



Week 12

Week 28

Week 317

Week 424

Week 531

Many of us get excited about Jesus on Easter, but then end up right back in the daily grind that seems to push faith to the sidelines. We become emotional on Good Friday as we enter the story of what Jesus has done for us, but the pressures of the world build and our renewed passion for following Jesus fades.

What if this year was different?

What if the next 30 days weren't a slow descent back to normalcy, but rather an engrossing journey toward a deeper, richer, fuller life with God?

This year we invite you to join the 30 DAY EASTER CHALLENGE. Completely free. No strings attached. No 'enter your credit card here, cancel at anytime.'

We are launching this 30 day challenge to kickstart a spiritual journey, *together*. For the 30 days after Easter we will send a **daily email** with bible verses, prayer practices, daily challenges, and other tips and ideas to help you grow spiritually and experience the newness of life your soul has been longing for.

What does the **30 Day Easter Challenge** entail?

- **Read the Bible** every day. (Don't worry. We'll guide you through!)
- **Pray** every day for 30 days.
- **Worship** every weekend for the month of April. (In person is great, but online if you can't be here)
- **Daily Emails** to encourage, guide, and challenge us
- **Journal** to track your prayers, insights, and questions.

Week 1

Monday April 1 – God has begun a good work in you

Pastor Josh Brecht

Welcome to the 30-Day Easter Challenge! I am SO proud of you for diving in and I'm confident God will use these next 30 days to do some incredible things in you. We will share prayer practices, bible verses, and other invitations to help you connect with God in new, different ways.

Here are a few pro tips to help get the most out of this journey.

1. **Make it consistent.** Set a consistent time every day to read the email and engage in the material. Committing to a consistent time makes it easier for new practice to become a healthy habit!
2. **Make it accessible.** Put your bible someplace **visible**. Carve out a regular quiet space (your favorite chair) where you engage each day.
3. **Make it memorable. Journal.** Get a notebook (or notes app on your phone), and write down any insights, ideas, or whispers of the Holy Spirit that you experience. Is there a bible verse that *really* speaks to you?

TODAY'S DEVOTION

The empty tomb isn't the end of the story, it's the beginning. The resurrection of Jesus isn't a story from the past we just remember, it's a divine reality God is continually working in us. And in the *world*.

God is the in the business of creating life out of death.

God's specialty isn't just restoration, but *recreation*.

God takes broken things and makes them even more beautiful than before.

Wherever you are at on your spiritual journey, whether you participate the church all the time or whether you have been away for eons, God is working something in you today. **Philippians 1:6** says this:

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

Read this verse slowly, a few times. Make it a prayer.

- What has God been stirring deep in your heart lately?
- Is there a hope or dream God planted in you long ago that you have almost given up on?
- Is there something in your life you have been longing to change?

PAUSE & PRAY

Lord Jesus, I want to trust that you are working something in me, yet it is so easy to get distracted and so difficult to hear your voice. Over these next 30 days, speak Lord, for I am listening. Remind me of your presence throughout my day. Guide my steps, my words, and my eyes to holy opportunities. Open my heart to the good work you have begun in me. Amen.

As you go out to the world today, hear God's promise from **Ephesians 3:20** -

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."

Tuesday April 2 – Guided Prayer Practices

Pastor Amy Stewart

1 Thessalonians 5:17 – Pray without ceasing

So often we think of prayer as folded hands, eyes closed, head bowed. That's one way of many! Prayer can be as simple as breathing with purpose. It can look like reflecting on your day with the intention of looking for God at work. It can look like reading your Scripture with all your senses and getting curious about where it meshes up with your own lived experience.

Did you know that we have three guided prayer practices, in our app, that encompass these three ideas? Try one, or all three, today. You can find them under the [“Prayer” tile](#) on our mobile app, Good Shepherd Connect. Click on “Prayer Requests” then [“Guided Prayer Practices”](#). Stay tuned for more suggestions on ways to pray in the coming weeks.

Wednesday April 3 – Doubt & Faith

Pastor Josh Brecht

“But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

- John 20:24-25

When I was a kid, I remember hearing a lot about the need to have faith. It was so ingrained in me that I thought to doubt was a terrible thing. Doubt meant my faith was weak. Doubt meant I wasn't a 'good Christian.' Or on the worst days, I might have even fallen into thinking that if I had doubts God would be disappointed or upset with me.

But as we read the story of Thomas... that doesn't seem to be the case. Jesus doesn't praise the others as better disciples because they believed sooner. He doesn't scold or guilt-trip Thomas. In fact, he *draws near* to him. He comes in closer, looks him in the eye, and speaks words of invitation.

In my personal experience, doubt is a time of development. The deeper my doubts, the deeper my faith develops through that journey of exploration and questioning. Jesus himself **asked questions** to get people thinking!

What holy questions are you asking today?

What are the things you struggle to believe?

Who can you talk to about these questions that will joyfully take this journey of spiritual exploration with you?

PRAYER:

Lord, Jesus, we long to see you face to face. We long to be able to touch your hand and hear your voice, soundwaves touching our physical ears. Yet for reasons we don't always understand, you invite us to have faith. Lord, be patient with my questions and doubts. Today, help me to find signs of your presence in the world around me. Give my heart ears to hear you speak through other people in my life, through your word, and through the wonder of creation. In Jesus name, **Amen.**

Thursday April 4 – Self-Care as Discipleship

Pastor Amy Stewart

Self-care is a popular topic these days. Some find it elusive, others can't figure out how to get past the surface suggestions of care, and still others think it's selfish and unimportant. Did you know that Jesus practiced self-care? Here are a few ways:

- Jesus went away by himself for meditation and contemplation.
- Jesus maintained healthy boundaries and was willing to say no. He was often quoted as saying, "My time has not yet come" or asking his disciples not to share his identity yet.
- Jesus felt his feelings - joy, anger, grief, frustration - instead of repressing them.
- Jesus paid attention to his body and took care of it. He ate, rested, and moved his body when he needed to. Look for the stories of him teaching while walking!
- Jesus reminded himself, and others, who he was at his core, and made sure all that he did stemmed from that identity.
- Jesus didn't conform to social constructs. He plucked grain on the Sabbath and once, he made his family wait because he needed to care for the people in front of him.
- Jesus spent time with friends.
- Jesus knew when it was time to move on. He encouraged his disciples not to stick around in a town that would not welcome them.
- Jesus told people to love their neighbors as they love themselves. This implies that he thought self-love matters!

Self-care is part of discipleship, following after the life, model, and mission of Jesus. **Matthew 11:28** says, "Come to me [Jesus], all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Jesus invites us not to neglect ourselves for the sake of the gospel, but to practice self-care in him **so that** we can experience and live out the gospel. Pray about what area of self-care is most needed in your life and choose one of these things to practice today.

Friday April 5 – Gratitude (SCHEDULED)

Pastor Josh Brecht

One of my favorite Bible verses is **1 Thessalonians 5:18** -

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Gratefulness doesn't come easy for me. I worry. I covet. Not my neighbor's house or donkey as it says in the 10 commandments, but definitely my neighbor's brand-new iPhone, or Tesla, or trip to Maui.

You get the idea.

We live in a culture of comparison.

We live in a culture of consumerism. And in the age of social media, **both** of these envy-inducing attributes get amplified!

Gratitude is the antidote to worry.

Gratitude is the cure for jealousy.

Today, I challenge you to begin intentionally **practicing** gratitude. Gratitude isn't just a feeling, it is something we can practice, something we can cultivate in our lives.

MORNING:

When you wake up in the morning, name **three things** you are grateful for.

“God, thank you for brining me safely through the night. Thank you for this new day. Thank you for my job (or school, or family, or _____).

EVENING:

When you get ready for bed at the end of the day, name **three things** you are grateful for as you look back on your day. “God, thank you for....”

Saturday April 6 – Service Saturday Spotlight: LifeWise STL

Pastor Josh Brecht

First, how did practicing gratitude go yesterday? I hope it helped you connect the small things in your life with the provision of God, **and** give you a greater sense of peace and fulfillment. Keep it up! Practicing gratitude in your morning and evening prayer is a life-long practice that will pay dividends toward your sense of spiritual fulfillment!

Each Saturday of the 30-Day Easter Challenge, we're going to challenge you learn about and pray for one of our core service ministry partners. When we follow Jesus, one of the keys parts of the journey is caring for the least of these, loving those whom Jesus loves and serving those whom Jesus serves.

READ: Mark 10:43-45

“But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

In 2023 Good Shepherd made a commitment to partner with **LifeWise STL** as our primary local service ministry. LifeWise has a wholistic approach to helping people move from poverty to sustainability and has many, many ways for people to support and engage in this ministry with them.

Today we invite you to visit: <https://www.lifewisestl.org/> and learn more about their ministry, and then spend some time praying for LifeWise. A few of the ways you can pray

- Pray for the staff, that they would grow in skill, wisdom, and effectiveness as they serve.
- Pray for those that are served, that they would experience God's love and provision as they grow.
- Pray for those who volunteer and support the work, that they would experience personal transformation and spiritual growth through their experience.

****Basecamp**, (GSLC's Men's Ministry) will be doing an outdoor service project at LifeWise on Saturday, April 27. Contact Pastor Josh or Tim Sorenson if you would like to join us!

Week 2

Sunday April 7 – Get Outside

Pastor Amy Stewart

Luke 12:25-27 – “And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?...Consider the ravens...Consider the lilies...”

Have you ever noticed that Jesus’ parables, musings, and teachings often centered around nature? Seeds, fields, water, wheat, soil, ravens, lilies. Jesus often draws our attention to nature, because there is much to learn from it. Creation is the epitome of mindfulness. Ravens and lilies aren’t worried about tomorrow or dwelling on the past. Creation knows how to be present exactly as it is – God’s beloved handiwork.

Today, take five minutes to be outside. Notice the birds, the plants, the earth, or whatever else is going about it’s day, unhindered by worry. Breathe. Be present. Give thanks that you are also God’s beloved handiwork, and take a moment to revel in that.

Monday April 8 – Do Talk to Strangers

Pastor Josh Brecht

Practice the Presence of God

As you enter this time of prayer, I invite you to be still. Breathe in and out slowly. Open your mind to God's presence with you here in this place, in this moment. Imagine Jesus beside you.

Pray: ***Lord, what do you have to show me through this story today?***

“Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”

- Luke 24:13-17

IMAGINE

Imagine walking down that dusty road. Are there birds singing? Is there a slight breeze? Can you see the dust kicking up from your sandals?

Imagine the heaviness on your heart as you walk away Jerusalem. Maybe you turn and glance one more time... back to the city where you had such high hopes. And then you remember Friday. You turn around and keep walking toward Emmaus.

You are walking with your friend. Quietly discussing the past few days. Then walking in silence again.

But then this stranger comes along and starts walking beside you. Quiet at first. But something about them feels... warm. Welcoming. Familiar. Then he speaks.

DAILY INVITATION

Remember when you were a kid and your parents said, “don't talk to strangers?” That was probably great advice in our complex world, especially for a kid. I've said that to my kids. A lot. Now that I am an adult, I still seem to abide by this rule. But sometimes, talking to strangers is a good thing.

Sometimes talking to strangers is a Holy Spirit moment.

Those two disciples thought they were talking to a stranger that day. (That's a whole other theological conversation!), and thank goodness they did! When we open ourselves up to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, sometimes that is a push to speak words of random kindness to a stranger.

So here is my challenge for us all today:

Share a random word of kindness with three people today.

Maybe it is a simple “hello, how is your day going?”

Maybe it is “I love your jacket.”

Maybe it is an offer to help carry groceries or hold a door.

Jesus gives us a great example and model in this story. Try it as a bold, holy experiment and see where the Spirit leads you! It may be nothing. And it may open the door to a beautiful opportunity to share the love of God in an unexpected way.

PAUSE & PRAY

Lord Jesus, thank you for walking with us on dusty roads and showing up in unexpected places. Lord, I open myself up to you today. Guide me as I go about my day and use me to share a random word of your kindness and love with a stranger who needs to hear it today. Amen.

Tuesday April 9 – Breath as Prayer

Gail Brecht

Breath prayer is my favorite type of centering prayer, and an easy way to incorporate your body, mind and soul. You can literally do it anywhere at any time. Be reminded of the Spirit at work in you through your breath. Simply choose one or two lines to meditate on each deep breath. Then inhale and then exhale through them.

Breath prayer scripture examples by Sarah Bessey:

(From Matthew 11:28-30)

Inhale: Humble and gentle One,
Exhale: you are rest for my soul.

(From John 15)

Inhale: True Vine and Gardener,
Exhale: I abide in You.

(From Romans 8:38-39)

Inhale: Nothing can separate me,
Exhale: from the love of God.

(From Psalm 46:10)

Inhale: Be still
Exhale: and know you are God.

(From Matt. 6:10)

Inhale: On earth
Exhale: as it is in heaven.

(From 2 Cor. 12:9)

Inhale: Your grace
Exhale: is enough for me.

(From 1 John)

Inhale: There is no fear
Exhale: in your Love.

(From Psalm 23)

Inhale: I will not be afraid
Exhale: for You are with me.

(From Psalm 46:1)

Inhale: You are our refuge
Exhale: and our strength.

(From Psalm 74:16)

Inhale: Both day and night

Exhale: belong to You.

(From Psalm 91:1)

Inhale: I find rest

Exhale: in Your shelter.

(From Psalm 103: 4-5)

Inhale: You surround me with love

Exhale: and tender mercies.

Inhale: You fill my life

Exhale: with good things.

(From Philippians 4:7)

Inhale: Peace of Christ,

Exhale: guard my heart and mind.

Wednesday April 10 – Weekly Memory Verse

Pastor Josh Brecht

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” - John 20:21

Peace seems like an elusive idea today, doesn't it? When I look at the global news, I see stories of wars, violence, and atrocities that break my heart. When I look at the national news, I see a more subtle violence in the divisive, slanderous, and vengeful spirit that seems to have taken hold of our collective psyche. It, too, breaks my heart. Where is this “peace” Jesus promises? How many prayers for peace must we offer up before we see this peace manifest in our world?

In **John 14:27** Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”

Did you catch that? “The peace **I give** you, is not the same as the **world** gives.” Remember, he is saying this to his *disciples* knowing that they will absolutely experience struggle, persecution, and even violence.

The peace Jesus gives is not the **absence of conflict**, but rather the **presence of God**.

We bring peace when we reveal the presence of God.

We bring peace every time we choose compassion over anger.

We bring peace every time we choose reconciliation or condemnation.

Pause & Pray

God, you offer us your peace, which you promise is beyond our understanding. Open my heart to receive your peace today. Our world desperately needs the peace, which is an absence of conflict, and so now I lift of those places rife with war today...

And God, our world needs the peace of Christ, which is your presence in the world. Give me your peace and guide me today so that I might reveal your presence, and bring about a peace beyond understanding. Amen.

(Pastor Josh's shares a Weekly Memory Verse message you can see on [Instagram HERE.](#))

Thursday April 11 – Embodied Faith

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am respectfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. - Psalm 139:13-14

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? - 1 Corinthians 6:19

Our bodies are a gift from God. They allow us to fully participate in this life. While our culture doesn't promote loving our bodies very well, or even having much awareness of them at all, embodiment is a way to more deeply listen for, and connect to, the Divine. Our bodies often register emotions before our minds do, if only we stop to listen. Today you are invited to slow down, drop into your body, and listen for God inside.

Get comfortable, close your eyes if possible, and take a few breaths. Then ask, "What am I most grateful for?" Notice where you feel the response in your body—loosening of the jaw, relaxing of the shoulders, a fluttering energy in your chest, etc. Give thanks that your body has been carrying gratitude and has helped you feel it more deeply, even when you weren't aware it was there. Imagine God in those areas, celebrating the joy with you. Repeat this process until you are ready to move to the next part.

Take a few more breaths and ask, "What is troubling me?" Again, notice physical sensations. A tightness in your neck, restless feet, etc. Thank your body for showing you what else it has been carrying, perhaps even without your knowledge. Imagine God infused in those areas, holding the burdens with you and tending to each of them with love. Repeat this process until you feel you are finished.

Finally, thank God for the gift of your body. Take a moment to delight in the fact that God thinks your body is a wonderful place to call home. Ask God to help you find one way to show your sacred body some love today.

Friday April 12

Director of Youth and Family Ministry- Delaney Rhea

Living Water

During our day-to-day lives we often get caught up in our responsibilities and worries. In the rush of trying to do and be all things it's easy to forget that God is right here, waiting to be called into our lives as a support and a guide. Often, we wait until we are feeling totally lost and overwhelmed before we remember that the Holy Spirit is always with us and we are never alone in our daily struggles. In the same way, we are often so busy that we complain of being tired and rundown, yet we've neglected the life sustaining and rejuvenating act of drinking water. By the time our bodies register the feeling of thirst, we are already dehydrated.

Today take a moment to sit with the following verse:

John 4:13-14 "Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'"

As you go through the day today, try to drink the daily recommended amount of water. Each time you drink take just a moment to connect with God and know that your body and spirit are both being refreshed and blessed.

Today's Prayer: Sacred Spirit, bless us through the water we drink. May it cleanse us and rejuvenate us and may your divine guidance flow through us like this water. Amen.

Saturday April 13 – Service Saturday Spotlight: Feed the Need STL

Pastor Josh Brecht

A dedicated, hardworking team plans and prepares, fundraises and coordinates for a full year, leading up to the culmination of **this week**. We are in the heart of our Feed the Need STL mobile pack, and on track to provide **1.25 million meals** to starving children and awaken the hearts of **5000 volunteers** in our community to the joy of giving and serving.

This ministry saves the lives of children all around the world, but it also saves the hearts of people all around our country. In wealthy societies such as ours, people often struggle to find meaning and purpose. We might have ample bank accounts, but empty hearts. I believe that people all around us have a deep, significant longing to be generous, share what they have been given, and make our world a better place. Feed My Starving Children provides this opportunity.

The Holy Spirit is flooding Queeny Park this week. The Spirit is pouring out over the food that is packed, going ahead of it to clear the path, prepare the places that will receive it. The Spirit is answering the prayers of mothers across the globe, praying for provision for their precious children. The Spirit is awakening generosity in the hearts of thousands of volunteers, inspiring a generosity that will begin to transform the latent wealth of our communities into kingdom-purposed resources for good.

Thank you for all the ways you have supported this phenomenal ministry that changes lives near and far.

“They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.”
- Galatians 2:10

Learn more at www.fmssc.org.

Week 3

Sunday April 14 - Sabbath

Pastor Josh Brecht

“So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” - Genesis 2

“Be still and know that I am God.” - Psalm 46:10

How often do you have a *full day*, with **nothing** on your calendar, your agenda, your to-do list? The gift of Sabbath was laid out in the fabric of creation. It's in the **very first chapter** of the Bible! It's #3 on the top-ten commandments list. Yet, I think most of us are not very good at taking sabbath ourselves. We are incredibly skilled at filling in the empty space on our calendar. We live in an era of human history that holds the strange paradox of busyness. Today, we have more leisure time than most of our ancestors.

We don't have to hunt or grow our own food.

We don't have to weave our own clothes.

Cars get us from A to B quickly (imagine walking everywhere!)

Phones allow us to communicate instantly.

Yet somehow, we run out of time.

In the book, “Building a Discipling Culture” Mike Breen writes:

*“God designed us to be productive. But we build our identities around our activities. We are not living in the truth of who God created us to be. We have become **human “doings”** rather than **human “beings.”**”*

What if sabbath isn't a **demand of God**, but rather a **gift from God**?

The original intent of sabbath was twofold.

First, it was to ensure that slaves and indentured workers were not forced to work 24/7, but had a time for rest, for family.

Second, it was an act of trust. Whatever you think you will accomplish or earn on your own?

Everything is a gift from God. Trust God. Sabbath is a holy pause, an act of trust in God's provision.

Today, we invite you to receive the gift of rest. How can you build a pattern of sabbath into your routine?

Jesus says to you in **Matthew 11:28-30**:

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

PAUSE & PRAY:

Lord Jesus, I bring my busyness, my worry, my agenda and I set it down at your feet today. Thank you for the gift of your presence. Quiet my racing mind, still my anxious heart. Teach me to simply rest in you and trust in your provision for our daily bread. Amen.

Monday April 15 – Praying in Color

Pastor Amy Stewart

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

-Romans 8:26-27

Sometimes I want to spend time in prayer for someone, but I don't really have any words to say. I just want to hold them in my mind, with love, as I connect with God. Sometimes I want to pray for somebody and find that I need to be more concrete in my prayer, using my hands or holding something, because the abstract idea of words isn't cutting it. Sometimes losing myself in something lovely, creative, and life-giving feels like the best way to be in connection with God. For me, all of these come together in "Praying in Color."

Praying in Color is what it sounds like. It's putting color to paper as an act of prayer. It is as simple as writing down a word of something you want more of in your life (like peace, joy, hope, patience, wisdom, kindness, etc.) or writing down the name of somebody you want to pray for, and then coloring or doodling around that word or name with intention and focus. It's not about the art you create, or about aiming toward a specific outcome, but about engaging more of your body (and perhaps less of your brain) in the prayer experience. There's no wrong way to do it, so grab a crayon, marker, or colored pencil, a piece of paper, and let your prayers flow!

There are lots of other ways to Pray in Color. Learn more about it [here](#).

Tuesday April 16 – You Will Do Greater Things than These

By Josh Brecht

Today we take collective breath after the rush of our annual Feed the Need STL pack event. As we celebrate our highest number of volunteers ever, approximately 5000, I cannot help but think of Jesus feeding the 5000.

In Mark 6, a huge crowd had gathered to hear Jesus teach in a remote area (he had been trying to take some time away with his disciples for rest, but alas...). It got late and there were no markets nearby to get food, so the disciples urged Jesus to send people home. I love how Jesus responds....

But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” - Mark 6:37

Jesus seems to ask them to do the impossible, right?

Jesus provides the miracle, but he *includes* his disciples in the process.

God provides the resources and the food to provide 1.25 million meals, but the Holy Spirit includes *all of us* in the process.

Later, In John’s Gospel Jesus says:

“The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these,” - John 14:12

Seriously Jesus? **We** will do greater works than you?! At first this promise seems outrageous. Yet, when I think about the incredible number of meals provided through Feed My Starving Children this year (450,000,000), I start to see what he’s talking about.

Jesus fed 5000 people that day, but then the body of Christ (that’s us) comes together, guided by the power of the Holy Spirit, amazing... almost miraculous... works are accomplished. Just out of this one event in St. Louis, 125,000,000 million meals! That’s a few more than 5000.

Thanks be to God that Jesus chose to include his disciples, and us, in the need that day. As he said to the disciples then, he says to us today: *“You give them something to eat. The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”*

PAUSE & PRAY

Lord Jesus, thank you for inviting us into your holy mission in the world. Grant us the courage to trust your invitation to serve in miraculous ways. Guide us by your Spirit that we would see you at work around us today, and answer your call to love our neighbors as you have loved us. Do great works in us today. Amen.

Wednesday April 17 – I am the Good Shepherd

This week's memory verse is very special to us at Good Shepherd.

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." - **John 10:14**

Loneliness is a serious problem today. I've heard it said that our modern, American culture is both the most connected culture ever, *and* the loneliest culture ever. This may seem like a paradox but think about it.

We have social media. We have Youtube. We have TV shows and news and podcasts and any way we turn we can hear different voices, see different people's faces. Digital communication is available 24/7. While there are certainly benefits to this, when it comes to true community, there's no substitute for the real thing.

We can go throughout our entire day digitally consuming human content, yet never *actually interact* with a real person. In other words, we can experience the *illusion* of community, without actually experiencing authentic community.

We all long for authentic, deep human connection. God designed us as social creatures. We all yearn for a sense of belonging.

The Church is where this happens at its best.

In the Church, our belonging is not qualified or earned; it doesn't come with conditions or stipulations. Jesus simply says, "I am the good shepherd, I know my own and my own know me." He calls each of us by name. He knows us completely, and *still* chooses to call us to the one flock.

In Christian community we belong not because of anything we do or accomplish, but because of the one who calls us and loves us. We belong to God and if we belong to God, we also belong to one another.

If you want to hear more about belonging in Christ, check out Pastor Josh's weekly Wednesday video today at: <https://www.instagram.com/goodshepherdmanchesterlca/>

Thursday April 18 – The Road To Emmaus

Today we invite you into a time of imaginative prayer as you enter the story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Imaginative prayer is a way to encounter the bible in different, deeper ways, allowing us to experience aspects of the story we have never noticed before.

Here's how it works.

As you read the story, **Luke 24:13-35**, slow down and use your imagination along the way. Imagine yourself in the story. Engage your senses to expand the story and experience more of what the characters would have experienced.

You can open your bible and read, or we've included the full text here. As you read, slow down and consider some of the following questions.

- What is the weather like? Is the sun shining? Is there a breeze?
- What do you hear around you as you walk along? Birds? Other people?
- What does the sand feel like on your feet? This journey is 7 miles, what is your pace like?

The Jesus (who seems to you to be a stranger) comes along side you and starts talking.

- What does his voice sound like? Does he talk slow? Fast?
- As you walk along and he begins to open your eyes to the scriptures, do other people pass you by? Do they look up? Say hello?

You finally arrive at your destination, where evening is coming and invite this man in to stay.

- What does the sunset look like? Is it getting chilly?
- As you enter the house what do you see? Chairs? Table? Candles for light?
- Can you smell the bread?
- What do you think they felt like when the guest, the stranger took the bread to offer the blessing?

PAUSE & PRAY

Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of your presence. Help me to recognize you beside me as I walk along my ordinary days. Thank you for the gift of community and daily bread. Help me experience the holiness that resides in ordinary moments like sharing a meal with family or friends. Open my heart to unexpected encounters today, make me ready to listen and share. Amen.

Friday April 19 – Grow Spiritually Podcast

Pastor Amy Stewart

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith... - Colossians 2:6-7

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. - John 15:4

Did you know that we offer a monthly podcast designed to help individuals, families, and groups move through a guided devotional? “Grow Spiritually” is available any place where you get your podcasts; under the “Sermons & Podcasts” tile on our mobile app ([Good Shepherd Connect](#)); and on our website's [Grow Spiritually](#) page.

Each month has its own theme and offers a devotional, Scripture readings, questions, and a closing prayer. April's theme is “Mama God” but you can also go back and listen to any others!

Saturday April 20 - Prayer Practice: Examen

Psalm 139

“O LORD, you have searched me and known me.”

When I was younger, my daily spiritual rhythm was quite different. Mornings were either leisurely or rushed, but almost never sacred. The evening was my quiet time with God. Somewhere along the way I had developed a rhythm of reading scripture and prayer before bed. I don't recall when this began or how it became such a consistent habit, but I was quite, well... religious...about this routine. It was a way to find some calm after whatever that day held and fall asleep with a sense of peace.

Two things changed in my life that completely disrupted this regular rhythm.

1. I discovered the convenience of reading eBooks on my cell phone before bed! (I love to read)
2. I had kids. (Sleep became an elusive and valuable commodity)

As these two factors slowly eroded my long-time habit of quiet time before bed, I eventually developed a new rhythm of morning prayer. This is good, but I'm still not a morning person and always felt something was missing.

About 2 years ago I learned about the daily prayer practice called “Examen,” and I have found it to be such a gift.

The Examen is a simple prayer practice, developed by Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) where you pause for a few minutes at the very end of the day to look back to notice God's presence throughout your day, practice gratitude, confess, and find peace in Christ.

This week, I invite you to do this prayer practice every evening before bed and notice how it shapes your heart and awareness of God.

How to Pray the Examen:

1. **Review your day.** Think through all that has happened. Where do you see God? Where did you miss God?
2. **Give thanks** for those moments in your day where you experienced goodness and love.
3. **Repent** – Confess those moments, thoughts, actions that you need to bring to God. Receive God’s forgiveness.
4. **Rest** for Tomorrow – Ask God’s safety through the night and God’s guidance for tomorrow.

For a more detailed, helpful guide, you can download [“How to Pray the Examen”](#) from the Prayer Course Toolshed. (From our Lenten Prayer Course this year).

For a guided journey through the Examen, you can pray through [Pastor Amy’s guided prayer practice](#) on the mobile app.

Psalm 139:1-10

1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

3 You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

5 You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

Week 4

Sunday April 21 – Sabbath Me

Director of Contemporary Worship - Gail Brecht

Do we ever really take a day of rest to focus on God? In modern times, we have lost the meaning of Sabbath. Not just the meaning, but the actual *practice* of Sabbath. It was meant not only for us to rest, but to direct our thoughts, attention and action toward God. This is why we worship on Sunday. It is our Sabbath day.

But that's not really enough, is it? There are always other tasks, sports games or commitments we schedule on Sundays that distract us from a true and full day of Sabbath. I'd like to offer this prayer from Donna Schaper. She uses Sabbath as a verb... as a prayer request. Today, let us join in this prayer:

Sabbath Me

Bring me out of the house of bondage today, O God, into the house of freedom. Hear my thanks for the work of my hands, and heart and mind.

Release me from the guilt I carry at not doing enough and never being done. Bring me into the grace of completeness and incompleteness. Sabbath me, from time to time, even on the job. In the name of the true God. Amen.

- *Donna Schaper, author of Sabbath Keeping*

Monday April 22 - Making a Bigger Pen

By Pastor Josh

“The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.... I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” -
John 10:4-5, 16

I'm not very good at inviting people to church. In fact, I downright stink at it. I don't know if it's my shy nature, or some sort of worry about an odd power dynamic since I am a pastor, but I struggle to invite. But one thing I love is getting to know new people. I love building relationships, hearing people's stories, and finding small ways to enjoy life together.

When we lived in South Carolina, we quickly realized that most of our neighbors did not know each other and rarely made any sort of effort to do so. Even though it seemed counter-cultural there, we started to be more intentionally present outside and take any opportunity we had to introduce ourselves. We quickly found that our neighbors were open and interested in building more community but didn't know how. So, we started a Neighborhood Happy Hour. Once a month, we opened our home to our neighbors from 5-7 for a potluck-style happy hour with no agenda other than getting to know one another. It was amazing how grateful people were for this opportunity! I was amazed at the depth of conversation and the bonds that slowly formed around us. In fact, one of those families began showing up at our church a few months later!

I love Jesus' imagery of sheep and the shepherd. We long to be gathered into community with others, but often we don't know how. We build these walls (pens) around ourselves. Jesus opens gates, wider and wider. Jesus is always creating a bigger pen, a bigger pasture to bring in more and more of his beloved sheep. Jesus reminded us this weekend that “[He] has other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” and he intends to bring them into his pasture.

When we open gates, and build bigger pens in our social lives, expanding our community, people can see God's love at work in our lives, and this is a powerful witness. Maybe, through some small introduction, (Hi, my name is Josh. I live just down the street), the Holy Spirit will move and allow one of Jesus' beloved sheep to hear his voice.

What opportunities is God placing in front of you this week to open gates and make a bigger pen?

Tuesday April 23 - You will find what you are looking for

Director of Youth and Family Ministry- Delaney Rhea

You will find what you are looking for.

When learning to drive my father used to repeat, "Where your eyes go, your car will follow" as a way to remind me to keep my inexperienced eyes on the road and at the task at hand.

Much of our lives follow this pattern. It can be a form of confirmation bias when we know what we are looking for and in return we are sure to find it. This is also the basis of self-fulfilling prophecies.

We will find what we are looking for. If we are looking for all the negatives in our lives, and in those around us, we are going to find them. If we are prone to complaining and venting, we will be looking for reasons to complain and vent.

Many meditation and gratitude practices are aimed at combating our negative focus in life. Just like keeping your eyes on the road helps avoid running into a ditch, when we focus on the positives, and what we and those around us are doing right, we keep ourselves from straying further from the path of God's Grace and Love.

Sit with this verse today:

"Finally, Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me and the God of peace will be with you." **Philippians 4:8**

Think of places in your life, or people in your life, where you have gotten into the automatic habit of looking for the negative. Try to shift your eyes and focus instead on searching for goodness and God in all things.

Today's prayer: Gracious God, help us to keep our eyes and focus on You and Your peace. Through You we can let go of our negative focus and instead allow You, Your way, and Your word to be the center of our thoughts and focus. Amen.

Wednesday April 24 – A Prayer for Clarity

Director of Contemporary Worship - Gail Brecht

I often find my mind cluttered with things that need my attention... (the to-do lists, where my kids need to be, calendar and meal planning, etc.) I lose myself in all... the... stuff.

This is when I stop what I'm doing, take some deep breaths in prayer, and I look outside or go for a walk and simply listen and notice what surfaces in and around me. This is often how God speaks to me... through gentle nudges of invitation. It helps clear my mind of that which is not life giving.

Today, I invite you to stop what you are doing, take a few minutes for you. Still your mind and heart. Take some deep breaths before you read this prayer for clarity, and then take some time in silence as you look out the window or go for a walk and listen for those gentle nudges from the Spirit.

A PRAYER FOR CLARITY

Clear our heart, O God,
that we may see you.

Clear our heart, O God,
that we may truly see ourselves.

Clear our heart, O God,

that we may know the sacredness of this moment

and in every moment
seek you
serve you
strengthen you

as the Living Presence in every presence.

Clear our heart, O God,
that we may see.

from Praying With the Earth: A Prayerbook for Peace
~John Philip Newell

Thursday April 25 - Land

By Josh Brecht

And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. - Genesis 1:9-10

This week we celebrate Earth Day, and I was reminded of a profound saying I heard on my internship. The high school youth went on a service trip to a Native American community, and when they came back they shared their stories with the congregation. One young woman had worked with people there on restoring some of the land and when asked what she learned she said, "*When we heal the land, we heal ourselves.*"

Do you ever really stop and consider the land on which your feet reside?

The eons the land had experienced?

What life grew from this ground a century ago?

A millennium ago?

A million years ago?

A few years ago, I was at a conference where I was able to learn from an incredible Native American pastor. After that experience I was inspired to research the history of the land on which my family lives and the peoples that had called it home before us. Osage, Ogaxpa, Kaskaskia and others once called this their home, and countless animals and plants, life teeming from the land God created.

I stepped out into the grass, with bare feet, and I leaned down to place my palms on the ground, allowing my imagination to remember the history of the place I call home. Thanking God for the gift of creation and those who have stewarded it through countless generations so my family can rest here today.

Today (or this week) I encourage you to step outside, touch the ground, and give thanks to God.

PAUSE & PRAY

Step outside. Breathe deeply. Listen for the sounds of creation. Notice the breeze and the sun.

Touch the land. Let your imagination lead your prayer down deep into the soil. Become aware of the life that teems within, visible and invisible.

Let your imagination see the people, creatures, and plants that have called this same land home, stretching back into history.

Thank you, God, for this gift and those who have passed it down to me.

Let your imagination see those that might come after you.

Creator God, help me to care for this land you lend to us. May it bless and provide for us today, and those that will come after us.

Amen.

The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; - Psalm 24:1

The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.

- Psalm 89:11

Curious about the history of the land on which you live?

<https://native-land.ca/>

Friday April 26 – Place

By Josh Brecht

“Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” - Luke 11:1

“On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.” - Acts 16:13

We believe that God is omnipresent, and although we can't quite fully understand it, we trust that somehow the Holy Spirit is always surrounding us. Yet there is something profound about place. Some places just seem, well, holier than others? Or perhaps not holier, but more conducive to our sense of connection to the divine.

For example, I often pray while I am driving as this a time where I am just alone with God. I put in a good effort, but the interior of my car on Highway 141 is rarely a place where I experience deep, rejuvenating connection to God. Distractions abound.

On the other hand, when I go for a hike through Castlewood State Park and find a quiet bluff on which to sit above the Meramec River I find that something about that place makes it easier to experience God's presence and listen for a word from God for whatever is going on in my life.

I also believe that there is something psychological that happens in our brains when we are in different places. For example, if I walk through my kitchen, somehow, I always think of how delicious that snack would be. If I go into my living room, I always think about the latest TV show.

What if you were to create a space in your home that was a space of prayer?
What if there was a room, or a seat where you spent your quiet time with God each day?
Would that place begin to automatically shift your focus toward God when you enter it?

There's a seat by the front windows in our house in the room where we keep our instruments. There are no TV's or video games in this room. There are no snacks in the pantry in front of me. In the mornings, there is often a view of the sunrise.

This has become my place of prayer. Each morning, this is the place I sit down with coffee and my bible or devotional app and take a few moments of prayer. It is an ordinary space, yet for me it has become a place of prayer, a holy space where I can spend time with God each morning.

What is your holy place?

Saturday April 27 – Time

By Josh Brecht

One of my favorite TV shows of all time is Doctor Who. Now before you dismiss my taste in television, let me clarify. I am referring to the modern reboot of Doctor Who, *not* the original old-school series with cardboard props! I have always been intrigued by the science fiction topic of time travel. From Back to the Future when I was a kid, to discovering Doctor Who in recent years, the idea of manipulating time is fascinating. Why is that?

Do you ever feel like you don't have enough time?

Do you ever find yourself buckling from the pressure to get too much done in too little time?

Me too.

No wonder we are magnetically drawn toward the idea of manipulating time! While science has not yet discovered a way to *actually* time travel, God has given us the gift of time.

In the opening chapter of Mark's Gospel Jesus says, "The **time** is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." In the ancient Greek there are two different words that could be translated as "time." "Chronos," means literal or precise time, like the time on a clock or time of day. "Kairos," means something deep. It is like a *season*, or *opportunity*, a special *moment*. Jesus uses "Kairos" here in **Mark 1:15**.

We feel bound by Chronos time, and we feel this pressure or lack of 'time' in this sense. But God's time is different. God's time is measured by the span of eternity. There are times (Kairos), when things slow down, and God breaks into our lives and our whole perspective shifts.

Have you ever noticed how time stretches or compresses depending on what is going on around you? Remember the phrase "time flies when you are having fun?" Or as Doctor Who would say, things get "timey whimy."

When we pause from the rushing flow of chronos time and step into God's presence or kairos time, there is a sense of freedom and peace. We can catch a glimpse of God's kingdom breaking into our world. We step off the highway of busyness, and for just a moment stand in the peaceful expanse of eternity.

Today, I invite you to find moments to rest in God's Kairos time.

- Pause and pray throughout your day. Breathe deeply of God's spirit.
- Close your eyes and shift your perspective from your to-do list to eternal presence of God around you.
- Stop to listen to birds sing, or watch the sunset and let the peace of God fill your heart.

PAUSE & PRAY:

God, we feel so bound by busyness that we often view time as a scarcity. But no matter how much we have we always want more. Help me to rest in your Kairos time today. Fill my heart and mind with your peace. Give me eyes to see time as you see it, through the lens of eternity that I might fully enjoy the moments of beauty, wonder, and joy that I encounter today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Week 5

Sunday April 28 – Faith is a Work in Progress

By Pastor Amy

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. -- 2 Peter 3:18

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. --1 Corinthians 13:11

First, let me say that children are amazing and a gift from God! There is nothing wrong with children being childish and being childish can be quite life-giving for people of all ages. Children have much to teach us about faith, just as they are, and they are an important part of the Church NOW; not just the future of the Church.

That being said, we would not do our children justice if we stopped teaching them about life or faith just because theirs is beautiful at their current age. We all know that it's important for children to go to school to keep learning and growing, because there is always more that can help shape them into functioning adults in the world.

So it is with faith. We send children up front in worship for children's messages, off to Sunday school, and to Wednesday night faith formation programs like SHiNE, RiSE, and FLY. We do this because we know that there is much for them to learn to help them grow in their relationship with God, with the Church, and in the world as they practice their faith.

Today we confirm 14 middle schoolers, who understand that their faith is different from when they were baptized. They stand and declare that they want to take the faith on for themselves and keep growing, learning, wrestling, wondering, and participating in a community that helps them do so. We encourage this because we, as adults, know that our faith isn't what it was in 8th grade...or at least I hope not!

What we sometimes forget, though, is that once we are adults, our faith still has room to grow. We are never finished being shaped in faith. Our faith is a work in progress, and this growth often happens best alongside others who are doing the same. So as we near the end of our 30 Day Challenge, remember that there are plenty of places, spaces, and folks within Good Shepherd to help you continue on the journey.

Today, spend a moment thinking about what your faith was like as a child, teenager, young adult, etc, and notice how it's evolved over the years. Then, prayerfully consider if it's time to join a Sunday morning or weekday Bible study, join or start a new small group, or find a new devotional for your own study. Talk to the pastors or other staff if you need some help finding your next steps and remember that you aren't alone! We are all a work in progress.

Monday April 29 – Prayer

By Pastor Josh

It may seem odd to be writing a daily devotion about prayer at the end of the 30 Day Easter Challenge. “Haven’t we been praying for the past 30 days, Pastor Josh?!” Hang with me. As we move into the final days of the month, I want to shift toward sharing some practical tips of ways continue on this spiritual journey and build upon the foundation God has been forming in you.

One of the most beautiful aspects of being a part of such a relational faith community like Good Shepherd, is how we walk with each other through the highs and lows of life. Every week, people share prayer requests with us. Some are private, some are spoken in worship, some are shared through email. Some of prayers of deep concern for health or personal struggles. Others are prayers of thanksgiving and joy.

There are many ways people can participate in this movement of prayer that flows through Good Shepherd, but I am not sure we are all aware of these opportunities! So here are a few of the most common ways we share and pray for one another.

REQUESTING PRAYER

People share prayer requests with Good Shepherd in several ways

1. Submit a prayer request in the mobile app. (“Prayer Request” tile)
2. Email or call anyone on staff
3. Talk to anyone on staff in person

Sometimes people don’t want their request to be public, and sometimes they do. So we always ask **how** we can be praying, and how/if people would like their requests to be shared.

HOW WE SHARE PRAYER REQUESTS

1. Pray for people by name in Worship
2. Share a request via our Prayer Chain Email (you can sign up [HERE](#))
3. Add request to our long-term, Ongoing Prayer List (included in our Friday E-news and the mobile app [HERE](#))

Personally, I keep a list on my phone of people at Good Shepherd who are going through difficult seasons, and I pray through that each morning as I pray through my morning devotion.

Today, I encourage you to explore these different prayer lists and pray for some of the people and needs before you. There is something beautiful and powerful about lifting our hearts and voices to God together in prayer.

Tuesday April 30 – What's Next?

By Josh Brecht

Thank you for joining us on this 30-Day spiritual journey! I hope and pray that you have been blessed by these daily devotions and spiritual practices, and that it has helped you to experience the presence of Jesus more consistently in your life.

As we come to the end of this journey, we ask what comes next? We would like to share a few ideas and resources to encourage you to continue growing deeper in your relationship with God. I have found the different practices, styles, and tools work better for different people, so my prayer is that one of these would resonate with each of you.

1. Our "[Grow Spiritually](#)" page

We created a page on Good Shepherd's website to be a one-stop hub for the various regular resources we create and a centralized place to find the latest short-term tools, as well. Here you can find:

- **Weekly Memory Verses & Readings Ebook** - updated seasonally. Designed to help us dwell in the bible stories we experience in worship.
- **Grow Spiritually Podcast** – New episodes drop each month for you and/or your family to simply listen to a guided devotion around the dinner table together.
- **Sermon Podcast** – We know life is busy, so we provide a podcast version of our sermons each week to listen on the go. In the car, on your run, or while mowing your lawn!

2. NEW Monthly Email, "**Faith Fertilizer**"

We are launching a new monthly email to share resources, ideas, and practices for growing in faith in daily life. You can [SIGN UP HERE](#) as we share books, resources, and awesome ideas to help us walk with Jesus each day.

3. [Lectio 365 App](#)

This is a free, daily devotional that offers morning and evening prayer following the ancient practice of Lectio Divina. It is created by 24-7 prayer, a global, ecumenical movement. This has been the most meaningful and helpful resource for me personally.

May the God of peace fill you with joy as you do ministry and grow spiritually every day! In closing, we prayerfully receive these words of encouragement from the Apostle Paul from **1 Thessalonians**

5:16-18:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”