

Reinforcements *from Sunday's message*

*"Reflect on what I am saying,
for the Lord will give you insight into all of this." 2 Tim 2.7*

Christmas Rightside Up – Magi Worship (December 28, 2008)

Read Matthew 2.1-11

Worship is responding to all that God is with all that we are. But, what do we have of worth to offer the God of all creation? He first and foremost wants our **hearts** wholly dedicated to Him. Our hearts are of paramount importance to God. Worship, then, becomes **seeking** Him and His will with everything we are – heart, mind, soul and strength. Like the Magi who prepared for their journey to find and worship the newborn King and then set out on that arduous journey, we too are to persevere in our seeking of God and worshipping Him despite doubt and opposition and physical and spiritual fatigue. Worship is **surrendering** to God's agenda, a willingness to come under His authority with a spirit of humility. Worship is **sacrificing** all that we have been given in financial resources and time and energy. Because He has given us everything, we must be willing to offer it back to Him so it's all at His disposal. Lastly, worship is **service** – a heartfelt service to God and other people without counting the cost. How can you respond with all of who you are to all of who God is in the new year?

Christmas Rightside Up – A Pregnant Virgin (December 14, 2008)

Read Luke 1.26-55

Our understanding of Christ's 1st coming to earth should take on some sort of expression in our lives. Yes, we know that Christ's birth was foretold 700 years prior to the actual events (Isaiah 7.14), and we know that Jesus was with God from the very beginning – there was never a time when he was not (Col 1.15), Jesus' incarnation is God-in-the-flesh (Phil 2.6,7), and that we need Jesus, a sinless person, to reconcile us back to God (1 Cor 15.22). This theology, our understanding of God, should not remain just an intellectual understanding, however, but should be made manifest in our lives somehow. Mary, our Lord's mother, simply responded to His grace with thankfulness and committed herself to the Lord's service – whatever the circumstances – "I am the Lord's servant." (Luke 1.38) May our hearts and lives likewise take on a fuller response to God's gift of His Son.

Christmas Rightside Up - Clash of Kingdoms (December 7, 2008)

Read Matthew 2.1-16

King Herod represented excessive wealth and abuse of power – he was consumed by these. Jesus was his radical opposite – born of peasant parents in a stable, lived in an obscure village, and yet was God in flesh-n-blood who was sent to be the King of the Jews, the King of Kings and the Lord of all creation. In short, Jesus came to serve – to *give himself* to those who were poor in spirit - not to be served. We experience a similar clash of kingdoms today – our culture entices us to spend beyond our means and give and receive lavish gifts – a Herod-type depiction of living. Whereas, just as Jesus ignored the Roman governor at his trial, we too, need to ignore the lure of wealth, power and prestige, which can be easily abused and worshiped. Instead, we can shift our focus and become consumed with Jesus' kingdom, depicting service, forgiveness, restoration and love. Two ways to do that this Christmas is to 1) spend less and give more of yourself by making gifts, and 2) give to those who have less. Which kingdom will you serve this Christmas?

Think Thanks: Embracing an Attitude of Gratitude (November 30, 2008)

Reflect on 1 Thessalonians 5.16-18:

“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”

What are you thankful for? Have you even asked that question lately? Sometimes I get so distracted by life's challenges (relationships, fatigue, busyness, financial woes) that this question doesn't even surface in my mind until that once-a-year reminder at Thanksgiving. The writer of this scriptural passage reminds us that blessings are not defined by our circumstances – they can be found even in the midst of challenges because God is always present, and His goodness permeates every facet of life. Thankfulness comes from our faith in the God of life. Ask God now to show you what you can be thankful for.

Follow Me: Becoming a Fully Devoted Christ Follower (November 23, 2008)

Reflect on 2 Corinthians 3.18

“And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like Him (Jesus) and reflect His glory even more.”

Jesus provides an inspiring example for us to follow in our devotion to God and our neighbor. Jesus' identity was defined by His relationship between Him and His Father. He valued this relationship so highly that He set aside time daily to spend in intimate presence with the Father. His focus was **UP**. What would *our* lives be like if we considered becoming God's friend the highest priority in our busy lives? An outpouring of His attributes would manifest in our lives to empower us to engage with the wider world. Jesus certainly poured Himself into the community of believers to strengthen His growing body. His focus was **IN**. Where do you share life with other believers? Jesus was also a master at giving His life away to the deeper needs of the world. His focus was **OUT**. Where do you engage with the needs of the world? Jesus' life and mission of UP, IN, OUT defines for us what it means to be a true follower of Christ. How does your life intersect with the priorities of Jesus?

The Spiritual Gap (November 16, 2008)

Spiritual growth is a biblical expectation, and the process is empowered by God: “*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*” (Philippians 2.12-13) We are all on a spiritual journey: some are **exploring** Christ (they may know God but are unsure how Jesus fits into the picture), some are newly **discovering** Christ, some are **growing** in intimacy with Christ, and some are **devoting** their lives fully to the will of Christ. No matter where we are on this continuum, even if sometimes it seems like we are moving backwards, God gives us grace along this path to move beyond the past, which can be filled with sin, guilt and disappointments. Spiritual practices, such as reflecting on the meaning of Scripture and communicating with God through prayer, can make a profound impact for growing in greater intimacy with our Lord. What spiritual practices are integrated into your rhythm of life?

Heaven Touching Earth – Inside Out (November 9, 2008)

Read Acts 15.1-21

As the Jewish Christ-followers in Jerusalem were grappling with the radical notion of the kingdom of God being extended to pagan Gentiles in Antioch, some felt it necessary to add conditions to Gentile converts to legitimize their standing. One of these conditions was circumcision, a uniquely Jewish sign that they were God's chosen people. Peter led the charge of the "Christ plus nothing" camp which pointed to the reality of the new covenant (whose truth is ironically given in the Old Testament): "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul and live." (Deut 30.6) A circumcision of the heart is the purification of our *inward* selves brought on by God's Spirit. God's work of grace performs this inward change in our hearts (Acts 15.11) and draws us more deeply into relationship with Him. We can begin to live more fully as He changes our inner desires to follow him – living more out of passion and less out of obligation, more out of our identity in Him and less out of outward appearances. How have you sensed God changing your heart lately?

Heaven Touching Earth - Compassion Evokes Action (October 12, 2008)

Read Acts 9

This world is a mess. I guess you didn't need me to tell you that. So many hurting and hungry people, so much to be fixed. So many directions we could go with our energies; where do we even begin? The heart of God is a loving compassionate heart. His heart breaks for the broken. Commitment to Jesus without compassion for his people is a lie. So, our heart calls us to start somewhere - we don't have an option. How about being a part of the tutoring for underprivileged kids that is starting soon at The Creek? Maybe your heart is with those who are overseas – come walk with us during HopeWalks, which raises \$ and awareness for kids in Africa with AIDS. This event takes place on Sunday, October 26 in Berkeley. There are so many ways we can help others. We are the church, we are God's people, and we are called to action. When I see others making a difference in the lives of others, living intentionally, it makes me think how I'd like to be part of a community that loves like that.

Heaven Touching Earth – Redirection (October 5, 2008)

Read Acts 9:1-19 and Acts 26.9-11

Can full restoration really come from times of brokenness? In God's economy, it can! God is eager to step into our darkness and redirect our lives by changing our hearts or our thinking. Living in darkness (i.e., times of hardship or times of wrongdoing) can make us sensitive to hearing God differently, and it is sometimes during these situations that God does His most amazing work! Saul was headed in the wrong direction, working to destroy the newly forming church by persecuting followers of Jesus. But God's plan will not be thwarted. God used Saul's darkness (his spiritual and physical blindness) to reorient Saul and give him an entirely new beginning. Restoration is entirely possible with God and actually the whole kingdom idea! What area of your life needs to be surrendered to the light of God's power to restore?

Holy Discontentment (September 21, 2008)

Read Exodus 2.11-4.4

Is there a discontentment stirring in you – maybe it's an offense you have witnessed or something occurring in the world that you cannot sit idly by and watch happen anymore? Moses became agitated at the sight of one of his people being mistreated (Ex 2.11-12) and he was shocked into action. God was stirring a holy discontentment in Moses that agreed with God's concern for His people: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt, I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." (Ex 3.7-8) The church is a vast display of God's resources of gifting, power through the Spirit and truth. It would be a shame to keep this trove harnessed only for the purpose of doing church. There are offenses in the world that are breaking God's heart, and He is calling us to be galvanized by our holy discontentment. What is God asking you to do?

Heaven Touching Earth – Engaging Faith (September 14, 2008)

Read Acts 8:26-40

God has each of us on a collision course with someone who is lost spiritually, someone living without Jesus. It is God's desire for everyone to know Him, so it shouldn't surprise us that he also desires to use us to relay His story to those searching for truth and meaning in their lives. Like Philip in our story who was attuned to God's still, small voice, guiding him towards the Ethiopian eunuch who was seeking answers, are we hearing and heeding God's guidance towards the lost? Who are the people you encounter that live only for the here and now? Seek identity from others? Are burdened by the guilt of wrongs? Are trying to change habits through self-help? Have not experienced divine forgiveness? Are pursuing pleasure without greater purpose? Who lack power to overcome sin? They are all pursuing something. Are you ready, as Philip was, to tell them "the good news about Jesus," (Acts 8.39) the very Something they are hungering for?

Heaven Touching Earth – Scattered (September 7, 2008)

Read Acts 8:1-8, 14-17

As a farmer scatters a handful of seed upon the soil to produce a rich harvest, God has purposefully placed us in the company of those who are dying to hear His message of hope and reconciliation. Think of the hearts of the people in your midst at work, school or in your neighborhood who could be spiritually nourished by the message God has for them. The early church was scattered because of persecution, but they were scattered for a purpose: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." (Acts 8.4) The church did not dissipate but was empowered to continue bringing this message to people far outside the confines of their familiar geography and comfort zone. Let's begin to think of church as less like a noun and more like a verb – we come to church to be strengthened, but we are also *sent out* to be influential. Who are the people or people groups inside your circle of influence or outside your comfort zone that the gospel message of hope needs to reach?

Heaven Touching Earth – Stand: Stephen in the Spirit (August 31, 2008)

Read Acts 7:1-60

How could we ever be like Stephen, not afraid to take a stand for Christ? Not afraid to speak the truth or tell it like it is? I shudder to think how he went in to face his accusers knowing the law, knowing what was at stake. He did it anyway. Was it his power? No, he too was human, filled with every fear that we feel. So how did he do it - stand up to the opposition? To be facing the Sanhedrin (the very same group that had falsely declared Jesus' blasphemy) with "the face like an angel" (Acts 6:15) would take more than courage. It would take the power of God's Holy Spirit. That same power is available to us. It takes that kind of power to change my heart, my perspective, my life. I don't want to be one of those "...stiff necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears..." (Acts 7:51) I want to tap into that power. I want to have the readiness and boldness of faith that Stephen had to stand up for God when faced with opposition. Ask God in this moment to whom and in what circumstances you can verbalize your faith this week.

Heaven Touching Earth – Truth or Dare: The Importance of the Truth (August 10, 2008)

Read Acts 5:1-11

A recent poll showed that 91% of Americans lie on a regular basis. Does this really surprise us living in this image-soaked culture that promotes presenting ourselves as successful, put-together, emotionally stable individuals? When someone asks you how you are, how often have you put on your mask and responded "Fine" when in fact you were depressed, lonely, discouraged, and really could have used someone to listen? I imagine people in the early church, too, wanted to present themselves as well. Take Ananias for example. He held back more than money - he held back his true self and he did "not lie to men but to God." (Acts 5:4) Taking off that mask, though, can be scary; what if my true self is rejected? Certainly we won't be hurt as easily if we put up barriers, but what a lonely place to be. It's time we grow out of the toxic, "Putting on our Sunday best" mentality. Our church, this beautiful, growing body of Christ, should be a place where we can open up and share our true selves. There's no other way to go deep in our relationships, to be authentic and also giving people a chance to accept us as we are. Our souls were made to be truthful, and withholding truth can be toxic. So, what are we holding back? Next time when someone asks you how you are and it's a bad day, how about sharing a little of your true self? What have you got to lose? Your mask?

Heaven Touching Earth - Community (August 3, 2008)

Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37

Our mission as a church is not confined to providing a socially safe and comfortable place to worship the living God. Although mutual encouragement and a “come-as-you-are” atmosphere are things we want to foster, they are not our only directive. God has a purpose for us beyond just meeting together in a safe place, and He is inviting us to be a part of it. We are also called to be mission (outward) focused. This will require that we are living out of our comfort zone and trusting God for the details. Movement out of comfort and into trusting God will seem to transcend rationality at times. But it can be exactly in those times of confusion and conflict and discomfort that we experience truer and deeper, more connected Christian community. Let’s continue to invite God to show us how He will call us to engage in missional community, and pray for the strength to be obedient to it, regardless of the costs.

Heaven Touching Earth - Dangerous Prayer (July 27, 2008)

Read Acts 4:23-31

“Do not tell me it cannot be done!” should be what our spirits are telling us in the face of the opposition that we personally and the Church are confronted with today. Some of the opposition in our culture can be characterized by greed, tolerance, a perceived irrelevance towards God, complacency, comfort and busyness. God is calling us and the Church to stand up against this opposition so His values can be realized; stepping forward despite the opposition is what God empowers us to do. The early Church was faced with opposition from the beginning, yet God, through the power of His Holy Spirit, emboldened and empowered the people to respond confidently and with authority. Even the religious leaders of that day observed an unexpected boldness in Jesus’ followers. Let us follow the early believers’ model of boldness by prayerfully affirming God’s sovereignty and bringing our concerns of difficulty to God, asking for a voice of boldness to “speak about what we have seen and heard,” and asking God to show His work in undeniable ways.

Heaven Touching Earth – More Than Bargained For (July 13, 2008)

Read Acts 3:1-10

Dancing, leaping and daring to take risks for God – does this picture characterize the life we are living for God? It does for the early church, and God wants to do today what He wanted to do in the early church. We, as the church, need to expect something from God. The crippled beggar expected to receive money from the disciples; however, he received life through the power of Christ to heal physically, emotionally and spiritually, and the beggar who had been crippled for 40 years jumped to his feet and went into the temple courts, “walking and jumping and praising God.” The beggar’s vitality was fueled by his belief in the power of Jesus to heal. Peter was not surprised at this man’s healing – he fully believed that the power of Christ in his own life was alive and potent, enabling him to extend healing “in the name of Jesus Christ.” God still heals – it is a sign that points to Him and authenticates His message. People in the world who are crippled physically, emotionally or spiritually need a heavenly touch by God, and God wants to heal you and heal others through you. Believe it! Live it! Ask God right now that He heal you in your area of need. Let the expectant healing (whether it happens immediately or not) bolster your belief and fuel your vitality for living as a beacon of hope for others.

Heaven Touching Earth - Ripples (July 6, 2008)

Read Acts 2:1-13

The Holy Spirit is the way of bringing Jesus to us. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost initiated the first fruits of a new relationship between Jesus and His church. It is said that 120 people were present at that time, but the Spirit continued to work in the lives of thousands and even millions of people who were open to Its power. This rippling effect continues today. If you have Jesus, you have the Spirit, and it is all you ever need. We are also commanded to “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5.18), which asserts a continuous infilling of the Spirit in each of us. With God's Helper, we are to let go of things in our lives (e.g., pride, self-determination, busyness) to allow more space for the Spirit to grow. Ask God to show you what needs to be cleared in your life to make more room for the Spirit. A fresh boldness will powerfully enable us, as the Church, to speak of the “wonders of God” to the world in a vibrant, relevant way. Ask God to show you specifically how you can be a part of this mission of the church.

Heaven Touching Earth - Kingdom Come (June 29, 2008)

Read Acts 1:1-11

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are more than what we have become. The world may see believers and the church as irrelevant and incapable of transforming the world around us. The reality, however, is that the Spirit of God is in each of us - this is our identity, which Jesus initiated by his resurrection. This new identity powerfully enables us to be transformed from the inside (think attitudes, behaviors, perspectives) and helps us impact the world around us (think friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, other cultural groups in our midst). We are God's redemptive community - the body He has chosen to change the world! Live out of this greater identity by realizing you are a part of God's redemptive plan to transform earth and make it a little more like heaven. God's kingdom grows larger on earth each time there is internal change in someone's life that displays God's priorities (Gal 5.22-23). Ask God to show you how He has changed you on the inside and how you can display this work in word or deed to those you come in contact with this week.
