was not the only machine with issues. We mused that we should just head back home while still ahead; but, we Dutch can be determined, so we soldiered on, and, surprisingly, and not a further hiccup ensued from our machines all morning!

Eleven of us eventually arrived, and one gal took special note of the welcoming atmosphere that greeted her. That's because, like good girls and boys, we were "all in our places with bright shining faces!" *Tee hee!*

Well, the big news that day was that, despite our minding our own business, we'd gotten ourselves on Facebook! "Well, how'd ya do *that?*" you might ask. I wondered the same thing; so, I took pen & tablet in hand to Mary, who seemed to be the source behind this happening. Now, Mary does not like to "toot her own horn," but we wondered how this all came about. *The problem is: I cannot listen and write at the same time, then can't decipher my own scribbling, and afterward-couldn't write it up until the following week! So, the nail may not be squarely hit on the head on this, but it's pretty close.* Anyway-Mary, Brenda and Sandy have been our main plarn mat-makers all along, with Mary topping the charts at over 55 mats created. *55?!!* Those large mats take much time—first, to cut bazillions of strips and then, loop them all together-before any crocheting can even begin. They are not created in a couple weeks even, and the gals don't brag the least bit, but all three have surely accomplished a LOT to bring comfort to so many. Mostly, the mats have been dispersed by the nuns of The Canticle, or donated to the Clinton hospital, as those entities are often a witness to many needs in our area. But, somehow, Mary had an inkling that the Fulton Police Department might have a use for them too, which made sense, as they most likely have a finger on the pulse of the city. But, how to contact the right person about that? Oh, God was leading again! Mary had to go downtown to pay her water bill, and in doing so, mentioned the mats to the billing clerk—wondering aloud if the Police Department might have a need. Now, Mary was quite reticent to just go trooping on into the Police Station, but the understanding clerk propelled her right over to meet one of the officers. Mary then filled him in on the origin, the purpose and ministry of the mats, and, well, she just happened to have a ready mat in her car to show him. By the time all was said and done, there were *five* people surrounding her in interest! One even reported, "My mother used to crochet. What size hook do you use?" Ha! Then, Aaron Fullan (Fulton's talented Tourism Coordinator) came out to see what the hubbub was all about too. Afterward, Mary was barely home, when a friend tipped her off that both a photo of her mat-in-gray and news that she and other Creative Crew members will donate mats to our police department was already on Fulton's Facebook page (via Aaron)! Boy, we never know just where God will lead us on any given day, do we? If we do not ask the Lord to use us for his glory every day, we surely should, shouldn't we?

Speaking of God's leading—all of this mat business started after Trinity and First Reformed merged. Trinity's Creative Crew had then packed up and moved an amazing amount of donated supplies to First, and we started meeting there. Shortly after that, we were glad to have Brenda's sister, Mary, join us from First Christian Reformed Church. One day, it was God's desire that Mary make a trek downtown (which seems to be a recurring thread in this tapestry of her story). And so, off she went, passing by the Words of Wisdom Christian Bookstore on her way. And then, she stopped in her tracks as a small notice in the window caught her eye. It was a request for those who knit or crochet to create sturdy sleeping mats out of grocery bag strips—to give comfort to those who are homeless and must rest their bones on the frigid, hard ground. And Mary said to herself, "I can do that," and in she went to get more details. Then, she *shared* those details with other Crew members—resulting in a

real hubbub of excitement over this new project. But, the Devil likes to put the kibosh on doing anything for the Lord, and his niggling question arose, "Just where do you think you are going to get enough bags to do *that?*!" Well, "Pfftt!" "Get thee behind me, Satan!" "We've got a whole congregation of people who have never failed us before and always come to our aid." And-come with mountains of bags they did! Then, other people offered to cut bags into strips, and still others rolled them into balls—giving *them* work to do and a part in this mission, even at older ages. Later, Mercy North Hospital got wind of this ministry, and asked if mats could be made for them, and staff members even gave a presentation that educated us in *their* mission to help those they see in need. And now, looking back, we wonder just *how* many lives have been affected by this *one* person's saying, "I can do that!" In this instance, not only *all* of the Crew and congregation members who have kept an eye out for bags everywhere, but also others in town, friends, relatives, neighbors who supply us, and then those who sort them all, and even a few of our fellas who've been a *big* part of this by folding these mobs of bags for compact storage and access. (*Truthfully, some Crew husbands may have been a bit averse to these inundations of bags—secretly stashed, and bursting out unexpectedly from nooks and crannies of their homes. Ha! But, it's been a small price to pay in order to help someone who HAS no home*). Then—after a mention of this in an RCA publication, people from *faraway churches* even contacted us about how to make mats, and- the big ripple-effect continued to roll on—who knows how far?! And most importantly—HOW many people have been helped and comforted by *all* of the mats that ensued from these efforts? ALL because one person answered the call, and murmured, "I can do that" to what she thought was just a small thing. Oh-h-h, little becomes much as you place it in the Master's hand." He does not demand that we do *great* things, only that we become the persons He designed us to be in the beginning. And that happens-when we turn ourselves over to Christ in prayer. Then, the Lord will help us take what we have and give it to Him, that it may even be multiplied (like the 5 loaves & 2 fishes), and used for His great purposes! Simply amazing, isn't it?!

October 28th - This was a brisk morning, but all was comfortable in the library when nine of us gathered. That number was a few less than normal, because the insidious Coronavirus was rapidly spreading again; so, some wisely deemed it best not to chance exposure.

As always, we enjoyed a great time together, but, with the physical distance between us and then masks muffling conversations, it is difficult to capture bits of humor *or* information. I did catch someone exclaiming, "Oh! I know what I was going to do before I sat down," to which another retorted, "Too late! You *already* sat down." Ha! Oh, these gals have a quick wit! We also learned that, after Mary's previous venture to the police station, she and Brenda delivered a second mat for the department to have on hand in case of need.

On a related subject: That day, Diane found not a *single* grocery bag in the collection box to prep for Jerry, and--only a few greeting cards to ready for St. Jude's Ranch for Children besides; so, she'd have little to do while we met. Well, once again, God provided just what was needed, because, in short order, in came one of our members-laden down with bags jam-packed full of *more* bags received from her daughter! Unleashed, they created such a mountain, they almost blotted Diane out from Donna's view from the next row of tables! Needless to say, she no longer had to scrounge for something to do—she had to take on help instead!

A wee bit of humor that day: From the hardware store, Ken bought me a 4" magnetic parts holder dish to use at Crew. It works great for latching onto those straight pins I need to tote back and forth—thwarting them from wiggling loose and stabbing somebody. In addition, Ken had previously turned a hard piece of brown swirly burl wood from his cousin's tree into a chubby fountain pen configuration with a hoofed shape on one end-used as a mini iron to flatten out my small seams while sewing. *It works pretty slick!* Well, as that duo rested beside my machine that day, a passing member, at a quick glance, thought I had now added a big fat cigar and metal ashtray to my sewing arsenal. *Ha!*

November 11th - This was another in a long streak of warm, dry days that (after last year's rain, rain, flood, flood) had been fantastic for farmers harvesting their crops, and much nicer than October. But, all was not hunky-dory for harvest this year either- due to the derecho's havoc-wreaking on many crops-turning them into a "rat's nest," or breaking the stalks off completely, or pounding them flatter than a pancake into the ground at the worst. With laborious one-way picking, and often halting to clear out large mounds of cornstalk debris built up ahead of the combines, many farmers here still managed to get a crop in the bins (IF their bins/silos were still standing), and many were blessed with more income than feared for the year. Thanks be to God!

Nine of us arrived to enjoy time together, and we were also delighted by a visit from our dear benefactor, Nancy Hook, who blessed us with many sewing goodies again-oooh! She is SO good to us!

Here are a couple updates about those plarn mats: First, regarding our Facebook stint featuring the Crew's mats—at least one gal who read the post asked whether she could have lessons on how to make the mats. Also, two other mats were donated to the annual "Coats Give-Away" held at First Christian Church, and, apparently, both mats went to those who needed them. A NOTE TO ALL WHO CROCHET OR KNIT (or want to *try out* those crafts): The Lord willing-for next year's Coat Give-Away, the hosts may also like to include scarves, hats and mittens. So, if you'd like to give knitting or crochet a try, now is the time. Except for potholders, scarves are probably the easiest test-project for a beginner to stick their toe into the waters of crochet or knitting. If *I* can make such, you surely could too. I would just say— don't knit a scarf in Stockinette stitch. It's a beautiful flat stitch, but the sides will roll right up like a scroll, and no amount of trying to flatten that stubborn curl out with an iron will beat it into submission! *I think that stitch must be for sweaters—which we want to curl around the body anyway. Ha!*

December 9th - This was the second of three nice days (50's!) that we were enjoying before the impending winter boom would be lowered, and seven of us took advantage of that to gather. The Coronavirus had *really* reared its ugly head both in our area and even our congregation lately; so, that not only affected our attendance, but also our conversations and our prayers a lot. So, it was good to gather and enjoy some good fellowship and humor that lifted us up. For that reason, we decided that we would forego our usual history of meeting only once in December, and plan to meet again on the fifth Wednesday of the month (Lord and weather willing). Otherwise, 'twould be *five* weeks before we could enjoy each others' company again, and we were adamant that such a stretch was just TOO long.

That day, another gal had hardly arrived, when she had something for *me* to come and see. "Okay." She then pulled out one of the many cute sundresses she had just designed. This dress in blue with little pink flowers had posed a problem, though. Because it was made from limited fabric, it really would be slightly shorter than optimal. Hmm. Then inspiration struck! If she could lay her hands on some plain pink fabric, a ruffle could be sewn up and added to the dress bottom to render it longer. With the pandemic lurking out there, though, we try to avoid shopping if at all possible. So—she wondered if there might be any pink fabric in her house, but-a search of her stash revealed none. So, she then raided her closets on the off-chance there might be some garment in pink stowed away. Well, lo and behold, she came upon a child's dress made many years ago, with, get this—a pink ruffle on the bottom-and, in the *right* shade of pink! (What are the odds on that?!) And get this too-when the ruffle was then detached and re sewn to the bottom of the *new* dress, it was an *exact fit!!* She said she had wondered *why* she'd kept that dress all these years (they do bring back pleasant memories), but--apparently it had not yet served its full purpose--God still had plans for it—AS He does for *us* too. *Now--do not know why, but every time one of the gals is pleased as punch over making good use of some nearly sentenced-to-the-dust-bin item, they always report that they think of me then—confident*

that I would be beaming proudly, I guess. I'm not sure what that says about me, but it certainly elicits a broad smile. Tee hee!

Toward the end of our meeting, one member pulled her sewing project out from beneath the presser foot to inspect upon completion, and then commented, "Well, how about that? I sewed that whole thing without any thread!" Urn, how many times have we heard *that* from us before?? *Ha!* But, that does not deter us from tackling more projects, does it?! It just goes to show—we might make big booboos in this life, but God can still use us to accomplish His will. We might think that someone who's more-on-the-ball, more gentle, kind or loving than we are must be used by God to accomplish His will in this world. And yet, like that vintage dress—deemed not useful any more—God can use us, too, no matter our gifts, our appearance, or our age. Not a one of us is perfect, but God will use us anyway, even if we don't think we measure up one bit. *You* are valuable to Him! Just like that lingering-in-the-shadows pink dress gave of its decorative ruffle in order to help clothe some indigent little girl, bring her some dignity, show her the love of Jesus, and maybe even change her life—even simple small acts can help *us* share God's love with others too. So—how are *WE* being disciples for Jesus...? May our prayer be, "Lord, help us to take what we have and give it to you. Multiply it and use it for your great purposes." From Proverbs 11:25: *A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.*

Rock of ages

On walks, I enjoy searching for heart-shaped rocks. One day in 2020, I spotted a broken heart, which seemed fitting as illness, racism and suffering dominated the headlines. I thought of Psalm 34:18, NIV: “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Humans can be hard-hearted — pointing fingers, assuming the worst and failing to extend compassion. We often reject people who look, think or act differently from us. All these things break hearts, including God’s. Only with his help can we rise above hatred, learn to listen more than we speak, and express kindness, empathy and a willingness to learn.

Jesus, be our rock as we face life’s brokenness. Stay near and start the healing. Amen.

—Julie Lee

Waiting until God is heard

We’re often taught that prayer is speaking to God. And of course, that’s part of it. It’s good to pray for the well-being and needs of others — even Jesus prayed for his disciples. It’s okay to pray for our own growth in faith and love. It’s a wonderful, powerful thing, modeled especially by the Psalmists, to give God thanks and praise. And God welcomes our cries of pain and sorrow, offering the Spirit’s help when words fail us (Romans 8:26).

But through the ages, many deeply faithful followers of Christ have practiced contemplative prayer, centering prayer and other forms of stillness before God. Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) expressed it this way: “To pray does not mean to listen to oneself speaking. Prayer involves becoming silent, and being silent, and waiting until God is heard.”

Numbering our days

To fix what they call a disorganized date-tracking system, professors Steve Hanke and Dick Henry have developed a “permanent calendar.” On it, January 1 is always a Monday, so holidays and birthdays occur on the same day every year. The 364-day calendar eliminates leap years, time zones, Halloween and every Friday the 13th. Instead of leap days, “every five or six years, we’ll have an extra week at the end [of December] when you can party,” says Henry.

Because the permanent calendar is predictable, it reportedly would save money and time. Yet despite almost two decades of work, the idea hasn’t taken off.

However we track our lives, we do well to remember this prayer: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations....Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:1, 12 NIV).

Live in the light

Often we want to be able to see into the future. We say, “How will next year be for me? Where will I be five or 10 years from now?” There are no answers to these questions. Mostly we have just enough light to see the next step — what we have to do in the coming hour or the following day.

The art of living is to enjoy what we can see and not complain about what remains in the dark. When we are able to take the next step with the trust that we will have enough light for the step that follows, we can walk through life with joy and be surprised at how far we go. Let’s rejoice in the little light we carry and not ask for the great beam that would take all our shadows away.

—Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*

?? ? Bible Quiz ? ?

In the story of the Magi, what word is used to give a sense of Jesus' age when the wise men visited? What does it tell us?

- A. "baby"; Jesus was still a newborn in a manger
- B. "child"; when the wise men visited, Jesus had grown past infancy
- C. "youth"; Jesus was probably between 10 and 14
- D. No word is used to suggest Jesus' age at the time of the wise men's visit.



Answer: B (See Matthew 2:1-12.)

The power of love

By comparing love to everything from oxygen and fire to wind and war, songs and poetry emphasize its immense power — for good or for ill. Christian author Patrick Morley uses metaphors that focus on love's practicality in everyday life: "Love is the glue that holds us together and the oil that keeps us from rubbing each other the wrong way." He also calls love "the WD-40 of relationships" because it "can seep into tight places where logic, threats and even promises just can't seem to penetrate."



St. Augustine, who predated WD-40 by centuries, knew that love not only eases friction in personal interactions but, with God's help, can change hearts and lives. "Love all [people], even your enemies," he advises. "Love them, not because they are your brothers, but that they may become your brothers. Thus you will ever burn with fraternal love, both for him who is already your brother and for your enemy, that he may by loving become your brother."

?? ? Bible Quiz ? ?

What was the name of Moses' wife?

- A. Miriam
- B. Jochebed
- C. Zipporah
- D. Leah



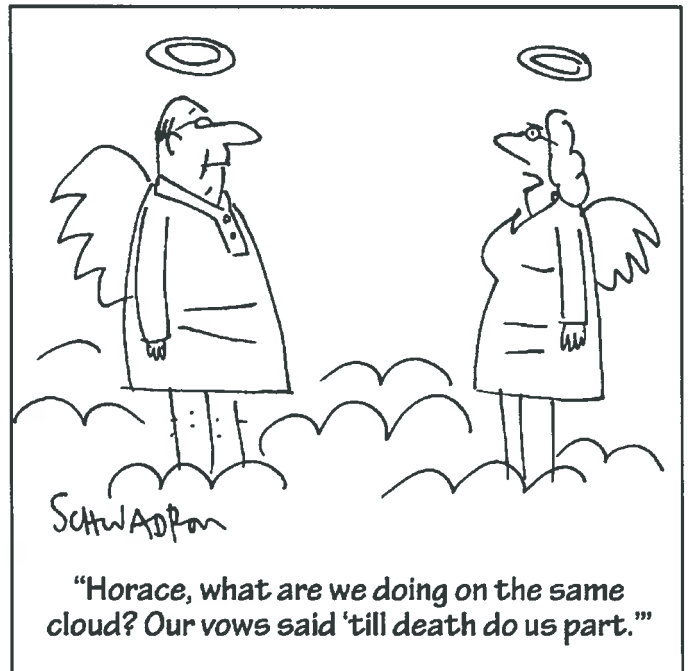
Answer: C (See Exodus 2:21.)



An interlocking community

Christ distributes courage through community; he dissipates doubts through fellowship. He never deposits all knowledge in one person but distributes pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to many. When you interlock your understanding with mine, and we share our discoveries, when we mix, mingle, confess and pray, Christ speaks.

—Max Lucado, *Fearless*



The parable of the lost ring

Only three years after Paula and Joe Walter married, her wedding ring was lost as she played catch with their son. Naturally, she was heartbroken. Over the years, whenever family and friends gathered in the back yard, she urged everyone to look for the ring — but to no avail. Because the yard borders on woods, Paula feared the ring had flown into the trees, never to be seen again.

But just before the couple's 40th anniversary, landscapers hired to do work in the yard brought her a surprise: They'd found the ring — right where Paula had been playing with her child so long ago! Like the woman in Jesus' parable who finally found her lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), Paula rejoiced. God too searches until every person who has strayed or been flung away from the faith is found.

Sometimes the place we rediscover faith is right where we've looked before. What makes the difference? A different person helping us search? Light shining in a different way? We may never know. We simply rejoice — and so does God.

—Heidi Mann

Love bites!

Retailers eager to capture some of the \$20 billion that Americans spend every year for Valentine's Day gifts are moving beyond candy and flowers. For an outside-the-box edible present for that special someone, now you can purchase a bouquet of bacon roses, pickles or even Olive Garden breadsticks. If money is tight, you can visit Waffle House on February 14, the one night it takes reservations.

Last year, a most unusual Valentine's Day promotion had no takers. A reptile park in Mosca, Colorado, offered a two-for-one deal on gator-wrestling classes, but no one "snapped" up the opportunity. Maybe another heart-shaped box of chocolates isn't such a bad idea after all!

Fasting from criticalness

Most fasting involves temporarily giving up something you enjoy. When you long for a cookie or a favorite show, you instead turn your attention to God, reorienting yourself to his best.

Catherine Marshall, in *A Closer Walk*, presents a different approach she calls fasting from "criticalness." God dealt with her judgmental spirit by prompting her to spend 24 hours without criticizing "anyone about anything." At first, Marshall felt rather empty when she didn't engage in a heated political debate. But friends and family didn't seem to miss her comments. Plus, God replaced the energy she'd spent attempting to correct others with energy and creativity to positively influence them.

A critical spirit can make us lose perspective, joy and even relationships. It also can prevent the good work God wants to achieve through us. Consider what could happen as a result of your own "criticalness fast." Pray for God to do the correcting while you focus on building up others.

—Janna Firestone

The soul of Christianity

A Christ-centered life does not mean a life in which one sings hymns, reads Scripture and edifies his neighbors by hanging texts on the walls. One does not become a Christian by doing a good deed a day, nor by go-getting for religion, nor by engaging in economic and political reform movements, even though these things are done from the noblest of human motives. A Christian is one who, believing that Christ is the Son of God, has that Christ-life in his soul.

—Fulton Sheen

The gift of desperation

In a 2012 interview with NPR, author Anne Lamott shared: "I've heard people say that God is the gift of desperation, and there's a lot to be said for having really reached a bottom where you've run out of anymore good ideas, or plans for everybody else's behavior; or how to save and fix and rescue; or just get out of a huge mess, possibly of your own creation. And when you're done, you may take a long, quavering breath and say, 'Help.'"

Amid the pandemic and life's other, more typical trials of life, have you found a silver lining — a gift that has arisen out of your desperation? Sometimes we're more open to God during times of struggle than when all flows smoothly. As long as we think our ideas and plans for ourselves and our loved ones are pretty good, we don't feel we need a Savior. But when life is so challenging that we call to God for help, "the gift of [that] desperation" is finding that God's loving arms have embraced and strengthened us all along.



Be kind
to one
another.

EPHESIANS 4:32, ESV

A COLORFUL body

Melt crayons to show how the body of Christ works together.



What you need:

- Crayons
- Metal baking sheet
- Adult help
- Metal gingerbread man cookie cutter

What you do:

1. Remove labels and break crayons into 1-inch pieces.
2. Scatter pieces on the baking sheet, about two layers thick.
3. Bake for 10 minutes at 350 degrees until melted. Allow to cool 15 minutes.
4. When melted crayons are the consistency of playdough, press the cookie cutter through them (while still on pan).
5. Cool the pan in freezer for 15 minutes until crayons are hardened.
6. Remove from pan and break apart the shapes.