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May the reflections in the pages of this 6th volume always remind us that whatever challenges we face spiritually, emotionally, and physically, our God is alive and He is real."

Carmelle Frances M. Romero

*Administrative Officer
Office of the President
Central Philippine University*

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It is a must-read, a daily go-to. This will not just make you fulfilled and contented but will answer the "Get a life!"

As a tip: If you are reading this and you cannot understand the message, take a pause, deep breath, and pray. Seek enlightenment and read again. Do not read for the purpose of just reading. Read to understand. Read to live. Read to smile knowing that God is with us."

Gelbert Jan S. Porque

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VOLUME 6

SEEDS OF FAITH

FRANCIS NEIL GICO JALANDO-ON



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SEEDS OF FAITH

Volume 6

Francis Neil G. Jalandon

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Edited by Gelbert Jan S. Porque

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Foreword

I believe that the level of Jesus' "realness" in our lives takes on different meanings as we become more mature and encounter different experiences. What remains constant is His unchanging love and care for us all the days of our lives.

Growing up, my Mother exposed me to the joy of discovering devotional books. Reading *Seeds of Faith* drives home the point that "Yes, Jesus loves me!", even and especially in this pandemic. The words are couched in everyday language, plain and simple, but full of depth and spiritual insight. And on a personal note, what makes reading *Seeds of Faith* a notch more special is because the author is not only a respected colleague, but is also one of my spiritual mentors.

May the reflections in the pages of this 6th volume always remind us that whatever challenges we face spiritually, emotionally, and physically, our God is alive and He is real.

May God bless us all!

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Preface

As I read through the Seeds of Faith, I think not only one, but variant seeds were planted in me. To say that editing this is an opportunity and privilege is an understatement. I am beyond blessed to have read through the stories, reflections, and messages indicated therein.

It is a must-read, a daily go-to. This will not just make you fulfilled and contented but will answer the “Get a life!”

As a tip: If you are reading this and you cannot understand the message, take a pause, deep breath, and pray. Seek enlightenment and read again. Do not read for the purpose of just reading. Read to understand. Read to live. Read to smile knowing that God is with us.

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Jesus is the Author of New Beginnings

Have you come to a point in your life that you prayed, "Lord, please make a new beginning in my life"? If yes, then please be assured that God hears our prayers, and will answer that desire for a new beginning.

Let us look at the life of Saul. The first entry in the New Testament of Saul was in Acts 8:1. It says, "And Saul approved of their killing him." Then as continued in verse 3, "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison."

Saul's notoriety is described in this chapter. It is notable that when Luke wrote the book of Acts, he was already in the company of a converted Saul, now called Paul. Luke did not mince words nor edited it. Luke wrote that it was Saul who approved the killing of Stephen and went about dragging Christians to be imprisoned. In short, Saul was destroying the church and Paul most probably told Luke to narrate about his past, uncensored, and unedited.

Why? Paul is teaching us that our past will not define who we are. What should define us is who we are in Jesus Christ.

When Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, his life was changed. He completely turned around and became the first missionary to the Gentiles. He did not let his past define him. He did not even hide his past. This should be the same with us. We must make the past an example to people that they, too, can have that assurance that they can be changed by God.

Paul later wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:9, "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God." It was perhaps difficult for Paul to write it. But he was not the worst. He was the greatest example of the grace of God.

Acts 26:11 described what is probably the biggest regret of Paul: "And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged

against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” Again, he let Luke write about it.

Paul may have had sleepless nights thinking about those whom he tortured and forced to blaspheme. He did not hide this specific event in his past. He repented from it and shared it with others that they too will see how God can change a life.

In Jesus, we, too, can have new beginnings.

“Paul is teaching us that our past will not define who we are. What should define us is who we are in Jesus Christ.”

“We must make the past an example to people that they, too, can have that assurance that they can be changed by God.”

Do Not Share Fake News

As of the latest statistics released by wearesocial.com on January 2019, over half of the world's population or 4 billion people are now online. Three-fourths (75 percent) of this people are active social media users with Facebook and YouTube as the Top 2 sites or apps that are being used. They are also being used as a source of news and information. There lies the "beauty and the beast." Everybody can become an instant newscaster, news writer, vlogger, or blogger but anyone can also be the source of fake news.

In the Bible, the other word for Gospel is Good News. The Gospel is the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ. If that is Good News, what then is fake news in the context of the Bible?

The prophet Isaiah already warned us about fake news. He said in 5:20: "Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter."

First, fake news is not believing that Jesus is the Messiah.

1 John 2:22 says, "Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist..."

Second, fake news is not holding on to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said in John 8:31 to 32 "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Third, fake news is believing everyone who can quote a Bible verse.

Some are distorting it as 2 Peter 3:16 warns us, "He (Paul) writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

Even Satan can quote a scripture passage like Psalm 91:11–12. This is recorded in Matthew 4:6. Let us be on guard with this because there are many cults around us. Let us pray that God will open our hearts and minds as we study the Bible.

Let us share the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, and not the fake news that deny it.

“Fake news is not believing that Jesus is the Messiah.”

“Let us share the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, and not the fake news that deny it.”

Being Wise through the Wise Men

Every January is the celebration of Epiphany or the time that Jesus was revealed to the Gentiles, first to the Wise Men or the Magi or for some the Three Kings. Let us take note that the Bible does not say that there were three Magi; only three gifts.

What can we learn from the visit of the Wise Men to Jesus as told in Matthew 2:1-12? Let us focus on the latter part of the story.

First, the Wise Men bowed down to Jesus alone. When they visited King Herod, the Bible says that they did not bow down to him. This is a significant part of the story. This means that the Wise Men acknowledged that there is someone greater than a ruling king. The Wise Men did not also bow down to Joseph nor Mary. This, too, is very significant.

We, too, should bow down to Jesus alone, not to any leader or government, but only to the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

Second, the Wise Men listened to a warning. God used the star at first to guide the Wise Men, and then later, God used a dream to warn them. They were open to any sign that God used. Because of this, their lives were spared.

We, too, should be open to any revelation from God. Let us not be fixed on any religious event or symbol to wait for the epiphany from God. God can use anything. We should heed the warnings from God.

Third, the Wise Men returned to their home another route. The travel of the Wise Men to Bethlehem was arduous. They had to travel for many weeks, maybe more than a month. After traveling with only a star to guide them, they have to go back to their country using another route that they have not tried but they did it.

We, too, should find alternatives or other routes if the usual or traditional is not working. We should not be afraid to be trailblazers in our thoughts and actions.

Being wise is not equivalent to knowing everything. It is, in fact, acknowledging that despite all that we know, we are nothing without God. We need to know to whom to bow down, listen to warning, and explore options. As with the olden times, and will be true in all ages, God will be with those who listen to Him.

“We, too, should be open to any revelation from God. Let us not be fixed on any religious event or symbol to wait for the epiphany from God. God can use anything. We should heed the warnings from God.”

DIET for the Year

According to Statistic Brain Research Institute, the number 1 New Year's Resolution year after year is to Lose Weight or go in a Diet (<http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/>).

My sister, Mrs. Rosette Joy Jalando-on-Dumdum, sent a message with regards to DIET at the start of the year.

D – Delight yourself in the Lord

Our God is worthy of our trust. Let us believe in Psalm 37:4 that says, “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

I – Invest in Friendships and Relationships

Life is all about relationships. Let us continue to water the garden of friendships. Let us seek new friends. We are never too old or too young to be a friend or to find a friend. Life becomes more meaningful if you spend it with friends and loved ones.

E – Explore New Avenues

Are you just comfortable with what you are doing now? Let us try to get out of our comfort zones and try to find new areas of our life that can make a difference to our society. Abram was old when God gave him the adventure of his life. Abram traveled to a new world. In doing so, he became Abraham, the father of many nations.

T – Take time to Rest and Relax

Let us find time to rest and relax. Our society now is so fast paced that we oftentimes forget to slow down. Elijah was so stressed out (1 Kings 19) that he asked God to take his life. God made Elijah sleep. After that, God gave him a bread to eat. He was then rejuvenated and ready to take on new challenges.

This diet fuels not only our physique, but also our mind and spiritual well-being. Enjoy your DIET!

Let us Not Limit Ourselves

Have you ever been uncomfortable with doing something because it is your first time? When was the last time that you got out of your comfort zone? The reality is that some of us have great fears in doing something out of the ordinary.

Let us look at the life of Philip in the book of Acts. He can teach us about not saying no to opportunities in serving the Lord. He was someone who was a trailblazer.

Acts 8:5 tells us that Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. They paid close attention to what he said.

Philip went out of his comfort zone and went to Samaria, a place hated by the Jews during this time. Philip must have remembered that Jesus healed a Samaritan leper. Jesus did not choose what race, age, gender, or economic class you are from. Jesus sees us as a human needing God. So, Philip, emboldened by a risen Christ, went to an uncomfortable place and shared the Gospel of salvation. It resulted to great joy in the city.

What is interesting here is that Philip was a deacon. He was not an original disciple of Jesus. He was one of the 7 deacons chosen by the disciples. He could have said no. Why? Another deacon, in the name of Stephen died by stoning. Despite this, Philip gave a yes to the opportunity presented to him. He was even emboldened by the martyrdom of Stephen.

He could have said no also because he was a deacon, and was assigned to oversee the distribution of the food to the widows, orphans, and poor people. It was the primary responsibility of the disciples to preach. But he did not. He did not limit himself.

When they heard this in Jerusalem, they also immediately sent Peter and John to help in Samaria. Philip was there even before the disciples came.

This should be the same with us. Let us not just share Jesus in our comfort zones, but we must rise up and share the Gospel wherever we will be sent.

A Second Chance

Have you ever been given a second chance? All of us have probably been given another chance in something or by someone. We have felt relief and committed ourselves to do it better or to do it right the next time.

In the Bible, there are many stories of second chances. In Acts 8 we can see the life of Simon, the Magus who was given a second chance, and even a third chance.

Acts 8:13 states, "Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw."

Simon, the Sorcerer was called the "Great Power of God." He was boasting to the people who were amazed by his sorcery skills. But when Philip came into town, Simon the Sorcerer believed in Jesus and was subsequently baptized. His conversion story is going great up until the time he offered money to Peter and John to buy the power of the Holy Spirit.

This was his downfall. And this is the same as some of us. We only think about what we get when we follow Jesus. This kind of faith is superficial. We may go to church, but we may not be true followers of Jesus.

What happened to Simon the Sorcerer after he offered to bribe the apostles? Peter told him that his heart is not right before God. But Peter was also quick to offer him a path to repentance so that God may forgive him for his bitterness and wickedness.

Acts 8:22 says, "Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that He may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart."

After this, Simon said something that we may consider as repentance. He asked for prayers that nothing will happen to him.

We, too, can ask for forgiveness for any sin that captivates us. Like Simon, we, too, can be given by God a second chance. In the same way, we do not judge a man by a single mistake nor by the hundreds of misdeeds. There is a second chance, a chance to be forgiven and to repent.

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The Faith of Stephen

One of the top New Year Resolutions is a promise to grow in their Christian faith. Perhaps, we can learn from a man who had an unwavering faith - the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

In the book of Acts chapter 6, we can find, for the first time in our Christian history, the term "deacons." Stephen was chosen as one of the seven deacons whose task was to take care of the widows and orphans, the marginalized in their society. In the course of doing this ministry, Stephen was falsely accused and was brought to the Sanhedrin for questioning.

Acts 7 is a testimony of Stephen to the High Council in Jerusalem. We can learn a lot of things in these verses:

First, Stephen teaches us to be courageous in the exercise of our faith. He was courageous to stand before the members of the High Council. How about us? Are we bold enough to share our faith?

Second, Stephen tells us to know our Christian history. He was well-versed in their history and connected it with Jesus Christ. How about us? Do we make an effort to know the historical roots of our faith?

Third, Stephen warns us not to go back to "Egypt." Egypt means something that enslaves us. Let us identify these things and pray that God will liberate us.

Fourth, Stephen reminds us that God does not dwell in a "temple" or a "church." We cannot limit God. We can worship God anytime and anywhere.

Stephen was eventually stoned to death because of his faith. But he did not waver, as we should also. This reminds us that faith will be tested and when the time comes, can we be as strong as Stephen to stand for what is right?

A Fruit that Lasts

How can a fruit last? The answer that will come first to our minds is: a fruit will last if you refrigerate it. Is this what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples as recorded in John 15:16 “... I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last...”? Should our faith be kept in a refrigerator or store it somewhere cool to keep it fresh? This is not what Jesus meant.

When Jesus said that we must go and bear fruit, a fruit that will last, he was using the agricultural context of Israel. And this agricultural procedure is even the same up to now. Jesus found symbolical meanings to the agricultural procedure of planting a seed, taking care of the seed until it grows into a fruit-bearing tree, waiting for the fruit to ripen, getting the seeds again from the fruit, and then repeat the process.

What then is this process in our Christian life?

First, we have to plant the seeds of faith in the lives of other people. This presupposes that our Christian life is ripe so that seeds can come out of our lives. We can spread the Gospel in many ways. This is what evangelization is all about.

Second, we have to take care of these newly planted seeds of faith so that it will grow to be fruit-bearing. This is labor intensive. A lot of nurturing and protection are needed. This is where discipleship comes in.

Third, when the fruit ripens, we help each other in spreading and planting the next generation of the seeds of faith. In this way, one seed has multiplied into a lot of fruit-bearing lives.

This is the way to bear a fruit that will last as Jesus commanded us to do so. As Christians, we need to make the fruit lasts. We do not plant seeds and stop when the harvest is done. We do not think for ourselves alone but also others and the incoming generations.

The Sin of Babel

Malaysia is a country fascinated with tall buildings.

Kuala Lumpur is the place where the 452m high, 88-storey Petronas Twin Towers is located. It previously held the record as the world's tallest building from 1998 up to 2004. It will soon be replaced as its city's tallest structure by The Exchange 106 which will be 492m tall.

Another building again will surpass these two imposing structures - the Merdeka PNB which will be 500m high. But the tallest skyscraper in the world today is the Burj Khalifa in Dubai with a height of 828m.

In the Bible, there was a time that people were also fixated with building a tall structure. Genesis 11:1-9 tells us about the story of the building of the Tower of Babel in Shinar. Their purpose can be found in Genesis 11:4 as follows: Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

Why did God stop the building of this tower?

First, they only wanted to build a city for themselves, and God was out of the picture. This should remind us that any plan that we make should include God.

Second, they wanted to reach the heavens and God using only their own wisdom and strength. God's self-revelation is the only way that we can reach God. We have to pray that God will disclose Himself to us so that we may understand His will and purpose in our lives, and not the other way around.

Third, they wanted a name for themselves. This desire was full of pride. In short they wanted to be God. They wanted to rule themselves. It was a rebellious act against God. This is a reminder that we must always submit to the rule of God.

I hope that our fascination of tall buildings nowadays is not connected with the intention of the people who were building the Tower of Babel. If it is so, then we await the wrath of God.

In every skyscraping goal that is being set, God should be in the center of it all. It does not follow that if our body can do it physically, it can be done alone without God.

“God's self-revelation is the only way that we can reach God. We have to pray that God will disclose Himself to us so that we may understand His will and purpose in our lives, and not the other way around.”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

In the January 2019 consultation by the Asia Pacific Baptist Federation in Melaka, Malaysia, Baptist theologians and church leaders were once again reminded of what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about.

There is a danger of what can be called as the “oversimplification of the Gospel.” We cannot oversimplify the Gospel and say, “You are a sinner. Christ died for you. You will be saved when you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and then your soul will go to heaven.” Yes, it is part of the Gospel, but not the complete Gospel.

When we go back to the first verse in the Gospel according to Mark, we are reminded of what the Gospel is. It says in Mark 1:1 “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This means that the whole story, the birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ is the whole Gospel. The whole Bible is actually the Gospel – the Good News.

Let me share three things that I learned from Dr. Timothy Hyunmo Lee of Korea Baptist Theological Seminary who spoke about the Holistic Understanding of Gospel.

First, the core of the Gospel is about obeying the Word of God and participate in the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. We should not stop the proclamation of the Gospel in the portion about the forgiveness of sins or having eternal life.

2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This means that when God has forgiven us, we are now to live righteous lives. Sometimes the “over focus” on heaven and eternal life has made us forget that we should obey the Word of God in the here and now.

Second, we cannot dichotomize or split a human being into soul, spirit, or flesh. We cannot say that God only cares for your

soul. He cares for us holistically even before the terms medicine and nursing were coined.

James said it best in James 2:15-17: “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is holistic. We must look after the spiritual and physical needs of people.

Third, although the Cross is central in the Gospel, we should not overlook the other parts of the Gospel. The whole story of Jesus, the whole Bible is actually the Gospel.

Jesus has declared that the kingdom of God has already entered human history. Like the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32), it started small but it continually grows and become bigger and bigger. So Christians must “...seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...” (Matthew 6:33).

Dr. Lee gave this us this summary: “The life of Jesus and the holistic gospel require us to live a holistic life. While maintaining the centrality of the Cross, one should not overlook the responsibilities in the world.”

May we all live the Gospel in our lives!

“The core of the Gospel is about obeying the Word of God and participate in the fulfilment of the kingdom of God.”

Healthy and Faithful Pastoral Leadership

The Convention Baptist Ministers Association (CBMA) held its 72nd Annual National Assembly on January 15-17, 2013 at University Church, Central Philippine University with the theme: “Healthy and Faithful Pastoral Leadership.”

What should the church do so that the pastor will remain healthy and faithful?

Let me use the acrostic of the word PASTOR:

P - Pray for your Pastor.

Please tell your pastor that you are praying for him or her.

Paul wrote, “Finally, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith.” (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2)

A – Assist your Pastor.

Are you volunteering your services to the church? These are the familiar reasons that pastors may not want to hear from members: “I am busy.”, “I am old for this.”, “I am young.”, and “I am not prepared.” Regardless of age and skill, each one can help the church in many ways.

S - Submit to the Leadership of your Pastor.

The Bible speaks about submission to spiritual authorities. Hebrews 13:17, “Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit.”

The Pastor as the leader does not mean that the Pastor is the boss, the chief or a dictator. The pastor is a servant leader, leading and guiding the members of the church.

T – Thank your Pastor.

When was the last time you thank your pastor?

Be specific when you thank your pastor. Thank your pastor for his or her sermon, ministry, and prayers. Please support your pastor financially. 1 Timothy 5:17-18 says, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.”

O – Open yourself to become a friend of your Pastor

Pastors need friends. We want to cultivate deep and lasting relationships. Pastors need your feedbacks and constructive criticisms.

R – Respect your Pastor

Pastors are also human beings. They make mistakes. Please give them space to make mistakes. Please respect our uniqueness and talents. Not all pastors are the same. Please do not expect one to act as a replica of another pastor.

Our pastors guide us in our spiritual journey. They are your support system if you need someone to talk to, a friend, or to help you pray. They need a support system too and as a family, you can and you must be a support to your pastor.

Being Up in a Down World

Central Philippine University celebrated the Christ Emphasis Week (CEW) on January 2013 with the theme “Being Up in a Down World.”

Our world is characterized as a “Down World.” There are a lot of things that are pulling us down.

What are these things? Let me use the word DOWN as our outline:

D – Directed by Pride

If our life is directed by pride, then this will pull us down. The Bible is reminding us that “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” (Proverbs 16:18). Let it be that we will always discern and pursue the will of God in our lives and not be blinded by our pride and worldly desires.

O – Order of Priorities is not clear

We will be in a crisis situation if we do not know our priorities. Each of us has different priorities. But let it be that at the top of it is doing the will of God – the impetus behind each priority.

W – War of the Spirit and the Flesh

There is an ongoing war inside us. This is what Paul said in Romans 7:15-19 – “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing.” Try to read that again until the message sinks in.

The dilemma sounds familiar, is it not? There might be a day that you have encountered those words or the same lines ran through your head. Who can pull us up in this quagmire or mixed-up situation? Only Jesus Christ.

N – No way! I will not do something!

The attitude of indifference is increasingly prevalent in our society. Many do not care because they think they will not be affected by it while majority stays with the status quo even if it is wrong “because that is how it has been before.” Let us fight this selfish and individualistic attitude.

Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, the CEW speaker for the Faculty and Staff gave a quote from Maimonides, a medieval Jewish thinker who said, “A single righteous act can tip the balance and make all the difference.”

Let it be that we will live lives that can make a difference in the lives of others. Let us remember what puts us DOWN and live a life that UPLIFTS others.

“We will be in a crisis situation if we do not know our priorities. Each of us has different priorities. But let it be that at the top of it is doing the will of God – the impetus behind each priority.”

Apart from Jesus, We are Nothing

Have you tried reading Genesis 1 together with John 1? If you have not done that yet, then it is high time that you should. These two chapters are so connected with one another that it will lead you to praise God!

What can we learn from these two chapters that we can apply in our lives?

First, like the Earth before, our lives are formless, empty, and dark without Jesus Christ.

John 1 tells that everything was made through Jesus. This tells us that apart from Jesus we are nothing. Indeed without Jesus, we are without purpose.

The word "Word" in Greek is *logos* which is the origin of *Logic*, as well as *-logy* which means "study" (as in *biology*). When you delve deeper, *logos* also means "meaning", "sense", "reason."

So, if Jesus is in our lives, we will find out the true meaning of our existence. The moment that we also surrender our five senses to God, everything will start to make sense. Jesus will also answer our questions and we will know the reason for our being.

Second, light is essential to having a life. The first command of God in Genesis is "Let there be light." John 1 also tells us that Jesus is the Light.

Science tells us that light is essential to the world around us. Without the Sun, it would be impossible to continue the existence of all life on Earth. The importance of light leads us to why John 1 is connected to Genesis 1. Jesus as the Light gives life to all people in this world. This means that apart from Jesus, we will have no life at all.

A lot of people are still in darkness. We are tasked by Jesus to let our light shine to people. This means to let Jesus be seen in our lives. In doing so, we are piercing the darkness so that the light will shine through.

Be passionate! Be loving!

On January 27, 2020, I woke up with tragic news that seems so unreal. I was telling myself that it might just be fake news. But then news agencies reported. It is real. Kobe Bryant, an athlete who has influenced me a lot during my varsity years, and later as a coach and trainer, has passed away due to a helicopter crash. What made it worse is that his daughter, Gigi, died with him along with seven (7) others.

Indeed, James 4:14 is very true. It says, "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." What can we learn from this?

First, we must be passionate in everything that we do. We do not know if we will still be here tomorrow. So, we must give our all in fulfilling our responsibilities.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:16 that we should let our light shine to all people. Jesus is referring to our faith that should produce good works, thus, giving glory to God. Are we shining examples in our workplace? How about in the community and in our family?

Second, we should know what is important and make it our priority. At the end of the day, we must ask ourselves: Why are we doing what we are doing. Is it *for what* or *for whom*?

Jesus was also asked about what is important. Matthew, Mark, and Luke recorded His answer of what should be given priority. In Mark 12:30-31 Jesus said that our first priority is to love God with everything that we have, and we should love others as we love ourselves.

So in every action that we make we must ask ourselves, "Is it loving to God? Is it loving to others? Is it loving to myself?" If we have answered truthfully that it is indeed loving, then let's do it.

All our lives will come to an end. We do not know when. Be passionate! Be loving!

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

When we are in the midst of pain, suffering and tragedy, we dare to ask the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” If God has a wonderful plan for me, why is it that these bad things are happening to me?

In 1981, Harold S. Kushner wrote a book entitled “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Let me quote some of his words,

“Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen to us. They do not happen for any good reason which would cause us to accept them willingly. But we can give them a meaning. We can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them.

The question we should be asking is not, “Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?” That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be “Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?”

How then should we respond to the bad things that are happening to us?

First, let us still believe that God has a purpose for our life.

Pain is a great teacher. We can learn a lot from the negative things that happen to us. Let us see problems as lessons and crises as opportunities.

Roman 5:3-4 says, “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

Second, let us continue in doing what is right.

When something bad happens, we are tempted to abandon the Christian way of life. We tend to take shortcuts and divert to ungodly ways. We also observe that the righteous suffer while evil people seem to prosper in this world.

Let us neither be resentful nor retaliate. Ecclesiastes 8:11-12 says, “When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people’s hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong. Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him.”

Third, let us affirm our faith in God in confusing times.

2 Corinthians 1:9 says, “This happened so we might learn to trust, not in ourselves, but in God.”

We need to be reminded that there are a lot of things in this world that we do not understand. When we can only see the ugly cocoon, God has already seen the beautiful butterfly. God is telling us to trust Him.

Bad things happen to good people, so as good things. It is not on how bad they are, but on how we react towards it, that matters.

“We need to be reminded that there are a lot of things in this world that we do not understand. When we can only see the ugly cocoon, God has already seen the beautiful butterfly. God is telling us to trust Him.”

Turn a Pain into a Blessing

It is a reality in life that we will surely encounter pain. Be it through death, persecution, bullying, losing a game, a breakup, or separation.

Let us look at the early Christians on how they dealt with persecution. We can learn how to turn persecutions into blessings.

Acts 8:1 tells us that a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem and the Christians were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

What did they do? God gave them a new beginning. We can see how they answered the persecution in Acts 8:4. The verse says, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”

How many times have our pains become blessings later on? Let us be clear. We do not ask for pain and persecution to come to us so that we can learn something. No. That is wrong! What is right is we reflect on what happened and give meaning to it.

I have a friend who was a drug dealer before. When he was imprisoned, he met Jesus through a prison ministry. He is now a pastor.

I also have a friend who shot his commanding officer. He was also imprisoned. Inside his cell, he met Jesus through a prison ministry. He is now a pastor.

Both of them were my students. I asked them if they think it was God’s will that they will be imprisoned. Both of them said no. It was not God’s will. It was their own will why they were there. But they said that the grace of God did not let them go. Even inside the prison cell, God worked in and through their lives. God gave them a second chance.

This was the same as the first century Christians. They did not see it as God's will when they were persecuted. They did not

blame God. They turned their persecution into a gateway to spread the Gospel.

Be conscious of what is happening in your life. You will surely realize how God is making a new beginning in your life. Identify these pains. Surrender it to God. Pray that it will become blessings.

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Centralite

Centralians from all over the world gathered at the campus for the CPU Grand Alumni Homecoming from February 4-9, 2020. Here is the reflection that I delivered during the Fellowship Brunch of Alumni Chapter Presidents on February 5, 2020.

Have you ever made a deep reflection of our CPU seal? It was designed by Rev. Dr. Francis Rose in 1923 when Jaro Industrial School became the Central Philippine School. A year later the name was changed again to Central Philippine College. It was in 1953 when the college became Central Philippine University.

Since Dr. Rose was a missionary and a pastor, he embedded his message in the seal so that it will be seen as long as there is CPU.

I would like you to focus on the light that emanates from CPU. Before we were called Centralians, our first name was actually Centralite.

The challenge for us can be found in Matthew 5:16 which says "...Let your light shine before all people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

If we are the light that comes from Central, then what should we bring?

First, we should bring Scientia.

Scientia is most often translated as knowledge but as realized from the writings of Rose, what he really meant was Science. Knowledge is just amassing facts and figures while science is about the pursuit of new things, the discovery, and the invention of things that can help in the betterment of mankind.

Centralians should not just be receptors of information but givers of new information. We are trailblazers in the field of research, technology, and many more.

Second, we should bring Fides.

Fides is faith. It is not just faith in anyone but faith in Jesus Christ. We should bring Jesus wherever we may go. Let us remember that the missionaries came here in 1900. They left their homes to bring the Gospel. We are the products of a mission school. Thus, we have to be part of doing missions.

The “rays” coming from Jaro, Iloilo City, Panay Island are numbered twelve (12). Why do you think is this so? Since Rose was a pastor, the reason could have been theological in nature. As of this time, there are no extant sources to explain this. But in all probability, the 12 rays may signify the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ. As such, CPU must continue to be a disciple of Jesus doing the mission of proclaiming the Gospel at every opportunity.

Third, we should live out our vision of EXCEL (Exemplary Christian Education for Life).

The keyword here is Exemplary. We can teach any subject or even offer Christian Education but it is not the same if we are not examples. We must be exemplary Christians worthy to be emulated. And this should be for life.

Let us all continue the legacy of our Alma Mater.

“We can teach any subject or even offer Christian Education but it is not the same if we are not examples. We must be exemplary Christians worthy to be emulated. And this should be for life.”

Where should I Put my Hope?

On February 5, 2019, Chinese New Year, we greeted our Chinese friends a happy new year. But with this celebration comes certain practices that if you wear this certain color or put this certain thing in an area in your house, or if you are born in a certain year, you will either become lucky or unlucky.

That certain color or thing is probably good in aesthetics or as a decoration, but it should never be an object in which you put the destiny of your life into.

Paul warned Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:7 (ESV) “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness.” Timothy was in a certain context which was full of practices that if you follow it, your life will be blest by the gods. Paul told Timothy not to put his hope on those practices but to put his hope in the Living God, Jesus Christ.

Back in the Old Testament, Moses warned the Israelites in Deuteronomy 18:10-12 (ESV) that “There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you.”

Why is telling a fortune or interpreting omens among other things in these verses an abomination to the Lord? This is detestable in the sight of God because you have transferred your faith into these practices or objects rather than in God.

So the next time you come across your “fortune” or “destiny” in a newspaper or what your life will be if you are born in this year, or what color or object is lucky, ask yourself a question: should I put my hope in these things or in Jesus Christ, the Creator of this world?

God's Criteria on Choosing a Leader

Although the campaign period started on February 12, 2019 and March 29, 2019 for national and local candidates respectively, the candidates' posters and tarpaulins became publicly available earlier during the May 2019 elections. This event triggers us to think: how to choose our next leaders?

Does the Bible provide a guideline of what is a good leader? Indeed, there are many examples and principles that we can get from the Bible. God said to Moses - "A king must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself, or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them... He must not take many wives or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold" (Deuteronomy 17:16-17).

Looking at it closer, God's criteria is that a leader should be:

First, a leader is someone who will not repeat past mistakes and will always pursue an agenda that gives freedom to people. This is what it is meant by not returning the people back to Egypt, a symbol of slavery and military arrogance.

Second, a leader is someone who is faithful and committed to the will of God. The key here is that the leader's heart shall be strong enough not to be led astray by a woman, man, thing, group of people, or another agenda. The commitment of the leader should foremost be on God.

Third, a leader is someone who does not use position or power to acquire material possessions. The kings in the Bible were not exempted by the temptation of having many horses, silver, or gold. In the same way, this can still be caught among who-ought-to-be-leaders of today.

The Bible is telling our leaders to be honest and transparent. Let us ponder upon this, every election time.

Thrive

The theme for the SY 2018-2019 Second Semester's Christ Emphasis Week (CEW) celebration was "Thrive." To thrive is to prosper, to blossom, or to grow vigorously. It is the opposite of decline, wither, or to stagnate.

In John 10:10 Jesus tells us that "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." What does it mean to THRIVE?

T – Trust in Jesus alone. This means that all others are thieves and will just destroy our lives. Jesus is the only one that can give us life.

H – Hear and do the Word of God. We cannot thrive without hearing and doing what is in the Bible. We must read the Bible and pray that God will empower us to follow the commands of Jesus. The commands of Jesus are all counter-nature and are impossible to do without the grace of God.

R – Release forgiveness. Our lives will surely wither if we continue to live a life full of scars and bitterness. Jesus has forgiven us of our sins. He has even commanded us to forgive those who sinned against us. A forgiven life is a forgiving life.

I – Invite the Holy Spirit. When we grow in our relationship with Christ, our lives would show the fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one working in us that we may produce "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." We have to take note that Paul used the singular "fruit" and not the plural "fruits." This means that all that Paul wrote is just in one fruit.

V – Vital vitamins for growth must be taken. We will surely decline rapidly without the vital vitamins that our body needs. This is the same with our spiritual life. We have to pray, read the Bible, have fellowship with other believers, go to church, spread the Gospel, and disciple others. These are all vital things that each Christian must faithfully do.

E – Exercise our faith in Jesus Christ. To thrive is to be healthy. And we cannot be healthy if we do not have proper exercise. In other words, our spiritual lives can only thrive if we vigorously exercise our Christian faith daily. We cannot simply choose to exercise every Sunday. To be a Christian is an every-second commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

“We cannot thrive without hearing and doing what is in the Bible. We must read the Bible and pray that God will empower us to follow the commands of Jesus.”

“Our spiritual lives can only thrive if we vigorously exercise our Christian faith daily. We cannot simply choose to exercise every Sunday.”

Reconciliation

No family is exempted from conflicts. Some have held grudges up to their last breath. Some have reconciled before they died. There are many stories in the Bible that talk about family feuds and how they worked it out. One great example of reconciliation and restorative justice is the story of two brothers -- Esau and Jacob. They were the sons of Isaac and Rebecca.

The conflict of the twin brothers came about when Jacob, with the connivance of his mother, tricked Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau, the first born.

The reaction of Esau is recorded in Genesis 27:41 “Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, *“The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”*”

Because of fear, Jacob ran away. From then on Jacob was always on the run. Until one day he learned that he would cross paths with his brother Esau. The night before they met, Jacob had a wrestling match with God (Genesis 32:24). That was the encounter that changed his life. What lessons can we learn here?

First, we cannot always run away from your problem. There will come a time that we have to face it.

When God touched the hip of Jacob, he consequently became injured. God was probably telling him that you cannot run away now. You have to face Esau.

Second, we have to confess our sins in order for us to be forgiven. This is the reason why God asked Jacob, “What is your name?” God needed him to confess. Jacob's name means “the supplanter.” He confessed his sins and God changed his name into Israel.

When we confess our sins and receive the forgiveness of God, we will also be changed by God. We, too, like Jacob can become a new person with a God-given purpose. Just imagine how

the nation Israel came about -- from a supplanter to a planter of a new nation.

Because of Jacob's confession, and for not running away from his problem, God saw to it that he was reconciled with his brother, and then with his father. The following two verses are vivid illustrations of the reconciliation that happened:

Genesis 33:4 “But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.”

Genesis 35:29 “Then he (Isaac) breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.”

We, too, can be reconciled with our family members when we confess of our sins, and address our conflicts. It is never too late and we do not need to wait for near-death experiences to do this.

“When we confess our sins and receive the forgiveness of God, we will also be changed by God. We, too, like Jacob can become a new person with a God-given purpose.”

Sudden Change

In 2013, we are in an airport waiting for our flight back home. We dutifully went to the gate number which was assigned for our aircraft. All of a sudden, our gate number changed. This made us walk a long way to another gate. We were grumbling as we board the plane. Obviously, what we wanted was for the plan to have gone accordingly.

Life is like this experience. As we go through our lives, we will encounter sudden changes which will make us uncomfortable and sometimes painful. This leaves us confused, resentful or angry at the situation.

Hebrews 13 assures us that God will never leave us nor forsake us. So, we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

Yes, even though there are sudden changes that are happening to us, we are secured that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He will be true to his promises to us.

There are three things that we can reflect on change:

First, let us accept the reality that there will be and always will be changes that we will encounter in this life. We are not in control of everything. When we deny this reality, we are in trouble.

Second, let us be prepared to adjust to the changes. Those who cannot adjust will become bitter and will blame anyone and anything. Be resilient. Oftentimes, it is not the circumstance, but how we react towards it, that makes our lives miserable.

Third, let us still plan ahead even though we know that there were still be changes. Let it be that we will not be paralyzed by the fear of change. When a high likelihood of change is expected, plan. This is how we manage risks.

Amidst the many changes in our lives, let us hold on to the promise of God that He will never change.

Journey On!

When I go out of town to speak in churches and organizations, I usually ask directions from people who have been there. Sometimes, I also consult an online map. Along the way, my wife, Hermely, acts as the navigator. We often get there on time and on target. But there are times that we got lost and have to stop and ask for additional directions.

Our Christian life is a journey of faith. Scott Peck calls this as “A Journey to a Road Less Traveled.” What directions do we need as we journey through life? Hebrews 12:1-2 gives us the following directions.

First, let us travel with companions. It is hard to travel alone.

v.1 says “...we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...” Our co-travelers are both unseen and can be seen.

Many Christians have died but through their legacy of faith, they are still speaking. They are our unseen co-travelers. Our visible co-travelers are those who are beside us who remember the biblical mandate of “bearing one another’s burden.”

Second, let us get rid of everything that gets in the way.

v.1 “...let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us...” A seasoned traveler will tell us to always travel light and pack only the necessary things.

Let us discard the bad attitudes and negative things that hold us back in our Christian life. They are excess luggage that slow us down in our trip.

Third, let us journey with determination coupled with faith.

Determination itself is not enough. It must be coupled with faith so that we will not falter in our journey. Paul once complained to the Galatians (5:7): “you were running well; what hindered you from obeying the truth.” They lacked faith.

Dr. Johnny V. Gumban once told our class, “When you cannot see the bottom of the water, it may not be deep but might be muddy.” “You must have faith in your faith.”

Fourth, let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

When we look at people, we will only become disappointed and discouraged. Hebrews 12:2 reminds us to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Let us continue in our Christian journey with faith in God.

“Let us discard the bad attitudes and negative things that hold us back in our Christian life. They are excess luggage that slow us down in our trip.”

“Determination itself is not enough. It must be coupled with faith so that we will not falter in our journey.”

Remembering Dr. Rex D. Drilon

Every February, Central Philippine University celebrates Dr. Rex D. Drilon Day in honor of the First Filipino President of the university.

Let me share a brief reflection that I delivered during the memorial service on February 21, 2013.

There are three things that Dr. Rex D. Drilon has taught us:

First, we must walk with a purpose.

Proverbs 19:21 says, “Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails.”

Dr. Drilon is remembered as someone who would always say, “Centralians, walk with a purpose.” He is telling us to always seek God's will in our lives.

Dr. Drilon wrote, “The World Outside is greedy, parasitic, deceitful, selfish, slanderous, quarrelsome – also kind, generous, noble, truthful, if you know how to reach hard enough beyond the superficialities. You will be discouraged at first, but you need not be. For with your training at CPU, you are theoretically armed with the weapons of Christian character and Christian liberal-minded intellect that can make the difference in the eternal contest between the forces of darkness and the forces of light.”

Second, we must learn to listen.

The prophet Elijah was reminded by God that He has given us two ears and one mouth. God was not in the earthquake, not in the fire, and not in a howling wind. Elijah had to really listen because God was in a still small voice.

Dr. Drilon said, “The burden of my message is simple. In this day when the country is on fire, we must talk less and do more. The university world, as well as the outside world, is in terrible agony because we talk too much and do too little. Everybody is

talking and nobody is listening. We must learn to listen so we can cure ourselves.”

Third, we must always remember the CPU badge.

“The CPU badge that you will carry all your life long is a badge of honor... You tarnish that badge and you tarnish yourself and your precious heritage. You live up to it and you place all that is best on a pedestal for the world to see and perhaps to emulate...

We who remain on the campus will watch you make your mark in the world – a world that will test you by means fair and foul as to the kind of man or woman Central Philippine University has prepared you to be.

Stand fast by your Christian principles..., but in doing so do not be self-righteous. Self-righteous people are not trusted and they do not go very far.

When you do all these things – and more – you will be the salt of the earth wherever you will be and whatever you do – big or small. Remember – always remember your CPU badge!”

We thank God for the words of wisdom of Dr. Rex D. Drilon.

“The prophet Elijah was reminded by God that He has given us two ears and one mouth. God was not in the earthquake, not in the fire, and not in a howling wind. Elijah had to really listen because God was in a still small voice.”

God uplifts the neglected

March is International Women's Month. This celebration is significant because for a long time since the Old and New Testament, society has largely been patriarchal.

There is a story in the Bible about a woman, named Leah, who was forced to be married to a man, Jacob, who is not attracted to her. Jacob was in love with Rachel, the younger sister. Jacob worked for 7 years to get the hand of Rachel. On the day of the wedding, a heavily veiled woman married Jacob. He thought she was Rachel. In the morning, after the wedding night, Jacob just found out that the woman was Leah.

In this story we can see that Laban, the father of Leah, was the one who made the decision for her life. We cannot imagine how Leah felt. She was forced to marry someone whom she does not love. In our modern understanding, she was “raped” during the wedding night. All her life starting the wedding day was filled with the feeling of being neglected and unloved. But God did something wonderful through the life of Leah.

Leah had 6 sons - Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah. Out of her offspring, two of them had an incredibly significant role in the life of the nation Israel: Levi and Judah.

The tribe of Levi or the Levites was set apart to serve as priests and to perform functions for the religious life of Israel. Perhaps the most popular descendant of Levi is Moses, one of the most revered leader of the Jews who led them out of Egypt. It was through Moses that Israel had the Ten Commandments, the Law, the Tabernacle and many more.

On the other hand, the descendants of Judah had a prominent role in the leadership of the nation of Israel and in Old Testament prophecy. The most popular person who is from the tribe of Judah was King David. And as the prophecy foretold, the Messiah will come from the tribe of Judah. The genealogy of Jesus clearly states

that He is from that Tribe. In Revelation, Jesus is also called the Lion of Judah.

The lesson for us is that God will uplift those who are unloved and rejected. God will also do wonderful things through them. If you feel the same (unloved and rejected), then submit yourself to God and pray that you will be used by God to fulfill His will in this world.

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Let us Tell the Stories of Women

March 8 is International Women's Day. It was in 1977 when the United Nations began celebrating this day. What can we learn from the Bible with regards to the stories of women?

God did not allow that the stories of women will be missed in the Bible. It is up to us to know these stories and learn from them.

Without a doubt, the Bible was written from a patriarchal perspective. God is described in the Old Testament as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Using another lens, we can also call God the God of Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. Their stories of faith in God are also written in the Bible.

In the New Testament, the stories of women were also prominent. If you look at it a little closer, you can see that the writers had the chance to erase the stories of women, but they did not. The Gospels were written about 30 years after the events happened. The writers could have changed the narrative, but they chose not to. This non-omission actually gave credence that what was written were true stories.

The writers could have written that the men were the first to know about the resurrection of Jesus. But they did not. No matter how shameful that may be, they told the truth that it was two Marys who were the first to know and told everyone about it. They could have also written that Jesus was financially supported by men only. But they did not. They wrote the truth that Jesus was financially supported by Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna.

The book of Acts could have omitted that the first person who accepted Jesus Christ in Europe was a woman named Lydia. But Luke did not do that. It was the truth. Phoebe was also mentioned by Paul to be treated with respect befitting a saint. Against all odds, she was the one who hand-carried the letter of Paul to the Christians in Rome. Paul entrusted it to her and because of that, we have the book of Romans to read now.

The Bible is full of stories of men, as well as women, whom God used mightily. God did not allow the stories of women to be hidden. It is up to us to seek it out and learn from it.

“In the New Testament, the stories of women were also prominent. If you look at it a little closer, you can see that the writers had the chance to erase the stories of women, but they did not. The Gospels were written about 30 years after the events happened. The writers could have changed the narrative, but they chose not to. This non-omission actually gave credence that what was written were true stories.”

Lessons from the Sermon on the Mount

In Galilee, there is a place called the Mt. Beatitudes. Bible scholars have identified it as the place where Jesus preached what is called as the Sermon of the Mount (Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6). Before I went to Israel, I cannot imagine how can Jesus preach and be heard by the people. Seeing the actual place, I can now see how Jesus did it. Jesus utilized the wind coming from the Sea of Galilee. He was on top of the mountain, his back on Lake Tiberias or Lake Gennesaret (other names of the Sea of Galilee), and his voice was carried to the listeners.

The Sermon on the Mount is called by scholars as the ethics of the kingdom of God. If there are a few chapters that you want to read first in the Bible, then these would be it. The Sermon includes the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and imperative commands to be followed. Let me cite three lessons.

First, bear in mind that in the Beatitudes, the key element in receiving the blessings in the second part is in the beginning.

For example, we can never receive the blessing of seeing God if we are not pure in heart. We can never be called sons and daughters of God if we are not peacemakers. We can never be filled if we do not hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Second, the Lord's Prayer is teaching us that the heart of every prayer is about seeking the will of God and doing it.

Jesus is warning us not to follow the style of hypocrites who pray but do not practice what they prayed for, or to be like the pagans who babble a lot of words. We have to pray earnestly for God sees what is in our heart.

Third, the Sermon on the Mount contains commands that should be followed. These imperative words are not mere ideals, but every Christian must do it.

Jesus is expecting that when He said, “You are the light of the world”, “You are the salt of the Earth” or “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”, we have to follow it.

Let us continue to read and meditate on the Sermon on the Mount.

“We can never receive the blessing of seeing God if we are not pure in heart. We can never be called sons and daughters of God if we are not peacemakers. We can never be filled if we do not hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

“Jesus is warning us not to follow the style of hypocrites who pray but do not practice what they prayed for, or to be like the pagans who babble a lot of words. We have to pray earnestly for God sees what is in our heart.”

Have a Break or You will Break

Having a break in our modern society is a luxury. Oftentimes, those who are taking a break are frowned upon because they are perceived to be non-productive. But recently there is a House Bill. No. 4721 waiting to become a law. In essence this bill is about the “right to disconnect” from work-related communications like text, email, or messages after office hours so that an employee will have the uninterrupted time to rest and be with their family. Indeed, having a break is essential to one's health.

Recently a UK study from the Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health noted that men and women who work on weekends may be more likely to develop depression. This means that not having a break is affecting the mental health of workers. There is also a growing concern that workers are converting their vacation leave credits into cash.

Did Jesus have a break? Yes, Jesus found time to rest. Let us learn from Jesus.

First, amidst our busy schedule, we have to take a nap.

In Mark 4:35-41 we can see that Jesus slept while they were having a boat ride from one side of the Sea of Galilee into another. If you have been in the Sea of Galilee or Lake Kinnereth, the other side is visible because it is near. This means that Jesus planned for a short nap if He was not interrupted by a storm that He calmed. This is the same with us - take a nap from time to time during the day to be rejuvenated again.

Second, find time to be alone and reflect.

In Matthew 14:13 and 23 we can see that Jesus intentionally left the large crowd to be alone to reflect and to pray. In this highly connected world, we need the time to be alone to think, to meditate, to pray, to read or to simply have a “me time”. This time will surely have a great impact in our productivity.

Third, find time to visit places and friends.

When reading the Gospels, we sometimes think that the places there are so near to one another. Not so. Even in a bus, it would take several hours to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem. This means that during New Testament times, it was an exceedingly long travel. This gives an idea that Jesus deliberately travelled to attend a wedding in Cana, to visit His friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, and attend festivals in Jerusalem. How about us? Are we planning a trip in order to take a break?

Do it now or else you will break.

“In this highly connected world, we need the time to be alone to think, to meditate, to pray, to read or to simply have a “me time”. This time will surely have a great impact in our productivity.”

Vent Out and still Trust God

With the order of government officials to follow the enhanced community quarantine, and the pleas of frontliners and medical personnel to stay at home, people are resorting to a lot of things to occupy the mind. Some are reading, some are into binge-watching, some are gardening, some are browsing the internet and social media, while some are taking pictures and videos.

Indeed, aside from the deadly threat of COVID-19 novel coronavirus, another threat is on maintaining sanity. There is panic buying in some countries, some have inefficient government services, and some are still apathetic. But slowly, fear is creeping in. Fear has the ability to cripple us.

In Psalm 13, King David wrote some very sorrowful words. What can we learn from this psalm that could help maintain our sanity in these trying times?

First, it is okay to vent our disappointments or anger towards God.

We have this notion that we cannot express what we truly feel towards God. We keep telling ourselves not to question God. But David, in this psalm and many of his psalms, is teaching us that God can accept whatever we vent out. Venting what is in our minds and our hearts will help us maintain our sanity.

David wrote what he felt. It was a great release for him to write down these complaints - "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

In these difficult times, Psalm 13 is encouraging us to vent what we feel towards God. Try it. It is liberating.

Second, we must hold on to God's unfailing love for this will surely come to pass.

David was able to hold on to God because of what happened in the past. History was on the side of God. In spite of what was happening in the life of David during the time that he wrote Psalm 13, he was comforted by his trust in God's unfailing love because God has already proven it to him. David probably remembered how a shepherd boy defeated the giant Goliath, or how he became a king. And when he reviewed his past, he began to sing God's goodness.

Another recipe given by David to us to maintain our sanity during difficult times is to look back in the past and count how many times God has been faithful to us. When we do that, it will surely strengthen our trust in God. We will someday look back and say, God was with us during the pandemic.

You can talk to God about how you feel. Let us continue to hold on to God. May God bless us all!

“Another recipe given by David to us to maintain our sanity during difficult times is to look back in the past and count how many times God has been faithful to us. When we do that, it will surely strengthen our trust in God. We will someday look back and say, God was with us during the pandemic.”

Pray for more Opportunities to Serve the Lord

Before Jesus was betrayed, he went to the Mt. of Olives, in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Nobody heard his prayer because he was the only one there. But why was it recorded in the Bible? The only explanation is that Jesus shared his prayer to his disciples. He probably shared this prayer after his resurrection. If Jesus shared the content of His prayer, then we can say that it is a particularly important prayer.

What principles can we learn from the prayer of Jesus Christ?

First, Jesus is teaching us through his prayer that we should be involved in what is happening around us, and not run away from responsibilities.

John 17:15 says, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.”

Are we praying to be involved? Or are we praying not to be involved?

What are some of our reasons not to be involved?

1. I am old. Think of Noah and Abraham. They were senior citizens.
2. I am young. Think of King David and King Joash.
3. I am small in height. Think of Zachaeus.
4. I am woman. Think of Mary, Mary Magdalena, Martha and those who supported Jesus financially.
5. I am not educated. Think of the majority of disciples.
6. I am not a good speaker. Think of Moses.
7. I am busy. Think of Paul.

We can have many reasons, but all of these reasons can be answered by the many stories in the Bible. This is not because of us. It is only through the grace of God.

Second, Jesus is teaching us through His prayer that in whatever situation we are in, we should not lose sight of our identity as Christians.

John 17:14 says, “I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.”

We have been in many situations that our Christian identity was challenged. How did you act? There will still be many situations that it will happen. Are you going to compromise your faith? Do people in your workplace know that you are a Christian?

Third, Jesus is teaching us through his prayer that we have to be courageous in spreading the Gospel because He has prayed for us and to all would-be disciples.

John 17:20 says, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message...”

This prayer of Jesus was firstly for his disciples. And then it included the next generation of disciples until it reached us, and it will continue to reach the next generation of Christians until Jesus will come again.

How does it feel now that Jesus has prayed for you and me? It is a great feeling when someone tells you that he or she is praying for you. It is even a greater feeling to know that Jesus has already prayed for us.

So, when you are praying for a specific person whom you want to share Jesus with, be assured that Jesus has prayed already for that person. Have the courage to share the Gospel to that person.

CROSS

During Lenten Season, we are drawn to the symbols of Christianity, especially the cross where Jesus Christ died.

The Bridgeway Dictionary explains that crucifixion was a form of torture and execution used by the Romans, not by the Jews. Israelites of Old Testament times executed their criminals by stoning them. After an execution, they hung the body of the victim on a tree as a sign to all that he was under the curse and judgment of God.

The Jews considered that Jesus' hanging on the cross had the same meaning as hanging on a tree. They considered, therefore, that he was under the curse of God. Actually, Jesus did bear the curse of God, but he did so on behalf of sinners, not because of any sin he had committed.

What is the meaning of the cross?

C - Christ died for us

When we focus only on the death of Jesus, we will miss the connection that led to his death. In other words, the death of Jesus can only be understood in the light of his life and ministry.

In fact, the bulk of the gospels is about the life and ministry of Jesus. This means that the death of Jesus is an affirmation of his message. He was committed to his message even up to death.

R - Redeemed by Christ

Redemption is synonymous to the word ransom in the Bible. It was used in the context of a person being freed from the bondage of slavery. The cross symbolizes our freedom from the bondage of sin.

O - Obedience to the will of God

Jesus was tempted not to suffer and die in the cross. He prayed, “if it is possible, let this cup pass over me.” But amidst this temptation, Jesus declared in his prayer, “not my will but thy will be done.”

S - Saved by the grace of God

The cross is a reminder for all of us of the cost of God’s grace. God sent His only begotten Son to save us from damnation. We do not deserve it. But because of God’s great love, He gave us a wonderful gift. Let us be humbled with this reality.

S - Sent out as a disciple who always carry a cross

As a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, He reminds us that as we go out to this world, we should deny ourselves and pick up our crosses. This cross is not our personal burden but the burden of others in which we could have refused yet carry it. This is the same with Jesus Christ. What He carried was not His burden but our own.

May we be reminded of the meaning of the cross all year long.

“When we focus only on the death of Jesus, we will miss the connection that led to his death. In other words, the death of Jesus can only be understood in the light of his life and ministry.”

We are Redeemed by Christ

As Christians, we are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. What is the meaning of redemption?

There are three Greek words associated to the word “redemption.”

First, agorazo. This word means “to purchase in the marketplace.” This is often to the act of buying a slave. Jesus purchased us from the bondage of slavery.

Matthew 20:28 is telling us that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many.

Second, exagorazo. This word denotes that redemption is a process from one state to another state. This means that Christ freed us from the bondage of the law to have the freedom of a new life in Him.

Galatians 3:13 says that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

Third, lutroo. This word indicates the release after a payment of a price. The price for our release from sin is the precious blood of Jesus.

Acts 20:28 says that Jesus bought us with his own blood. 1 Corinthians 6:20 also reminds us that we were bought with a price.

This reminds us that our redemption was not an automatic, one-click solution. It was a sacrifice to release us from our sins.

“The price for our release from sin is the precious blood of Jesus.”

Freedom Day

Every March 18 is Freedom Day in Panay Island.

What about our freedom in Jesus Christ? If we are free, what are the things that God expects us to do?

Let us use the word FREE as our outline:

F – Fight for freedom

We can see a lot of situations, systems, or people that enslaves us. We must make it our mission to fight for freedom. Our freedom in Jesus Christ should not make us complacent, instead it should motivate us to get away from our comfort zones and help others.

R – Reconcile broken relationships

The horizontal and vertical lines of the cross should continue to remind us that freedom in Jesus Christ involves reconciliation to God, our fellows, and the whole of creation.

E – Engage in the upliftment of the marginalized

There are a lot of people who are living in the margins. They are not recognized, frowned upon, and simply ignored. Let us do something for them in our own field of endeavors. This can be a big and daunting task. But let us just start small.

E – Expect the eternal freedom

Our freedom in Jesus Christ should give us hope that there is life after our life here on Earth. This hope is our driving force to live as free people and to live as servants of God (1 Peter 2:16).

Jesus has given us his mission statement in Luke 4:18-19 -
“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom

for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

As freed people, we must always advocate freedom wherever we are.

“We can see a lot of situations, systems, or people that enslaves us. We must make it our mission to fight for freedom. Our freedom in Jesus Christ should not make us complacent, instead it should motivate us to get away from our comfort zones and help others.”

“Our freedom in Jesus Christ should give us hope that there is life after our life here on Earth. This hope is our driving force to live as free people and to live as servants of God.”

HOLY

The Holy Week is primarily not a time to have a vacation but more importantly, a time for self-reflection.

As you reflect on the last week of Jesus' life, you may use the word HOLY as your outline:

H - Hear the message of God.

The Prophet Elijah is reminding us that we need to be still and listen to the gentle whisper of God.

O - Offer our life for the cause of Christ

Let us not be indifferent. We must get involved. Martin Luther King Jr. posed a great challenge when he said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter."

L - Live an exemplary life

Let us be consistent with our Christian living. Let it be that we will hold ourselves accountable with what we say and do.

Y - Yearn to do more

Jesus is reminding us to do the "extra mile." Let us continue to find more ways and means to serve God and the people.

May our reflection bring about change in ourselves and a deeper commitment to our Lord and Savior.

"Jesus is reminding us to do the "extra mile." Let us continue to find more ways and means to serve God and the people."

Return to the Lord

On March 2020, the Philippines was under Enhanced Community Quarantine. This was because of the pandemic brought by COVID-19. During nighttime, there is the sound of sirens signifying that it is now curfew time. Those who violated the curfew were penalized in different ways.

In Joel 2, there is a special kind of siren. It says, "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill." God was telling the Prophet Joel about an apocalyptic event -- "the day of the Lord" or better known as Judgment Day. On this day all will make an account before God.

Joel 2:6 to 9 speaks about the situation before Judgment Day -- "At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defenses without breaking ranks. They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into the houses; like thieves, they enter through the windows."

We do not want to speculate what it is. Some say that it is the description of the COVID-19 coronavirus that is spreading now. You may see it that way if you want to. The point of Prophet Joel is there will be a Judgment Day. If this is it, then what should we do?

God is the one who instructed Prophet Joel on what should we do. Here are God's instructions:

First, return to the Lord with all your heart with fasting and weeping and mourning (Joel 2:12). We must cry hard and confess our shortcomings.

Second, we must tend our hearts and not our garments (Joel 2:13). Our confession and repentance must be real and not ritualistic.

Third, we must gather the people, consecrate ourselves, and worship God (Joel 2:15 to 16). We may not do it physically now because of the Enhanced Community Quarantine but we can do so online. The quarantine may be an impediment, but it should not stop us from doing Bible Study as a family, and also online with the local church to which we belong to.

Fourth, let those who minister before the Lord lead us in crying for mercy (Joel 2:17). Let this be the time that our spiritual leaders will rise up and lead the people to repentance and worship the one true God.

Prophet Joel wrote that when we do this, "Who knows? God may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing" (Joel 2:14). Why? Because "the Lord our God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Joel 2:13b).

“Return to the Lord with all your heart with fasting and weeping and mourning (Joel 2:12). We must cry hard and confess our shortcomings.”

Judgment Day

One of the teachings of Jesus, after He entered Jerusalem, was about judgment day. In that time, God will "separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left." You can read this teaching in Matthew 25:31 to 46.

Upon reading it, one has the impression that Jesus hated goats and only prefers the sheep. But upon a closer look, you will see that Jesus only likened the process of separating those who accept Him or reject Him to the meticulous process that the shepherd is doing to the sheep and the goat. A shepherd during the time of Jesus has to protect his herd. If there are many male goats, then chances are that the shepherd will not be provided enough milk. If there are more goats than the sheep, then chances are that the sheep will suffer because the goats are more voracious eater than the sheep. So, this is what Jesus meant by judgment day. Jesus never hated goats!

Judgment Day, as described by Jesus, is a day of many surprises. As one pastor once said, "You might be surprised that those who you expected to enter heaven will not be able to, those that you do not expect to enter will be able to enter, and worst, you cannot enter." This simply means that it is in God's hands and not ours. All that we need to do is to follow what God says in the Bible.

What did Jesus say that we should do? These verses are very appropriate in what is happening around us now. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has shown how generous people can become and it has also sadly shown how people can still be corrupt even in the midst of a crisis.

Jesus said that the righteous are those who do the following:

First, those who give something to eat to the hungry.

Second, those who give something to drink to the thirsty.

Third, those who invite people into their homes though they are strangers.

Fourth, those who give clothes to the needy.

Fifth, those who look after the sick.

Sixth, those who come to visit the prisoners.

Jesus was noticeably clear here. He said that those who do not turn their faith into righteous actions will hear these words -- "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

These people will also make a protest. They will say "When? We did not know!" But the protest will come to no avail someday.

Jesus has already told the when and how. Let us take this into our hearts. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

We do not wait for the Judgement Day to come for us to do what we are supposed to do for our brothers and sisters.

May we be found righteous by God!

God Answers Prayers

Have you ever asked yourself if God really hears and answers our prayers? The story in Acts 10 featuring Peter and Cornelius gives us the assurance that God answers our prayers.

Peter was in Joppa in the house of Simon, the Tanner beside the sea. Joppa is the modern-day Jaffa in Israel. This was the place where Jonah wanted to go but instead God through a storm and big fish persuaded him to go to Nineveh. It tells us that God has other plans for Joppa, and it was not during the time of Jonah but that of Peter.

Cornelius the Centurion, on the other hand, was in Caesarea. Both of them were praying, and both of them were answered by God.

We can learn four things from Acts 10:

First, God answers prayers in different ways.

Peter received a vision on top of Simon the Tanner's house. God opened the heaven and there was a large sheet with all kinds of animals which are all unclean for Jews. God told him to eat. Peter said no. One could imagine that the food might have been pig, shrimp, crab and animals and seafood considered unclean by the Jews. But Acts 10:15 says, "The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'"

For Peter, it was a vision. For Cornelius the Centurion, it was an angel, a holy angel who told him a specific instruction to get Peter in Joppa and let him come to Caesarea.

This tells us that God can reveal His answer to us in any way. It could be a dream, or it could be anything because God can use anything around us to talk to us. Just be sure to test it and confirm it in the Bible.

Second, God wants us to act on what He revealed to us after we prayed.

Here are some things that we can learn from Cornelius:

1. He has a prayer time. It was at 3pm. How about us?
2. He was prayerful and generous. God remembered his gifts to the poor. This means that God does not forget every good thing that we have done.
3. He acted without delay and sent for Peter. How many times have we delayed our action on what God revealed to us?

Third, God is telling us to pray only to Him and not to others.

Acts 10:25-26 tell us that “As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. 'Stand up,' he said, 'I am only a man myself.'”

This should remind us not to pray to any religious leader, a dead person, a wooden, concrete or drawn image but only to God alone.

Fourth, God wants us to share the Good News to our family, friends, and others.

There were a lot of people that Cornelius invited to hear the good news. And Peter preached to them.

In his introduction, Peter confessed of his realization that the Gospel is not just for the Jews but to all people. Peter now understood the vision that God gave him.

The result of the prayer and action of Peter and Cornelius was that the Gospel was preached and the people who heard it were filled with the Holy Spirit and they were eventually baptized.

Indeed, God answers prayers. The question for us, are we ready to respond to the answer of God?

The Gospel of Salvation

Holy Week is a time to be reminded of the ministry, sacrifices, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The ministry of Jesus -- preaching, teaching, and healing -- is directly related to His death. One can say that Jesus was actually put to death because of what He did and spoke. If His death is the only event that is needed for our salvation, then the moment that He was born in a Manger, He should have been put to death. But it was not so. Jesus lived for 33 years before He died in the cross. This means that what He did and said are part of the whole Gospel of Salvation.

The death of Jesus actually shows that He was willing to die for His message. This should lead us to read the words of Jesus. We must especially take note to follow the commands of Jesus. Consequently, the resurrection of Jesus tells us that His message is true and powerful.

When He conquered death, Jesus is not just a wise person or a great Rabbi but the Messiah, our Savior. His resurrection validated everything that He did and spoke.

As we spread the Gospel of Salvation, let us be emboldened that what we share is true and powerful.

“The ministry of Jesus -- preaching, teaching, and healing -- is directly related to His death. One can say that Jesus was actually put to death because of what He did and spoke.”

Hosanna!

On Palm Sunday or the celebration of the Triumphal Entry of the Lord Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, we usually bring palm leaves and sing “Hosanna!” Usually, what comes into our mind when we hear the word “hosanna” is that it is a song of praise and it is uttered with joy. But is this the original meaning of that word?

The English word “hosanna” that we see in the Gospels is from the Greek word “hosanna” (yes, same spelling). This was the translation of the Gospel writers of what the people cried during that time. The Hebrew word that the people who were lining up the streets during that time shouted the Hebrew phrase “hoshiya na.”

The Hebrew phrase “hoshiya na” can only be found in a verse in the whole Old Testament. It can be read in Psalm 118:25, “Lord, save us!” So “hosanna” means, “Save us now, please!” The literal meaning of the word can be illustrated with someone who is drowning and is shouting “Help, please save me (“Hoshiya na!” “Hosanna!”).

The people during that time were not singing praises and shouting the word with joy, but it was a cry to God for help. It can be imagined as a protest rally. Matthew 21:10 says, “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred...” In some translation it says that the “city was in an uproar” or “the people went wild.” It was a situation that was ready for a revolt.

The Israelites were under the Roman Empire and they wanted to overthrow it. They were trying their best to sway Jesus to become their king. Imagine this situation: Herod was the King of Israel, and they were shouting that Jesus is their King, the son of David. It was indeed an upheaval. The Gospels record that the leaders were indignant.

The people were expecting that Jesus will lead them to storm the Fortress of Antonia beside the Temple Mount and usher the kind of “salvation” that they were expecting. But Jesus went straight to the Temple and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers. It was not a political

salvation. Jesus ushered in a holistic salvation – this is what the kingdom of God is all about. God is not just a king in a certain geographical area, but God should be the King in all areas of our lives.

Now picture out these two scenarios: the time when Jesus entered Jerusalem, and the ends as written in Revelation 7:9-10 “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

What are in the hands of this saved people and what are they shouting? It is a palm branch, and they are shouting “Hosanna!” Now, this is the real meaning of the triumphal entry of the Lord Jesus Christ. We hope and pray that we are part of these people who will be waving these palm branches and shouting “Hosanna!”

“Jesus ushered in a holistic salvation – this is what the kingdom of God is all about. God is not just a king in a certain geographical area, but God should be the King in all areas of our lives.”

The Power of the Risen Christ

In Jerusalem there are two places that are possible places where Jesus was buried and resurrected.

The first one is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is the place where Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, decided to build a church when she said she discovered a burial site. This was built in the 4th century.

The second site is the Garden Tomb outside the walls of Jerusalem. It is near what the British Major-General Charles Gordon refer to as Golgotha. Gordon, a Protestant was convinced when he read John 19:41, "At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid." The Garden Tomb is a rock-cut tomb in Jerusalem unearthed in 1867. It is near Golgotha and has a garden.

Amidst the discussion of where it really happened, what should matter to us is that these two tombs are empty. When we visited these two tombs, they are all empty. And for us Christians what is most important is the empty tomb.

What is the power of the Risen Christ? Let me share four things:

First, the Risen Christ empowered the women and the marginalized.

When almost all the disciples fled during the trial, suffering and execution of Jesus, the women were there for Him. After He died, the women - Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and others - visited the grave for the purpose of putting the spices that they had prepared for the body of Jesus. The angels reminded them of what Jesus told them while He was with them in Galilee (Luke 24:6). This means that these women were there from the start of Jesus' ministry. And amidst the patriarchal society, Jesus chose the women to receive the good news of the resurrection. The women became the first messengers that Jesus is alive.

We, too, should see the women in the perspective of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, the Risen Christ empowered the first century Christians to share the Gospel of Salvation in Jesus Christ.

When the disciples received the Great Commission, they followed it. They knew that the Great Commission comes from the highest authority. Jesus, the one who resurrected from the dead, has given them the Great Commission. We, too, should be empowered by this.

Third, The Risen Christ empowered the disciples to organize the church.

The church was not organized if not for the resurrection of Jesus. The words of Jesus that says “upon this rock I will build my church” will just be empty words without the resurrection.

There is something amazing and strange in Acts 28:30-31 that says, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ-with all boldness and without hindrance!” The verses have no ending, no finality. Why is that so?

The Book of Acts has no closure so that we could be part of it. Each of us should write our own chapters. Let us live a kind of life in which we are living in the Book of Acts.

Fourth, the Risen Christ can empower each one of us to have a new beginning.

Genesis is a Greek word that means beginning. But in Hebrew it is Resheet. The Israelites have a feast they call the Day of the Firstfruits or “Yom Resheet” in Hebrew. It literally means the Day of the Beginning. According to Leviticus 23:10-11, this feast is celebrated on the day after the Sabbath.

Do you know what happened on the day of the resurrection of Jesus? It was Yom Resheet - the Day of the Firstfruits. Paul affirmed this when he wrote 1 Corinthians 15:20 - "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

And do you know what is amazing on April 21, 2019 - the Resurrection Sunday in our calendar? On the same exact day in Israel, the Israelites celebrated the Day of the Firstfruits in Israel.

We, too, can have a new beginning in Jesus Christ.

"The Book of Acts has no closure so that we could be part of it. Each of us should write our own chapters. Let us live a kind of life in which we are living in the Book of Acts."

"The Risen Christ can empower each one of us to have a new beginning."

Happy Resurrection Sunday

The Resurrection story is a very familiar story to all of us. But by re-reading the Gospels you can still find a lot of little details, and of course, you can learn new lessons.

Here are some little details and accompanying lessons:

First, in all the Gospel accounts the angels only showed themselves to the women.

If you read John 20:1-18, Matthew 28:1-8, Mark 16:1-8, and Luke 24:1-10, then you will notice that the angels talked to the women only.

It might not be very valuable now in this age which we know about women's rights and equality, but from a historical perspective, this kind of presentation or writing is very valuable. Why? The testimony of a woman during New Testament times was not as valuable compared to a man. Oftentimes, it counts for nothing. But why did the Gospel writers stick to this story? The writers could have changed it later since they wrote their accounts 30 to 50 years later, but they did not. Why? The simplest answer is that the account of the women is true and factual. By writing that it was the women whom the angels showed themselves, it gives credence to the resurrection story.

Nowadays, there are a lot of cover-ups. We may never know the real story behind COVID-19. Fake news continues to exist. A lot of Twitter accounts, for example, were taken down because of it. So, the lesson from the Gospel writers is this: tell the true story!

Second, the women knew where the disciples were hiding.

The Gospels tell us that while Jesus was carrying the cross towards Golgotha, the 10 disciples went into hiding. It was only John who was with the women. There were many women from Galilee who were there. Some of them were named like Mary the mother of Jesus, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, Salome, Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the

mother of the sons of Zebedee. Some are the same individuals but with different descriptions. There were no last names during those times.

The women -- Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb with the intention of adding spices to the body of Jesus. They were greeted by the angels and by Jesus Himself. They were afraid yet filled with joy. As instructed, they ran to the disciples to tell the good news.

The detail that is interesting here is that the women knew where the disciples were hiding because of fear. The point here is that the women did not rat them out. They did not inform the authorities out of anger or spite because they ran away. The women gave them a second chance.

Nowadays, due to the pandemic, we have been given a second chance. Graphs of climate change show an improvement in our atmosphere. We have been given a second chance to be with our families. But this chance should not have come with the expense of hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by the coronavirus. This second chance was there all along.

The resurrection of Jesus has given the disciples a second chance. It continues to give us a second chance. The question is: when will you accept and act on this second chance?

“The resurrection of Jesus has given the disciples a second chance. It continues to give us a second chance.”

A Reflection on Earthquakes

In our Systematic Theology class, the late Dr. Johnny V. Gumban told us that “An earthquake is one of the ways that Earth heals itself. God designed it that way.” I was in awe during that time, but I never delved into the scientific facts behind it until now when a series of earthquakes hit the Philippines.

According to United State Geological Survey (USGS), “An earthquake is caused by a sudden slip on a fault. The tectonic plates are always slowly moving, but they get stuck at their edges due to friction. When the stress on the edge overcomes the friction, there is an earthquake that releases energy in waves that travel through the earth's crust and cause the shaking that we feel.” (<https://earthquake.usgs.gov/>).

With this description, we can see the logic that once the tectonic plates will stop its movement, there will be no earthquakes anymore. So, what if the tectonic plates stop its movement? What will happen?

According to Kerry Sieh, Professor of Geology at Caltech (<https://www.caltech.edu>), “If all plate motion stopped, Earth would be a very different place...Erosion would continue to wear the mountains down, but with no tectonic activity to refresh them, over a few million years they would erode down to low rolling hills. So the whole planet would be flatter, and the topography would be...a lot less exciting.”

According to Pierre Köchel of INSH (<https://insh.world>), “Tectonic plates: can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em.... Convergent plates come together to form impressive mountain chains and terrifying volcanoes. But without plate tectonics, Earth will simply stop making new ones...Volcanoes, for the most part, would be out of commission, since tectonic activity is generally what causes their eruption. But if volcanoes are out, then so is Earth's magnetic field. Our magnetic field is powered by convection currents within Earth's iron outer core. But if this process fails, we lose our magnetic field. And without our magnetic field, the earth has no more protection from deadly solar wind. The Sun

would consume our atmosphere, sucking up the air we breathe, and boiling away the oceans. At that point, life on Earth becomes impossible.”

Another interesting fact is the chain reaction that can occur if volcanoes will cease to function. It would mean that there will be no new minerals and as a consequence, trees and plants will hardly thrive to live until all the remaining minerals will be used up. This means the decrease of oxygen until there is no more left for us to breathe in. In other words: if the tectonic plates stop moving, then all of us, including all around us, will die slowly.

Taking all of these in, a Christian should be confident that God exists. Our God designed the whole universe up to smallest detail. Robin George Andrews of National Geographic wrote, “There's no geological artist quite like Earth's plate tectonics.”

So, the next time you feel an earthquake, go somewhere safe and then remember that God designed our world that way to sustain life.

“A Christian should be confident that God exists. Our God designed the whole universe up to smallest detail.”

EASTER Reflection

Christians all over the world celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ with joy and assurance because our Lord and Savior has conquered death.

What does Easter mean to us? Let us use EASTER as our outline:

E – Enter into a conversation with God

The temple curtain was torn into two when Jesus Christ died on the cross. It symbolizes our free access to God and that Jesus is our only mediator. Let us listen and talk to God.

A – Answer the call of Jesus to get out from the tomb

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He said this in the incident when he called out Lazarus to come out from the tomb. Symbolically, Jesus is calling us to get out from any death-like situations that we are in. By the grace of God, we can do this because Jesus has conquered death.

S – Show to the world that our Jesus is alive in our lives

The disciples in the book of Acts showed everyone the power of resurrection through their words and deeds. From a disappointed and dejected band of people, they became a passionate group who tirelessly spread the Gospel. We, too, should live lives empowered by the Easter event.

T – Teach everyone about the commands of Jesus

The resurrection of Jesus has validated everything that he has said and done. Because of Easter, the teachings of Jesus were not just merely great words from a master teacher, but it has become imperative commands.

E – Encourage people by giving hope

When Jesus conquered death, it gave hope to his disciples. They faced everything that was thrown to them. It has given them hope to fulfill the commands of Jesus, and it has given them hope of eternal life. As Christians, we have that hope also. Let us give that hope to others.

R – Restore what is broken

Paul said that God was reconciling the world back to him in Jesus Christ. Let us start restoration wherever we are.

“The resurrection of Jesus has validated everything that he has said and done. Because of Easter, the teachings of Jesus were not just merely great words from a master teacher, but it has become imperative commands.”

Jesus is Coming Back

When Hermely and I visited Mindoro on 2013 to speak in the Mindoro Conference of Baptist Churches, I was impressed by an old man in that assembly who sang many times the following song: “Siya'y darating, ang sabi niya'y siya'y darating, mamaya o bukas, ang sabi niya'y siya'y darating.”

At every opportunity, the old man was reminding us that Jesus is coming back.

Let us ponder on the promise of Jesus to come back again. Let us use the word BACK as our outline:

B - Believe that Jesus is coming again

As Christians we must have faith on the words of Jesus with regards to his Second Coming.

A - Act a life that shows an anticipation that Jesus is coming again at any moment

We do not know when Jesus will come again. Let us turn from our wicked ways and live a godly life. We may not have a last minute like the thief in the cross.

C - Care for those who have not yet surrendered their lives to God.

Let us not be apathetic. Let us walk the extra mile and share the Gospel to everyone.

K - Know the signs of the times

Jesus has given us the “signs” that will usher the Second Coming. Let us learn about it and be vigilant.

Is He coming back? Yes. When is He coming back? We do not know. Are you ready when He will be back? Let us leave that for you to answer.

Lessons from the Great Commission

The Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28:16 to 20 is one of the post-resurrection stories. Perhaps this event is one of the most popular passages that preachers would use with regards to mission work.

What are some of the facts that we can draw lessons?

First fact: the "Great Commission" was given by Jesus in Galilee, and in a mountain. (v. 16)

What is the significance that Matthew recorded the place and the area? The first disciples of Jesus were called to be fishers of men in Galilee. It was a powerful visual reminder for the disciples. I believe that Jesus deliberately did this so that the disciples could remember their first encounter with Jesus and the subsequent call. Jesus also chose the mountain as their meeting place for the commissioning as another visual reminder. It is a reminder that they are being sent not only to the seaside, to the towns, cities but also to the mountains as well.

Perhaps in this time of Enhanced Community Quarantine, we have reflected on so many things. It is high time for us to reflect also about our first encounter with Jesus; and how that encounter changed your life. It is good to visualize it again and remember what we have promised to the Lord. That first encounter will surely renew our commitment to Jesus.

Second fact: Before the "Great Commission" the disciples worshiped Jesus, but some doubted Him. (v. 17).

Jesus appeared to His disciples many times after He resurrected from the dead. Perhaps by the number of times that Jesus showed Himself, the disciples could have believed His resurrection already.

We also expect Matthew to end his writing with words like "They all worshiped Him" and then put a period on it. Why did he put that some of them doubted Jesus? Well, it actually gives

credence to Matthew's account. It would have sounded like a fictional tale if he ended it another way.

The Gospel according to Luke and the book of Acts tell us that after this meeting, Jesus showed Himself again to them in Jerusalem in the vicinity of Bethany. And this time the disciples worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

This tells us that Jesus allows us to have doubts to question our faith in Him. It is in these moments of doubt that the Holy Spirit will come and reveal to us the truth. God welcomes our questions. It does not change the fact that He is still God. It actually gives God the chance to answer us.

So, in this time of the pandemic or any crisis that you will encounter in the future, if you have some doubts and questions, then direct it to God through your prayers. Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Let us be ready for the answers of God.

“It is high time for us to reflect also about our first encounter with Jesus; and how that encounter changed your life. It is good to visualize it again and remember what we have promised to the Lord. That first encounter will surely renew our commitment to Jesus.”

The Righteous Moves On

On April 14, 2013, Central Philippine University had its Baccalaureate Service and Commencement Exercises. Here is a portion of the message of Rev. Dr. Nestor D. Bunda, the Baccalaureate Service speaker, entitled “The Righteous Moves On.”

What is CPU’s gift to you that you can use to maintain a righteous life? There are two important ideals that CPU offered you as a legacy to your life and to the life of your generation to come.

The first is fides or faith. Faith is the essence of life. That is why you have chosen CPU to nurture your body, mind, and spirit because CPU emphasizes first and foremost faith in God - Faith that seeks understanding.

What is faith? Hebrews 11:1 says, Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

In day-to-day life, faith is like buying canned sardines. You cannot see the sardines inside the can and yet you still buy it because you are certain that it contains sardines even if you have not opened the can yet. Faith believes in the goodness of God’s creation. Faith believes in a person’s goodness even if you cannot actually see the person’s heart.

Faith means believing in yourself. If your faith is strong, you are always looking at how you can do the best thing possible in your life. If your faith is strong, you are always looking at how you can help others become the best persons they could possibly be.

Faith believes in the human capacity and wisdom. Faith trusts people that they can do something which are right in the eyes of God.

Faith transforms even the harmful and corrupt situation because it always believes that something good, something righteous, or something wonderful lies inside a person’s heart.

You remember Jesus' faith? In the midst of false accusation; in the midst of false judgment; in the midst of the deadly cross, Jesus was able to rise above the situation, so that he was raised and was dignified.

As young professionals, you shall expect great challenges and huge problems to deal with in life. (As our saying goes, *madamo pa nga asin ang kaunon ninyo*).

But I guess in the midst of frustration and failure; in the midst of hopelessness; in the midst of false accusations and false judgment, like Jesus, you will be alone (on the cross) resolving your own issues. And yet, you too, like Jesus, will move on, because of your faith in God – you will move on as you live a righteous life.

The first ideal that CPU gifted you is faith. What is the other one? The second gift of CPU to you is science.

In order to sustain a righteous life, you should live by faith and by science.

CPU has defined science by using the Latin word *scientia* which when translated into English means “knowledge.” Science refers to a reliable body of knowledge which forms as a solid base in making decisions and actions.

In other words, you make judgment or decision based on scientific findings.

You act based on critical analysis. By using science, you do not decide based on ‘*tsismis*’ or rumors. By using science, you do not decide to act based on friendship or based on blood relationship. By using science, you decide to act based on objective analysis drawn from verified body of information.

I hope at this point it is clear to you that faith and science or *scientia et fides* are valuable in your quest to live a righteous life even as God sustains you as you cast your burden on God.

Science and faith will help you move on, as you contribute to change a difficult and negative situation into a favorable and positive one.

As young professionals, you will be tested out there – on how you will live a righteous life by using your faith and science.

As you struggle to live a righteous life, be assured that God will sustain you. God will not permit you to be shaken when you are righteous.

Psalms 55:22 gives us the assurance that God will be there with us -- “Cast your burden on God, And God shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous be shaken.”

“As you struggle to live a righteous life, be assured that God will sustain you. God will not permit you to be shaken when you are righteous.”

The Parable of the Growing Seed

When Jesus started His public ministry, He would go about preaching, teaching, and healing. Here is the record of Matthew 4:23 - "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

If you have noticed, the center of Jesus' proclamation is about the Kingdom of God. This means that the good news of salvation is about the reign of God in our lives. Jesus reemphasized the importance of the Kingdom of God when He continued to teach about it after His resurrection as we can read in Acts 1:3. Thus, it is necessary for us to learn the parables about the Kingdom of God.

In Mark 4:26-29, Jesus taught about the Parable of the Growing Seed. What can we learn from this teaching?

First, we must understand that the Kingdom of God is of God, and not of any person.

We can see in this story that Jesus emphasized that the man who planted the seed does not know how the seed sprouts and grows. All that he can do was to plant the seed and wait for the harvest.

This tells us that God has already put all the nutrients, elements, and compounds in the soil and in the air that are needed for the seed to grow. The composition of the soil and the air were not yet known scientifically during that time. Now, we know what these are. And we marvel at it. God is amazing that even if you know all of the science behind the growth of a seed, we cannot still replicate and say, "By tomorrow I will have a 5-year-old mango tree or a fully grown and ready-to-harvest rice stalk in a matter of days." Yes, we may have sped up the process but the growth itself is a profound mystery. This points out that our world did not exist through an accident but because there is a wise Creator behind it, and that is God. We may invent a smartphone but as one author says, "Only God can make a tree."

Now going back to the Parable, Jesus is telling us that the growth of the Kingdom of God is not in our hands. We cannot point to church buildings and say to ourselves "Look and see the kingdom of God." No! We cannot do that. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that gives us the courage to spread the Gospel. It is God that nurtures the spiritual lives of people.

Second, we should continue to plant the seeds of the Gospel wherever and to whoever.

We need to be reminded of what Paul wrote when the early Christians were arguing who gets the credit. 1 Corinthians 3:6 to 9 says, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building."

In this time of the pandemic, let us continue to plant seeds and water it. We may not be able to publicly preach and share the Gospel face to face, but we can do it through the Internet and many other ways. We may not be able to pray and lead Bible studies face to face, but we can do so through new technologies. The instruments to spread the Word of God is within our reach. It is up to us to use it.

"We must understand that the Kingdom of God is of God, and not of any person."

EARTH Day

Every April, we celebrate Earth Day. As we commemorate this day, let us reflect on the following things:

E – Eat healthy foods

In the creation account, God designed us to eat healthy foods – Gen 1:30 “I give every green plant for food.” In discussing about food, Paul argues that “Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial.” (1 Cor 10:23)

A – Acknowledge that the world belongs to God

The Psalmist reminds us that “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;” (Ps 24:1). The world does not belong to us; it belongs to God alone. Let us not act as if we are the owners. Let us take care of the creation shared to us.

R – Remember the 4 R's of Waste Management

The 4 R's are Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink. The floods caused by our improper waste management are a constant reminder to all of us to remember these 4 R's.

T – Thank God for His creation

Every time we travel, let us reflect on the wondrous creation of God. Let us enjoy the beauty of the Earth and praise the Lord. Psalm 96:11-13 says, “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad, let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord.”

H – Help take care of Mother Earth

In the beginning, God intended it that we will be the stewards of this Earth. Our responsibility is given in Genesis 1:26 “Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'”

“Every time we travel, let us reflect on the wondrous creation of God. Let us enjoy the beauty of the Earth and praise the Lord.”

“In the beginning, God intended it that we will be the stewards of this Earth.”

Live a Life that Matters

Let me share to you a portion of my message delivered during the Baccalaureate service of the University of the Philippines Visayas last April 25, 2013.

Dear graduates, as you start your life outside of the campus, you must remember what Jesus said -- “Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.” You need to live meaningful lives in the service of humanity and for the glory of God.

Let me share three things that can help you live a life that matters. The three main points starts with the letters U, P, and V. This is my challenge to you UPV graduates:

First, Unload the things that hinder you in focusing your lives to God.

Jesus was asked by a rich young man on how to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered, “sell your possessions and give it to the poor.” The rich young man was so shocked that he turned around.

Did Jesus mean that we will give everything that we have, and then there is nothing left for us anymore? I do not believe that Jesus meant that. Jesus challenged him to give up the things that hindered him in focusing his life to God. Jesus declared, “No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money.”

What are the things that hinder you in centering your lives to God? Let us throw it in the “Bonfire of Vanities” like what the reformer of Italy Girolamo Savonarola did.

Secondly, practice a kind of life that has an eternal value.

In a parable that Jesus told us, a rich man had an extraordinary crop. The first thing that came to the mind of the rich man was a question of where to put all the harvest. He planned to tear down his current barns and build bigger ones, and then he said to himself – “I will take life easy, I will eat, drink and be merry.”

At first glance, we might say to ourselves, there is nothing wrong with this picture. He was just acting as a smart businessman.

But something is wrong in this picture. God declared this rich man as a fool. He was a fool because he did not commit his life to a kind of life that has an eternal value. Jesus tells us in the parable that “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

What is wrong here is that he was only thinking for himself. He was so individualistic that all he thought was “me, myself and I.” He was full of pride on what he has achieved that he has forgotten God.

Proverbs 16:18 “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” Another translation says, “First pride, then the crash - the bigger the ego, the harder the fall.”

This is what happened to the rich man. And this is what will happen to us also if we will not practice a kind of life that has an eternal value.

Let us remember that everything that we have comes only from God. All that we have are God’s blessings and we must be thankful for it by declaring God’s faithfulness, goodness, and mercy in our lives.

Third, value excellence as you serve the people.

Let us not be tempted to settle with what is ordinary. Let us always combat mediocrity. Strive for excellence in everything that you do. Let us not be tempted to be indifferent. Let us not be like others who do not care and who will not get involved.

There was a teacher who was so irritated with her student. The student was a happy-go-lucky person and has a “bahala na” attitude. One day she questioned the student, “What is the meaning of apathy?” The student answered, “I don’t know, I don’t care, and I don’t give a damn ma’am.” “Very good,” said the teacher. She continued, “That is the meaning of apathy -- you don’t want to know, and you don’t care what is happening.”

God cares for us. He cares so much that He gave his only begotten Son to die in our behalf. Let us go out in this world with love and care in our hearts as we strive for excellence.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

According to the Bible Encyclopedia, Luke recorded 24 parables of Jesus, and 18 of these can only be found in his writings. Matthew, on the other hand, contained 23 parables in which 11 are unique. The Gospel according to Mark recorded 8 parables in which two cannot be found in other Synoptic Gospels. John did not record any parables of Jesus.

One of the parables found in Matthew is called the Parable of the Ten Virgins which is found in Matthew 25:1-13.

This parable raises some questions like: Why were 10 virgins waiting for the bridegroom? Where is the bride? Is one of the virgins the bride?

According to the Jewish custom during that time, the bridegroom must get the bride in her home. Then there will be a celebration. Afterward, the entourage will go to the bridegroom's home for a grander celebration. There will be a procession in the streets along the way and this is usually during nighttime. Everyone who was invited is expected to bring their own lamp that uses olive oil as the fuel.

So, the 10 virgins were not the bride-to-be but part of the entourage that were waiting for the procession in the streets that will go to the bridegroom's house. The bride is already with the bridegroom. When the gate of the bridegroom's house is closed, nobody can enter anymore and those who have no lamps of their own were considered gate crashers.

In telling this story, Jesus is reminding us to follow in the footsteps of the 5 wise virgins and not the 5 foolish ones. In the kingdom of God, the bridegroom is Jesus Christ. He is coming again, and we do not know the time when it will be. We are like the 10 virgins, part of the entourage, who are waiting for His return.

What must we do while waiting for the second coming of Christ? We must be ready anytime and anywhere.

Readiness means that we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. This faith in the Lord is what gives us the hope that no matter the situation, we hold on to the promises of God, and we continue to live out the will of God.

Readiness also means that we must be wise. To be wise in the parable is to always have oil in the lamp -- you know how much supply you have and when to replenish it. In our spiritual lives that means that we take time to read the Bible, fellowship with believers, go to church, have a reflection time, and share the Gospel with others. We must continually feed our spiritual lives so that we may not become like the foolish virgins in the story.

“Readiness means that we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. This faith in the Lord is what gives us the hope that no matter the situation, we hold on to the promises of God, and we continue to live out the will of God.”

Victory over Satan

If you are fond of what is showing in the movies and in the TV, then for sure you may have heard about Thanos in the Avengers and the Night King in the Game of Thrones. Both can be considered as supervillains. In short, these villains had more or less the same objective - to erase the memory of people and to annihilate everyone in the world except themselves.

In the Bible, the villain is Satan. Satan is the embodiment of evil. In the New Testament, Satan was called twelve (12) times as “the evil one.” And whether we like it or not, we encounter Satan every day. 1 Peter 5:8 tells us of this reality, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Job 1:6-7 also tells us that Satan is always roaming around -- “One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. The Lord said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the Lord, “From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.”

What are the things that we should be watchful for? This would also be a good guide for choosing the right leaders during the election period.

First, when you lie and do not tell the truth, Satan becomes your father.

Jesus said in John 8:44 “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

Second, when you become a stumbling block and led astray people away from God, you have become Satan.

In Matthew 16:23 the most popular disciple of Jesus was called a Satan. “Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me,

Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Paul warned about the tricks of Satan. 2 Corinthians 11:3 “But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”

Third, when you continue on sinning, you are now part of the Devil. 1 John 3:8 says, “The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.”

How can we resist Satan? Let us follow what Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:11-16 -- “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.”

Thanos and the Night King might be great supervillains in the fictional world of movies and TV series. But what we should watch out in reality is Satan.

Let us remember that we have victory over Satan because of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us resist Satan in Jesus name.

Follow the Rules

On May 19, 2019, the CPU Golden Lions, the biggest delegation of Region 6, attended with 7,000 athletes, coaches, and officials the opening of the 63rd National Games of the Private Schools Athletic Association (PRISAA) at the University of Mindanao, Davao City. The theme of the games is “Sustaining Filipino Athlete for Global Competitiveness.”

The Bible also used sports metaphors. In 2 Timothy 2:5 Paul wrote to Timothy, “Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.”

Paul used the rules of games to remind Timothy about his point. Paul and Timothy were familiar with the Isthmian Games. Most probably, both of them had watched and cheered for their chosen athletes. These games were one of the Panhellenic Games of Ancient Greece held in Corinth. The games were popular, and they were held in between the Olympic Games. According to history books, the first Isthmian Games were held 582 years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

The point that Paul was reminding Timothy of this -- “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

And what are these “things” that Timothy heard from Paul? These “things” can be found starting in 2 Timothy 2:10. These are the “rules” that Paul were pointing out to Timothy. I found seven. There may be more.

First, salvation is in Jesus Christ alone.

Second, God is faithful even if we are not.

Third, we must not be ashamed of the Gospel.

Fourth, we must avoid godless things.

Fifth, those who confess that Jesus is their Lord must turn away from wickedness.

Sixth, we are instruments of God to do good work.

Seventh, the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, able to teach and should not be resentful.

As Paul reminded Timothy, may we follow the rules of God like an athlete who follow the rules in order not to be disqualified but to win.

“Salvation is in Jesus Christ alone.

God is faithful even if we are not.

We must not be ashamed of the Gospel.

We must avoid godless things.

Those who confess that Jesus is their Lord must turn away from wickedness.

We are instruments of God to do good work.

The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, able to teach and should not be resentful.”

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Have you experienced getting lost while traveling? Most probably, in one way or another, we have been lost but thanks to modern technology like Google Maps, or by simply asking people who are around, we found our way to our destination.

There was a time when our son got lost in a mall. He mistakenly followed another person thinking that it was his aunt. It was nerve-racking but we eventually found him. One time, during my elementary days, I got lost with a bunch of boys during spider hunting in the middle of a sugarcane field. We were scared. We collectively decided to reverse our shirts with the belief that it can help us. Some were fervently praying. And then we looked up and found the shadow of a big tree. We focused on it as a landmark and eventually found our way to the roadside. It was a relief to have found your way home.

In the Parable of the Lost Sheep found in Luke 15:1 to 7, Jesus answered the murmuring of the Pharisees and teachers of the law with regards to His dining with sinners. He told them about a story of a shepherd who has 100 sheep and lost one while they were in the open country.

What can we learn from the action of the shepherd?

First, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will find us wherever we are.

Did the shepherd in the parable abandon the 99 sheep? Shepherds during Biblical times usually have a sheepdog with them as attested by Job 30:1. This particular shepherd in the story did not abandon the 99. They were already safe because sheepdogs were guarding them.

We are oftentimes like this lost sheep. The modern wilderness can oftentimes lead us to nowhere. Like the sheep, we must cry and cry until Jesus, our Shepherd will find us.

Second, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is so joyful once He can rescue just one lost sheep.

Jesus said, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents."

If you feel that you are lost, then it is high time for you to cry out to God. Jesus will surely find you!

“We are oftentimes like this lost sheep. The modern wilderness can oftentimes lead us to nowhere. Like the sheep, we must cry and cry until Jesus, our Shepherd will find us.”

Our Hope

Like any country, Israel in the Old Testament had a share of good and bad kings. The Prophet Isaiah gave Israel a hope that someday, they will have a good leader. Isaiah is at the same time a guideline on how leaders should do their job.

Isaiah 32:1-2, 7 (GNB) says, “Someday there will be a king who rules with integrity and national leaders who govern with justice. Each of them will be like a shelter from the wind and a place to hide from storms. They will be like streams flowing in a desert, like the shadow of a giant rock in a barren land. A stupid person is evil and does evil things; he plots to ruin the poor with lies and to keep them from getting their rights. But an honorable person acts honestly and stands firm for what is right.”

Based on what Isaiah wrote, here is my hope on how the elected leaders of the Philippines should do:

First, our leaders should have integrity and should maintain their integrity despite of the temptations that will come their way.

Second, our leaders should be just and must do everything that they can that our land will have justice.

Third, our leaders should give refuge to those who need help. And literally, they should see to it that our country, which is prone to flooding due to typhoons, should have a good drainage system, and should give shelter to those who will be displaced.

Fourth, our leaders should see to it that the food supply is sufficient to all Filipinos. Food security includes investment on agriculture and taking care of our God-given natural resources.

Fifth, our leaders must be honorable (as they are formally called) and should be honest in all their dealings. We hope that our leaders will stand firm on what is right despite of the enticement to become corrupt.

Sixth, our leaders must not do evil things, and must not trample the rights of the poor. They must seek to elevate status of the marginalized.

Let us hope and pray that our elected leaders will live up to what Prophet Isaiah has written.

“Our leaders should have integrity and should maintain their integrity despite of the temptations that will come their way.”

“Our leaders should be just and must do everything that they can that our land will have justice.”

Wait

To wait patiently is something that our generation is not accustomed to. We like everything that is fast and instant. But we have to remember the benefits of waiting for God's own timing in our lives.

In the Bible, there are many stories that God wanted them to wait. Some did not wait for God's schedule and the result was disastrous. Some who waited for God's instructions became successful in their endeavors.

Let us now turn to the book of Psalms and see what the psalmists wrote about waiting.

Psalm 27:14 “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”

This means that we have to be confident that in due time, God will make a way. We just have to be emotionally strong as we wait for it.

Psalm 33:20 “We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.”

This means that waiting without hope is futile. Hope keeps us empowered to go on despite of the circumstances. As Christians, our hope is founded on Jesus Christ. The same hope leads us to faith that someday somehow God will make all things beautiful.

Psalm 37:7 “Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for Him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.”

This means that we should not waver on our faith in God in spite of the bad circumstances that are happening around us. We have to be still and let God work in and through our lives.

Psalm 37:34 “Wait for the LORD and keep his way.”

This means that waiting for God's timing in our lives involves obeying the commands of God. Waiting is not idleness. Although God may have not revealed to you His specific plans in your life, this does not mean that we have to stop doing what God commands us to do.

Psalm 38:15 “I wait for you, O LORD; you will answer, O Lord my God.”

This means that our prayers will eventually be answered by God. We can wait patiently because we believe that God hears our prayers. Whatever His answer is, God will surely reveal to us His answer to our prayers.

Let us learn the value of patience as we wait for God's perfect timing in our lives! And while waiting, let us continue to carry out our mission.

“We should not waver on our faith in God in spite of the bad circumstances that are happening around us. We have to be still and let God work in and through our lives.”

Choosing a Leader

Every election day, we choose who will be our leaders. There are many biblical guides that we can use to help us select what kind of leaders should we vote. Let me share four things from biblical leaders.

First, a leader should be like Moses who knows how to listen. Moses listened to the good ideas of his father-in-law Jethro. Moses is not like a lot of leaders who only listen to themselves. Exodus 18:24 says, “Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said.” The idea presented to Moses is now what is called as the Jethro Principle in Management courses. It is about delegation of work.

Second, a leader should like Joshua who meditates upon the Word of God. God told Joshua, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8). Note that the mandate is to meditate on the Word, and not to simply read it.

Third, a leader should be like David who has a loving heart. Psalm 78:72 describes how David led the people – “And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.” Because of this, Israel and Judah loved David (1 Samuel 18:16)

Fourth, a leader must not be oppressive and corrupt.

The Philippines has a lot of oppressive leaders and corrupt politicians. Let us be reminded of two Proverbs:

Proverbs 28:3 - “A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops.” Proverbs 29:4 - “By justice, a ruler gives a country stability, but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down.”

We are leaders in our own lives too. Learn to lead by example.

Have a Happy Break!

It is good to have a break from time to time. It is a biblical mandate to take a rest. Have a BREAK!

B - Bring your family and friends to new places

We owe it to ourselves to be in the company of our loved ones. At the end of the day, we always answer the question of why we work - it is because of our family. Let us plan a time for our family.

R - Rest time is needed by our bodies

We always complain that we work too much and have so little time to rest. Why not use up all your vacation leave - it was designed for our rest and recreation. Take that well-deserved rest. Even in work, that is needed for your stamina to be refreshed.

E – Enjoy the trip

It is always exciting to plan the break. Laugh while enjoying the ride. Let us remember the adage that the fun is not just about the destination but also on the travel. It is true - it's more fun in the Philippines!

A - Accept that there will be unexpected events

We plan for our trip. Yet we should be open to unexpected events. Unforeseen situations should not become a source of argument and annoyance, but a way to explore new avenues. Have you encountered an unexpected schedule change? Enjoy it and don't let it ruin your vacation.

K - Know that God is the Creator of everything

We can appreciate the travel more if we have the spiritual insight to know that what we are seeing belongs to God. And we become conscious that we are stewards of God's creation.

Nameless Mothers

A lot of successful people credited their success because of the support of their mothers. Yes, oftentimes we only know the names of these successful people, yet their mothers continue to be nameless.

There are two nameless mothers in the Old Testament that gave their all for the sake of their child.

First, the widow in Zarephath (1 Kings 17).

This widow and her son gave refuge to the Prophet Elijah. She obeyed the commands of Elijah to prepare a meal even though it was the last of her oil and flour. A miracle happened to them - the flour and oil never ran out.

Her son later died due to an illness. She pleaded to Elijah to ask God to make her son alive again. God granted her request.

Second, the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4.

This woman was so kind and generous to Prophet Elisha. She asked her husband to construct an upper room so that when Elisha drops by their area, he can take a rest there.

Soon Elisha told her that the desire of her heart will be granted - she will have a son. This is a miracle for her. But this son later died. The faith of this mother was very firm. She sought out Elisha and pleaded for her son's life. Another miracle happened - her son was alive again.

May our mothers be like this widow in Zarephath and the Shunammite woman who are kind, with a firm faith that God can do miracles, and obedient to the commands of God.

What is Love?

Let me share four things about love. These four things revolve around the idea that love is not just a feeling. Love is an action word.

First, to love is to care. To care is to have an active concern for the life and growth of the person whom we love.

To care is hard work and labor intensive. You need to get involve and do something. Jesus said it this way, you need to “go the extra mile” (Matthew 5:41).

Nicholas Sparks in his book, *The Wedding*, says “Love is sustained by action, a pattern of devotion in the things we do for each other every day.”

Second, to love is to be responsible. To be responsible means to be able and ready to respond.

To be responsible is to be in charge with what is happening in your married life. You need to be accountable to each other.

Third, to love is to respect.

Respect is looking up and not looking down. You give freedom to the person to be and to become what God intends him or her to be.

Respect exists only on the basis of freedom, and freedom is possible only on the basis of proper respect.

Pearl S. Buck says, “A good marriage is one which allows for change and growth in the individuals and the way they express their love.”

Statistics says that men use about 10,000 words per day, whereas women use 20,000 words per day. Husbands need to be a good listener.

Fourth, to love is to fall in love many times but always with the same person.

Marriage is not a word. It is a sentence. It is a life sentence!

Couples need to be faithful to each other. If trust is broken, then there will be a lot of problems.

Lastly, “You do not marry someone you can live with. You marry the person who you cannot live without.”

“To love is to care. To care is to have an active concern for the life and growth of the person whom we love.”

“To love is to be responsible. To be responsible means to be able and ready to respond.”

Giving a Blessing

The ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ happened 40 days after the resurrection.

What can we learn from the ascension of Jesus?

First, Jesus has given all His disciples a blessing. Luke 24:50 says, “When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.”

What could this blessing be? We do not know the exact words of the blessing, but we can have a clue on what is that on Matthew 28:16-20. The event in that verse is when Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples. This happened probably days before or weeks before the ascension. The blessing of Jesus here is in a form of a promise -- “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Acts 1 also tells us that Jesus promised that they will receive power from the Holy Spirit. With this kind of blessing, we can have the courage to spread the Gospel of salvation.

Second, Jesus is coming back. Luke 24:51 says, “While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.” Dr. Luke followed it up in the Book of Acts that two angels assured the gathered disciples that Jesus is coming again. Let us continue in doing the mission that Jesus has entrusted to us because we believe that someday Jesus is coming back.

Third, there is joy in worshipping Jesus. Luke 24:52-53 says, “Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”

The 11 disciples knew that there will be struggles ahead of them. And indeed, we know in church history that most of them were martyred because of their faith. But they were filled with joy in worshipping the Lord.

This should be the same with us. We must be joyful in praising God while we are in the church or outside the church. If you are feeling dry, then pray that God will restore the joy of your salvation.

The Challenges of the Ascension of Jesus

In the Christian calendar, May 21, 2020 marked the Ascension Day. On May 24 of the same year, some churches celebrated Ascension Sunday. This is not a popular celebration compared to Resurrection Sunday or Holy Week or Christmas. Nevertheless, we should remember that Jesus stayed for 40 days after His resurrection until He ascended to heaven.

There are two passages in the New Testament that talk about the ascension of Jesus -- Acts 1:7 to 11 and Luke 24:50 to 53.

What are the challenges of the Ascension of Jesus?

First challenge: We continue to joyfully worship God.

As stated in the account of Luke, the disciples went back to Jerusalem with great joy, and they continually went to the Temple to praise God. Eventually, they were forced out of the Temple by the Jewish authorities. Then the disciples started to meet in house churches.

There was a joyful demeanor among disciples and early Christians in worshipping God even in the midst of persecution and hardships. This same demeanor should be followed by us. Even in the midst of this pandemic, we must be joyful in worshipping God in our homes or wherever that may be.

Second challenge: We continue to be faithful in serving God.

As we can see in the book of Acts, the disciples were emboldened by the resurrection and subsequent ascension of Jesus. These events gave the disciples the inspiration and the courage to do what Jesus commanded. They fulfilled the command of Jesus to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the other parts of the known world.

As Christians, we must continue to serve God by being witnesses of Jesus wherever we go in our words and deeds.

Third challenge: We expect the coming again of Jesus with hope.

The disciples who were looking up in the sky as Jesus ascended were reminded by two angels that He is coming back again. This is the reason why the area of Bethany has long been partly a cemetery because people believe that the second coming will happen in that area.

It is this hope of the second coming of Jesus that the early Christians used the Aramaic word "Maranatha" which means "Come, our Lord!" or "The Lord is coming!"

If we have accepted Jesus Christ in our lives, we do not fear His coming again, but we say, "Maranatha!"

“As Christians, we must continue to serve God by being witnesses of Jesus wherever we go in our words and deeds.”

Day of Pentecost

June 9, 2019 is Pentecost Day in the Christian calendar. This date of course coincides with the Feast of Shavuot or Pentecost Day in the New Testament times or even in modern Israel. This is an agricultural harvest celebration for the Israelites but has another meaning for Christians -- the harvest of believers that became the birth of the Christian Church.

What can we learn from Acts 2? What happened in that Pentecost Day a few days after the ascension of Jesus?

First, we should continue in worshipping God together. The disciples were together when they were filled by Holy Spirit.

We must fight the temptation of not coming to church or having fellowship with fellow believers.

Second, we should believe that the Holy Spirit will continue to empower us so that we can use the gifts that God has given us. In the case of the disciples, they were first empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak in different tongues so that the people will understand them.

We must identify our God-given gifts, dedicate it to be used by God, and pray that the Holy Spirit will empower us.

Third, we should have the courage to share the Good News of Salvation in Jesus even if it is uncomfortable or in unfamiliar places. Peter was a fisherman from Galilee. Although he was not trained in public speaking and from another place, he courageously stood up and preached the Gospel in the religious center of Israel.

Let us not we wait to be in familiar and comfortable places to share the Gospel! God has a reason for placing us in that situation at that very same time and place.

Be Empowered

The Day of Pentecost in the book of Acts was a very significant event in the life of the early church. This is the day that Christians celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is also considered as the birth of the Christian church. We celebrate this event 50 days after Resurrection Sunday.

What happened to the disciples when they were filled by the Holy Spirit?

First, the disciples began to speak other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

What did they speak? Was this language gibberish? No. The disciples spoke in other languages. Acts 2:9 to 11 tells us that they spoke the language of the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya near Cyrene, Rome, and those of Cretans and Arabs. The disciples of Jesus declared the wonders of God in these tongues!

This tells us that the Holy Spirit will enable us to contextualize the message of Jesus in the part of the world where we are in.

Second, the disciples were emboldened to preach the Gospel to many people.

During the public ministry of Jesus, we can see in the Gospels that the disciples were mainly part of the crowd. They would oftentimes ask a lot of questions. But this time, a fisherman by the name of Peter stood up courageously and preached.

One can probably imagine a Rabbi to preach to a large crowd because he was trained to do that. But a fisherman was not heard of to do that. The Holy Spirit empowered Peter to speak and it resulted to 3,000 people accepting Jesus Christ and subsequently, baptized.

We, too, can speak boldly and without fear when we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Third, when the Holy Spirit was breathed into the disciples, they continued the ministry of Jesus that gives life.

Right from the start in Genesis 2:7, we can see that when God breathed the breath of life, man became a living being. In John 20:22 Jesus breathed on the disciples also. Later, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16 that “All Scripture is God-breathed...” Taking all of these, we can see that God wants us to have a meaningful life, and to fight anything that brings about death.

As the Holy Spirit is breathed into us, we involve ourselves in ministries that give life.

“We, too, can speak boldly and without fear when we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.”

“As the Holy Spirit is breathed into us, we involve ourselves in ministries that give life.”

Make a Choice

Every year, we celebrate Father's Day. Fathers must learn from fathers in the Bible. What lessons can we learn from Moses as a father?

Moses is one of the most revered persons in the history of Israel. He was the one whom God chose to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. He also received the 10 Commandments, and from it came out the Mosaic laws.

The wife of Moses was Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro. They had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. (Exodus 2:21-22; 1 Chronicles 23:15). Moses is so popular that we sometimes forget that he was also a father and a husband.

What happened to his sons Gershom and Eliezer?

According to the Midrash (a commentary of the Jews), Moses requested one of his sons to be appointed as the next leader. God responded, "Your sons sat and did not occupy themselves with Torah. Joshua, who served you, is fitting to serve Israel." It was an incredibly sad day for Moses. He did everything that he could for his sons. Moses made a choice, but ultimately it was the choice also of Gershom and Eliezer.

This means fathers may guide their children to the right choices but ultimately the children had to make their own choices.

It is interesting to note that in Numbers 3: 1-2, the line of Moses was listed under the sons of his brother Aaron. It says, "This is the family line of Aaron and Moses as it was recorded when the LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: The names of Aaron's sons were Nadab (the oldest), Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar." It listed the four sons of Aaron not of Moses. The nephews of Moses became his bloodline up to the next generation.

But Aaron's two sons also made a wrong choice. Numbers 3:4 says that Nadab and Abihu died because they did not follow the command of God.

This means that even though Moses and Aaron made the right choices, they cannot make a choice for their sons. That is the same with us. Fathers can make their choices and we pray that our children will learn from our choices. But ultimately it is up to them.

Let us remember that all of us are accountable of the choices that we make. We pray that our fathers will be exemplary in their choices. We also pray that our children will make the right choice!

“Fathers may guide their children to the right choices but ultimately the children had to make their own choices.”

“Let us remember that all of us are accountable of the choices that we make. We pray that our fathers will be exemplary in their choices. We also pray that our children will make the right choice!”

What is a godly FATHER?

The father is often seen as the head of the household, especially in the traditional Filipino setting. Whether as the patriarch, breadwinner, or simply a member of the family, fathers are model figures that their children would look up to.

This brings us to the question: What does it take to be a godly FATHER?

F – Faithful to God. A father who is faithful to God will lead his family in the path of righteousness.

A – Always loving and loyal to his wife. There is a quote that says, “The best thing that a father can do to his children is to love their mother.” How much should a husband love his wife? The answer is in Ephesians 5:25 – “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

T – Teach the commandments of God. Deuteronomy 6:5-7 reminds us to teach about the commandments of God to our children when we sit at home with them, when we walk with them along the road, and when our children lie down and get up.

H – Helpful in the needs of his children. Filipino society seems to have a tradition that the nurture and care of the children is the mother’s task. This should not be. Fathers need to get involved in the affairs of their children.

E – Enjoy the company of his family. Fathers need to give more time to his family. A workaholic father will have no working family to go home to. Fathers need to cut their vices or else it will cut his time for his family.

R – Reprove his children. Fathers need to discipline their children and remind them of the right way. Proverbs 13:24 reminds us that “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.”

A Reminder to Fathers

The Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, is considered by the Jews as the most important prayer found in the Bible. The Jews from Old Testament times up to now would pray this prayer everyday usually in the morning and in the evening.

The Shema centers on the fundamental of the faith that states "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." This means that there is only one God. This statement was revolutionary because people during that time and even today believe in many gods.

This fundamental tenet is followed by a command that states, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." This is the same command that Jesus answered when asked what is the greatest of all commandments.

What is interesting in the Shema is that the responsibility to share it with the next generation is given to the fathers in their respective families. In this Father's Day, let us be reminded of the following responsibilities that are given to the fathers:

First, "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts (v. 6)."

Fathers should first and foremost believe in God, and that their lives must be centered on loving God.

Second, "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (vv. 7-9)."

Fathers should take up the responsibility of educating their children about God and His commandments. The Shema tells us that fathers must intentionally find the time to teach their children. It also gives us practical tips to put Bible verses inside our homes, and even in our gates. For Jews, they nail a Mezuzah (the first two paragraphs of the Shema are inside it) in a doorpost. They would touch it when they go out and come in. Indeed, putting Bible verses inside our homes is a great visible reminder for us.

Focus on Jesus

There is an interesting detail in the conversation by Jesus and Peter in John 21:21ff. The context of their conversation was that Jesus was asking Peter if he truly loves Him more than everything. It was an intimate conversation between Jesus and Peter. Jesus ended it in verse 19 with the words "Follow me!" Then, all of a sudden one can feel that the conversation turned sour. Peter was reprimanded.

What can we learn from this event?

First, Jesus wants us to focus on Him.

Have you noticed that while Jesus and Peter were talking, Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them (v. 20)? This turning of Peter's head or his body was a body gesture that Jesus did not like. It signified that Peter was not focused on what they were talking about.

Jesus most probably repeated this story to the disciples as a warning. We can say that it was repeated for the reason that John was able to write down the private conversation between Jesus and Peter. If it was not repeated, then that conversation is lost to us.

This is a warning to all of us as well. There are many things in this world that will try to get our attention. Jesus is telling us not to lose focus and only follow Him.

Second, Jesus has individual instructions for each one of us.

In this story, Jesus was giving instructions to Peter about feeding the lambs and taking care and feeding the sheep. Jesus was distinguishing the young and the old.

Jesus wanted Peter to know His specific instructions. While Jesus was talking to Peter, he asked about John, "Lord, what about him?" (v. 21). Jesus was directly talking to Peter, and he did was to divert the conversation to John. What followed were sarcastic words from Jesus -- "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is

that to you? You must follow me.” (v. 22). And then Jesus once again told Peter, and probably (and this how I envisioned it) while holding Peter’s face, and turning it back to Him said, "You must follow me!"

This particular detail is a great example for us. Oftentimes, we pass the specific work that God gave us to others. We don't want to listen to God or if while listening, we say to God -- "What about this person or persons? What work are you giving them?" We like to pass not just the blame to others, but we also want to pass God's specific instructions to others. But this should not be.

God has a special revelation for each one of us. This is why God has given us different gifts and abilities. If God is calling you to become a pastor for example (like what God did to me), then you should accept it and do not say, "Lord, not me, choose so and so instead." If we do that, then we are not following Jesus completely.

If God has a special revelation to you in this time of the pandemic, then pray for it and verify if it is truly from God, and then follow God's instructions.

“There are many things in this world that will try to get our attention. Jesus is telling us not to lose focus and only follow Him.”

A Teaching Principle from Jesus

June is usually the month in which schools are preparing for the opening of classes. But because of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the opening of classes was pushed back to the end of August. Just today, June 8, 2020, the Department of Education announced that there will be no face-to-face classes until a vaccine is available. Schools like Central Philippine University are now preparing for fully online classes.

Going back to the time of Jesus, we can remember that He was called a Rabbi, a teacher. In the Great Commission, we can see that Jesus said Christians must teach the next generation of disciples to obey everything that Jesus has commanded the first batch of disciples.

What principle can we learn from the teaching ministry of Jesus?

Jesus put forward a "teaching them to obey" principle.

Indeed, there is a big difference between teaching what is right and wrong, and teaching people not just to know but more importantly, to do what is right, and shun what is wrong.

Let us check our teaching perspective in the light of the principle that Jesus made. Let us not just teach people the knowledge but to empower them to do what they have learned. This is the perspective behind the American Baptist missionaries who put forward the vision of CPU that is "Exemplary Christian Education for Life."

We do not teach for the sake of teaching our students and making them achievers by their grades or scores. We teach in order for them to be Christian who live the value that they have learned. They ought not only to integrate the value of Christian faith in science, but to see both as co-existing values: *Scientia et Fides*.

Over and above this teaching principle, Jesus is teaching us to obey what He commanded. Why can Jesus say this? Why can He

command us to do what He said? Jesus can do so because He has all authority in heaven and on earth. And if you have this authority, then it simply means that Jesus is God. Jesus can command us because He is the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

The next question for us is, where can we find these commands? We can find the specific commands of Jesus in the Gospels. Let us continue to read and re-read the Gospels. We should also read the whole Bible in the light of Jesus Christ.

“There is a big difference between teaching what is right and wrong, and teaching people not just to know but more importantly, to do what is right, and shun what is wrong.”

“Let us not just teach people the knowledge but to empower them to do what they have learned.”

NEW Experience

Majority of schools start their classes on June. For the students, teachers, parents, and the society in general, this will usher a new experience.

Let us reflect using NEW as our outline:

N – Never say never to new things.

A lot of us are afraid to try new things. But if we never dare try a new food or activity, we may never know what it is like. “Fundamentally new which is also fundamentally better” – these are words that I often hear from one my favorite theologians, Dr. Lester Edwin Ruiz. This reminds us that trying new things is beneficial because it may result into something which is better. The fear that what is new may result to something worse is a deterrent to innovation.

This is what Jesus did. He challenged the old practices. He said, “It was written that ... but now I tell you ...” What He did was actually “fundamentally new but fundamentally better.”

E – Engage in new relationships.

Life is all about relationship. We always relate to one another. Jesus was open to new relationships. It was a taboo during His time to talk to women, to the poor, and to foreigners. He broke the societal traditions and engaged himself into new relationships.

Let it be that we will be open to new friendships. This does not mean that we will forego of our previous friends or relationships, but we need to build new connections. After all, we are a family.

W – Wait patiently on the Lord for new opportunities.

Many Filipinos are eagerly waiting for new jobs. Although the economy is picking up, there are still a lot of unemployed or underemployed new graduates. But the Bible is reminding us to put our hope on the Lord.

Isaiah 40:31 says, “But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles; They shall run and not be weary; They shall walk and not faint.” (NKJV)

Let us appreciate what is new and work hand-in-hand, guided by our Christian faith, to make new better.

“Trying new things is beneficial because it may result into something which is better. The fear that what is new may result to something worse is a deterrent to innovation.”

Praying for Strength to Hurdle the New Challenges

Whether we like it or not, the reality is that there will always be new challenges that we have to hurdle. Every day we face new challenges. These challenges oftentimes bring stress, discouragements, and disappointments. But Paul is teaching us to turn to God and pray for strength.

In Philippians 4:13, Paul wrote “I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.”

Why was Paul praying for strength? What were the challenges of Paul in Philippians? Let us learn what Paul did when he faced challenges.

First, the challenge of being in chains.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi while he was in chains. Paul turned this challenge into a blessing. There are three things that Paul listed here.

Philippians 1:12 “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

Because of Paul's imprisonment, he became a writer. The most successful ministry of Paul was his writing ministry. Almost half (48%) of the books in our New Testament are from Paul. These are the letters of Paul that were mostly written while in prison. Paul created and made use of an opportunity out of the adversary.

Philippians 1:13 “As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.”

Paul shared the Gospel to the guards. He could have been bitter and blame the Lord. Instead, he saw it as an opportunity to share the Gospel.

Philippians 1:14 “Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.”

The other Christians were inspired by what happened to Paul. They were now ready to become martyrs also for the sake of the Gospel. They were inspired by the idea that if Paul could do it in prison, why not us who are not in prison.

Second, the challenge of conflicts in the church.

Philippians 4:2 “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.”

These two women had an interpersonal relationship that affected the church. Just imagine that the names of these two women are in the Bible because of their interpersonal conflict.

Conflicts are inevitable. It is bound to happen. We are all human beings. There are many churches that were divided because of interpersonal conflicts. But what can we do? What is the advice of Paul?

We must put into heart the advice of Paul written in Philippians 2:1-5 “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”

We oftentimes focus on how we are different rather than how we are alike. If we see ourselves as a group who has a common goal, conflicts become healthy and can offer an opportunity for growth.

Third, the challenge of financial troubles.

Paul had financial troubles. He was working as a tent maker, but it was not enough. In Philippians he wrote that he was in chains. So, he was in need of money.

In Philippians 4:10, 14 Paul thanked the Christians in Philippi because of their financial help. “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.”

Paul received their gifts that they sent through Epaphroditus. In turn, Paul prayed to God to bless them. Philippians 4:19 says, “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

Fourth, the challenge of discipleship.

Discipleship is about our lifestyle first and foremost. People have to see it in our lives. Jesus said, “come and follow me.” Can we say that?

Paul wrote that they should follow what he has done. Philippians 4:9 says, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

Paul trained two disciples that he mentioned here: Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Paul gave them words of approval. Though they may be young, they have lived up to the expectations of Paul.

For Timothy he said, “I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare.” (Phi 2:20)

For Epaphroditus he said, “Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him,” (Phi 2:29)

Our church must train our young people. We must invest in them like what Paul did. We must endeavor to pass on what we have learned in our time to the younger generation. Discipleship and mentoring do not happen overnight. To ensure that our faith lives on, let us pass it on.

Like Paul, let us pray to turn the challenges in life as life-changing opportunities. God gave Paul the strength to hurdle the challenges in his life. Because of this we are assured that God will also strengthen us as we face the challenges that will surely come our way.

Let us pray that each and one of us will see light in every challenge that we face.

“We must endeavor to pass on what we have learned in our time to the younger generation. Discipleship and mentoring do not happen overnight. To ensure that our faith lives on, let us pass it on.”

Freedom from Discrimination

Every 12th of June our country celebrates Independence Day – a day of freedom from foreign oppressors.

What about our freedom in Jesus Christ?

Paul wrote in Galatians 3:26-28 “For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

There are three areas pointed out in these verses:

First, we are free from racial discrimination.

According to the Old Testament Law, the Jews had been above the Gentiles for they are called the “chosen people of God.” But in Jesus Christ, we become children of God through our faith and neither by our color or race.

Second, we are free from class or economic discrimination.

In the New Testament times, civil rights belonged to free men only; the slaves had nothing. A slave was not even considered a human being. But in Jesus Christ, our status is changed. We are all equal. Hence, let us treat each other as equal.

Third, we are free from gender discrimination.

Under the Old Testament law, the male sex had great privileges. Males alone can be circumcised -- the sign of the covenant. The males alone can be the priests. But in Jesus Christ, baptism can be applied to male and female. And “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” Acts 2:17. Men and women have equal status in the eyes of God.

As God released us from the shackles of discrimination, may we apply this also in our dealings with our fellowmen.

Freedom in Christ

Last June 12, 2020, the Philippines celebrated its 122 years of independence from Spain. It was during that time that the Philippine National Anthem was first performed publicly and also the first time that the Philippine flag was unfurled. A few years later, another country, the U.S.A., colonized the Philippines. It was on July 4, 1946 that the Philippines was granted independence again. It was in 1962 when President Diosdado Macapagal declared that June 12 is the proper date to celebrate the independence of the country.

In our current situation, many Filipinos are reflecting on what freedom means as citizens of the Republic of the Philippines. For Christians, Paul has written a beautiful explanation of what freedom is.

Here are four passages in which Paul described what freedom is:

First, we are free in the context of the lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:22 -- "For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave."

Second, we have been freed by Jesus, but this does not mean we have the right to sin intentionally.

Paul expressed it eloquently in 1 Corinthians 10:23 -- "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive.

Third, the freedom that Jesus gave us should inspire us to do things that break any yoke that enslaves people.

Paul gave this reminder in Galatians 5:1 -- "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Fourth, we have been set free by Jesus to have a loving relationship with one another, and not to abuse others.

Paul clearly explained what our freedom is for in Galatians 5:13 --" You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."

This freedom is a reminder that we have been set free by Jesus, but this freedom, just like our constitutional rights, is coupled with responsibilities.

"We have been freed by Jesus, but this does not mean we have the right to sin intentionally."

"The freedom that Jesus gave us should inspire us to do things that break any yoke that enslaves people."

Live like John the Baptist

Every St. John the Baptist Day in the Philippines, you can see people bringing buckets of water and emptying it to unsuspecting people. Some were angry but generally, with some grumblings, they accepted this tradition of being splashed with water during that day.

What did Jesus say about John the Baptist?

First, John was burning and shining light.

In John 5:35 Jesus said that “John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.”

In Greek, John was a *lyknos* or a luminary – a derived subordinate light. Jesus was *phos* or the light. John derives his light from Jesus. In the same manner, we must live our lives like John. We must get our light from the true light – Jesus Christ.

Second, John was more than a prophet.

Jesus said in Matthew 11:9 “Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.”

While the Old Testament Prophets prophesied about the coming of the Messiah, John, on the other hand, was commissioned to prepare the way of the Lord. He not only pointed out and saw Jesus but had the honor of dying for the truth that Jesus is the Christ.

We may never be like John, but we can live a life that leads people to Jesus Christ. Let us share the light that God has given us.

“Let us share the light that God has given us.”

Praise and Worship

2 Chronicles 5 is about the dedication of the 1st Temple of Israel situated in Jerusalem. What can we learn from this chapter with regards to praising and worshipping God?

First, the leaders of the church must be an example of all the believers.

2 Chronicles 5:2 says, “Then Solomon summoned to Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the Lord’s covenant from Zion, the City of David.”

If you volunteer to become a leader of the church, you have to accept the responsibility and accountability that comes with it.

Second, as Christians we have to make sacrifices.

2 Chronicles 5:6 says “...and King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted.”

For the Israelites in the Old Testament, they used the sheep and cattle to be the sacrifice. They have to pay it for themselves.

The point is that there will be a lot of times that we will make sacrifices for the sake of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have made sacrifices before, and we should continue to do so.

Going to church is a sacrifice. Why? You could do the laundry. Practicing in the choir is sacrifice. You could go to the mall and just hang out. Giving an offering is a sacrifice. Why? It could be added to your daily budget.

Third, the study of the Word of God must be the primary focus of the church.

2 Chronicles 5:7 says, “The priests then brought the ark of the Lord’s covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim.”

The preaching of the pastor could be of help to the people, but it is not a substitute to the Word of God. The singing of the choir can enhance the worship experience, but it is not a substitute to the Word of God.

The church is here to remind each one of us to read the Word of God, and to live out what the Word of God is telling us.

Fourth, we have to prepare ourselves when we go to church.

2 Chronicles 5:11 says, “All the priests who were there had consecrated themselves, regardless of their divisions.”

The primary purpose in going to church is to praise and worship the Lord. We do it through the whole liturgy. Singing, praying, preaching, and meditating. But we have to prepare ourselves.

During Biblical times, the consecration involves water purification and other rituals. These rituals remind the Israelites that God is holy and must be approached in holiness.

What about us? How do we prepare ourselves before going to church? Do we ready ourselves to praise and worship God?

Fifth, music is an integral part in praising and worshipping God.

2 Chronicles 5:12 says, All the Levites who were musicians—Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun and their sons and relatives—stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen, and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets.

These verses show to us that music plays a vital role in the Temple worship. It adds meaning to the worship experience.

The content of their song is noticeably short yet profound. 2 Chronicles 5:12 says, "... the singers raised their praise to the Lord and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever.""

Because of that, God was pleased. What is the proof? The proof is found in 2 Chronicles 5:13-14 - "Then the temple of the Lord was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God."

Let us pray that every time we go to church the presence of the Lord can be felt in our midst. Let us also go to church with the consciousness to praise and worship the Lord, and that nothing hinders it.

"The primary purpose in going to church is to praise and worship the Lord. We do it through the whole liturgy. Singing, praying, preaching, and meditating."

SONA and the State of the Tribes of Israel Before

Every year, the Philippine President would deliver a SONA or State of the Nation Address to the Filipino people through the Senate and Congress.

In the Bible, Joshua, the successor Moses, made a speech. This can be found the last chapter of the book of Joshua. We can call it as his own ‘state of the tribes of Israel.’ Joshua 24:1 states “Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.”

What are the things that Joshua told the assembled people? What can we learn from Joshua?

First, the moment that you accepted God in your life is also the moment that you should turn away from other gods.

Joshua reminded the people that their foreparents before worship other gods. But since they have accepted Yahweh as the one true God, they should not go back to their old beliefs. Joshua 24:14 says, “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the LORD.”

Joshua made a choice. He said that as for him and his household, they will serve the Lord. All the tribes of Israel answered that they too will serve the Lord.

Second, God will not abandon those who trust in Him.

Joshua reminded the assembly that God has not forgotten them. God has shown time and time again that He hears the prayers of the people. Joshua 24:5 says, “Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out.”

Third, God is faithful to His promises.

Joshua reminded the people that God always remembers His promises. God promised to Abraham that his descendants will eventually live in the Promised Land. They eventually did. Joshua 24:11 says, “Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands.”

At the end of the speech of Joshua, he got a stone to serve as a witness. He was telling the people that what they have promised must be put into action. Joshua said, “See!” he said to all the people, “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.” (24:27)

Joshua made an extraordinary to address the tribes of Israel. And the people responded well. It was the start of the Golden Age of Israel.

“The moment that you accepted God in your life is also the moment that you should turn away from other gods.”

SING to the Lord and for the Lord

Why do we need to keep on SINGing to Lord and for the Lord?

First, S - Singing is a prescription from the Bible, and should be continued in our churches.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:26 “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.”

It is not just the preaching or the teaching of the Word of God that will strengthen the church but also the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Singing is actually one of the things that we will be doing throughout eternity. In Revelation 5:12-13 we have been given a peek of what is happening in heaven, and it includes singing.

Second, I - Invite people to hear the Good News of Salvation to people when we sing.

There is a great story in Acts 16. Paul and Silas were severely flogged and then shackled inside their prison cell but at about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

They were praying and singing despite of their awfully bad situation. That is lesson for us. Can we still pray and sing when we are in a bad situation? Paul and Silas gave us a good example.

Now, why were the guards and the prisoners convinced that what they are singing and praying is real? They were convinced because when the earthquake happened, they did not escape although there was an opportunity for them to do so. What is interesting was that the other prisoners followed their example. They did not escape also. That is what an example should be.

The result of this is that the jailer decided to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior as well as his whole family. And in that early morning, the jailer risked everything when they went out of prison so that Paul and Silas can baptize him and his family.

And to think that all of these started with a prayer and singing of songs. That is how God can use our prayers and songs.

Third, N - New music comes from the heart as we encounter new experiences from God.

We make music out of our experiences because music is easy to remember. This is the reason why Paul told the Ephesians to sing.

Ephesians 5:19 says, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.”

Now here is a question to ponder. How many psalms can you memorize? Hymns? Spiritual songs? Paul is telling us to memorize these songs because it can help us, and others.

Fourth, G - Gratefulness to God should lead us to sing.

But what kind of song? Paul wrote in Colossians 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

Three types are given here - psalms, hymns, spiritual songs. We actually do not know the tune of most of the songs in the Bible. Only the tunes of some songs were passed down. But we can do is give new tunes to the psalms of David. We can compose spiritual songs that give praises to God.

But more importantly, Paul tells us that it is because of our thanksgiving to God that we can sing.

Let us continue to sing to the Lord and for the Lord. In doing so, God is pleased, and people will hear the Gospel of salvation.

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis is a biological process by which an animal physically develops after birth or hatching, involving a conspicuous and relatively abrupt change in the animal's body structure through cell growth and differentiation. (Wikipedia).

In the Bible, metamorphosis was used in Matthew 17:2. “And he was transfigured (metemorphoóthee) before them. And his face did shine as the sun: and his garments became white as snow. Romans 12:2 also used metamorphosis – “but be transformed (metamorphoústhe) by the renewing of your mind...” “Meta” means “to change” and “morphe” means “form.”

Metamorphosis is also used to refer to the life cycle of a butterfly. A caterpillar is going to become a butterfly. This is so because of its inner nature. All it has to do is to struggle and grow up.

We are like this caterpillar. But when we received Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, He now lives in us. Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

Let us continue to grow in Jesus Christ until the “new nature” that is inside us will come out. When this happens, the caterpillar has now become a beautiful butterfly – “This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“Let us continue to grow in Jesus Christ until the “new nature” that is inside us will come out.”

The Promise of Salvation

As Christians, what are the promises that God has given to us? There are many promises as written in the whole Bible. One of these is promise of salvation.

Salvation means deliverance from the penalty and consequence of sin.

There are three important aspects of salvation:

Firstly, Salvation means that we are delivered from our sinful nature.

Paul in Romans 7:18ff chronicled his struggles because sin is living inside him. He uttered, “Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Secondly, Salvation means that we are delivered from worldly ways.

Paul in Ephesians 2:1-3 tells us that when we are doing the ways of the world, our commander is the Devil who is enticing us to follow our passionate desires and inclinations.

Thirdly, Salvation means that we are delivered from eternal death.

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)

Salvation is “here and now, but also there and not yet.”

“Salvation means that we are delivered from worldly ways.”

The Promise of Victory over Temptation

God has given us many promises. One of these is the promise of victory over temptation.

The Devil will continue to sow seeds of doubt in our lives. Some fall to the temptation of doubting the Promise of Salvation in Jesus Christ. The constant attack of the Devil will be the temptations in the weaknesses of our life.

The truth is that all believers will be tempted and tested. If we will battle the temptations in our own strength, then we will surely fail.

This is where the Promise of Victory over Temptation comes in. Let us remember that as Christians, it is now Christ who is giving us strength. Galatians 2:20 reminds us that we have been crucified with Christ and it is not us who live, but Christ lives in us.

If we are tempted, that is normal. It is not yet sin. But giving in to temptation is a sin.

1 Corinthians 10:13 teaches us that God will be there for us when temptation knocks on our door – “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

“If we are tempted, that is normal. It is not yet sin. But giving in to temptation is a sin.”

The Promise of Forgiveness

In the Bible, there are many promises that God has given. One of these is the promise of forgiveness.

Learning to live a Christian life is like becoming a baby again. In learning how to walk, we have a lot of ups and downs. The objective of the Devil then is to make us fall down and never go up. The Devil will continue to do that all throughout our life.

If we fall down and sinned against God, and when the Holy Spirit convicts us of that sin, let us pray and confess to God immediately. Let us ask for God's forgiveness and mercy.

1 John 1:9 promises us that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

God's grace is indeed abundant. But we should never abuse God's grace. Paul said in Romans 6:1-2 "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!"

Let us walk away from our sins. Jesus has forgiven us and He is telling us like what He told to a woman accused of adultery, "Go! And sin no more!"

"If we fall down and sinned against God, and when the Holy Spirit convicts us of that sin, let us pray and confess to God immediately. Let us ask for God's forgiveness and mercy."

The Promise of God's Presence

We thank God for being true to His promises. One of the many promises in the Bible is the promise of God's presence.

Because we are human, we become frustrated, we feel weak, and we feel lonely. But God made a promise to us. His presence will be with us in every situation that we need Him.

In my Systematic Theology subject under Dr. Johnny V. Gumban, we learned about God's omnipresence. One day, Dr. Gumban asked us, "If God is everywhere, then is He under your chair? Is He inside the Coke bottle that you're drinking?" We were baffled. Dr. Gumban proceeded to answer his question. "If you need God to be under your chair, then He will be there for you. If not, then it is useless for God to be there."

As we ponder on God's abiding presence, let us reflect on the following verses that promised us that God will be there for us.

Philippians 1:6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:24 "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

Deuteronomy 31:6 "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

Indeed, God is true to His promises. What is written in the Bible will surely be fulfilled by God.

"God made a promise to us. His presence will be with us in every situation that we need Him."

We can Depend on God

God is dependable. Throughout all the ages God has shown that we can depend on Him.

Psalms 81 was written by Asaph to remind the Israelites that they can depend on God. What can we learn from this Psalm?

First, we must not forget what God has done in and through our lives.

Psalm 81:6-7 “I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands were set free from the basket. In your distress you called, and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud; I tested you at the waters of Meribah.”

God reminded them what He did in Egypt and in the wilderness up to the time that they entered the Promised Land. God also appointed the festivals that the Israelites should commemorate once they will enter the Promised Land. God commanded Moses that the people will celebrate these feasts. These can be found in Leviticus 23 - The Sabbath, The Passover, and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, Offering the Firstfruits, The Festival of Weeks, The Festival of Trumpets, The Day of Atonement, The Festival of Tabernacles. All of these have significant meanings in the life of the Israelites and these feasts were also fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Every year the nation of Israel does this.

These feasts should remind us to make celebrations that we can remember what God has done in and through us.

Second, we must listen to God for in doing so He will provide our needs.

Here is the promise of God to us in Psalm 81: 8-10: “Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.”

But there are conditions in those verses as well. What are these?

1. “Hear me, my people”
How can we hear God? Read the Bible. Go to church.
Listen to sermons. Listen to Christian music.
2. “I will warn you if you would only listen to me”
How can we hear the warnings of God? Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. God can use any situation to warn you.
In the Bible, God would often use dreams to warn people. You need to open your eyes and ears to the signs of God.
3. “You shall have no foreign god among you”
Let us examine ourselves if we have idols in our lives.
What are these things that hinder us in focusing ourselves to God alone?
4. “You shall not worship any god other than me. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt.”
We must worship God only. And who is this God? God introduced himself as the one who gave them freedom out of Egypt. This is the God of the Bible.

Third, we must depend on God and not in ourselves.

Psalm 81:11-12 are verses tinged with sadness. “But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So, I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.”

When Israel ceased to exist in the map of the world in 70AD, nobody thought that they will one day become a nation again. But on May 14, 1948, after more than 2,000 years, it happened. Israel became a nation again. It was a fulfillment of a prophecy.

May we never forget that God is trustworthy before, now, and forevermore.

A Tribute to Rose

The maritime tragedy that happened in Iloilo Strait claimed 28 lives when three passenger boats capsized last August 3, 2019. One of those who died was Rose Telis. She was a faithful church member of Bacolod Bethany Church where I pastor during weekends. Her husband, who survived the incident, together with their two children, family members and the community of faith, buried her today.

It was a funeral that no pastor would want to preach on. But I had to. There is one story that I had to share. This is a story that gave an assurance to her family. This is a story of Rose's faith in our Lord Jesus Christ up to the end of her life.

When their boat, M/B Jenny Vince, capsized, Rose and the other passengers were trapped inside. They were shouting and knocking on the hull so that rescuers outside could hear them. Richie Bustamante and his son Brent Kian were one of those who were panicking inside the boat. Both of them were rescued later and they told a story of a woman who held the hands of Brent after she prayed for them. They testified that it was the prayer of this woman that gave them peace and confidence that they will be rescued. But due to the heavy smoke inside the capsized boat, they were not able to see the woman again. When a group of people showed this father and son the picture of Rose Telis, they definitely identified her as the woman who prayed, gave them assurances, and held their hands.

Rose is not with us anymore, but I believe that she has already heard these words from Jesus - "well done my good and faithful servant."

Life is indeed short. We do not know when we will die. A life that matters is a life that is surrendered to Jesus Christ. A life that has meaning is a life that fulfills the calling of God. A life that is worthy of emulation is a life that is committed to Jesus Christ up to the end.

Thank you Rose for your life.

Our God is Trustworthy

The month of August 2019 is remarkably interesting in terms of prophecies in the Bible.

What Asaph wrote in Psalm 81 came true in the olden times, and also in the present. Verses 11-12 say, “But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So, I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.”

The words of Asaph were a warning. The Assyrians and Babylonians had attacked them already. This psalm was written when the second temple was rebuilt and rededicated during the time of Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah during that time.

The Israelites listened and God brought them back. And then the next generation did not listen to God. So, the Greeks came, and the Romans came. And Israel was gone by the year 70 AD. It was only on May 14, 1948, more than 2,000 years, when Israel became a nation.

Psalm 81 was one of the prophecies that were fulfilled when modern Israel became a nation. They listened to God, and God brought them back again. It was an impossibility by human standards, but God did that.

Psalm 81:13 says, “If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways, how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes! Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him, and their punishment would last forever. But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”

Last August 10-11, 2019 was Tisha B'Av. It is the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. According to the Jewish calendar, it is the 9th day of the month of Av or sometime between July and August every year. This is the period of time during which the Israelis mark the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

According to history, both Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed on this date. It started their diaspora and period of suffering for all Jews.

Days before Tisha B'Av, on August 6, 2019, foxes were seen for the first time for more than 2,000 years in the Western Wall. Shmuel Rabinowitz, rabbi of the Western Wall and holy sites said, "One cannot refrain from crying at the site of the fulfillment of the prophecy of 'foxes will walk on it.'" The rabbi was referring to Lamentations 5:15-18 that say "The joy of our heart has ceased; Our dance has turned into mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned! Because of this our heart is faint; Because of these things our eyes grow dim; Because of Mount Zion, which is desolate, with foxes walking about on it." They are reading these verses every year, but it was only this year that they have seen foxes.

Talmud Tractate Makkot 24b reads, "Until the prophecy of Uriah with regard to the destruction of the city was fulfilled, I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled, as the two prophecies are linked."

And what is the prophecy of Zechariah? It is about the rebuilding of Jerusalem. It can be found in Zechariah 8:7-8 -- This is what the Lord Almighty says: "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God."

These events and prophecies in the Bible should give us the confidence that our God is trustworthy before, now, and forevermore.

"They listened to God, and God brought them back again. It was an impossibility by human standards, but God did that."

Living the Fruit of the Spirit

We visited Silliman University, the sister school of Central Philippine University, during the celebration of their 118th University Founder's Day. Their theme was “Living the Fruit of the Spirit by Grace.”

Galatians 5:22-23 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things, there is no law.” What can we learn from these verses?

First, it is only if we are rooted in Jesus Christ that we can produce the fruit of the Spirit.

If our lives are rooted in our sinful nature, then the fruit will be the following: sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. (Galatians 5:19-21)

Let us check the manifestations of our lives if we are rooted in Christ or rooted in our sinful nature.

Second, the fruit of the Spirit includes all, and not just one or two.

It should be noted that the word used by Paul here is “fruit” and not “fruits.” It simply means that if the Holy Spirit is in our lives, it should manifest not just love but also joy; not just peace but also patience, kindness, and goodness; it should show not just faithfulness but also gentleness, and self-control.

Third, no force on Earth or any law can go against the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul boldly declared, “Against such things, there is no law.” This tells us that even if we make man-made laws that will block the fruit of the Spirit, it will still find a way to manifest itself. As such, let our lives be a channel to spread the fruit of the Spirit and not a fence that blocks it. Let us live a spirit-filled life!

Living Sacrifice

Paul challenges Christians to become “living sacrifices.” To be a living sacrifice, the passage is telling us three things:

First, we need to give God our bodies (v. 1).

Since our bodies now belong to God, we should use it not for sinful pleasures and purposes, but God’s glory. The body of a Christian is now the temple of the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We must exalt God through our body as Philippians 1:20-21 tells us “to live is Christ.”

Second, we must give God our mind (v. 2a).

The world is controlling our minds if we are not conscious of it. But God wants to transform our mind. The word “transform” is akin to the concept of “metamorphosis.”

One quotation says, “If the world controls your thinking, you are a conformer. If God controls your thinking, you are a transformer.”

Third, we must give God our will (v. 2b).

It is true that the mind controls the body, and the will controls the mind. We are mistaken if we think that we can control the will through “positive thinking” or sheer “willpower.” We need to surrender our wills to God. As Jesus Christ taught us to pray – “Not my will, but Thy will be done.”

Surrendering our body, mind, and will to the Lord allows us to live a Christian life and be a blessing to others.

“Since our bodies now belong to God, we should use it not for sinful pleasures and purposes, but God’s glory.”

KINDER Day

My alma mater in Kindergarten – Mama’s Love Kindergarten School celebrated its annual Kinder Day during a worship service at La Carlota Evangelical Church. Let me share to you a portion of my sermon using the outline KINDER:

K – Know that the Lord is God.

Let us teach our children to know God and to be conscious that God is the owner of everything. Psalm 100:3 says, “Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves.” This means that we must be good stewards of God’s creation.

I – Integrate Science and Faith

Allow me to share how Dr. Ben Malayang, the previous President of Silliman University, elaborated on this. He said, “Here at Silliman University we teach biology or the study of life and living organisms; but at the end of the day, the bottom line of teaching biology is teaching the students how great is our God and how beautiful is our world.”

N – Never give up on your children

No matter how tired or distressed we are, giving up on our children is one the worst things that we can do. If we give up on them, then it is like telling them that they have no worth or value. There are two things that we can constantly do like what the father of the Prodigal Son did: (1) Pray for our children and (2) Continue on loving our children.

D – Develop their character

There is one quotation that can remind us that molding the character of our children is very important:

“Watch your thoughts, they become words.
Watch your words, they become actions.

Watch your actions, they become habits.
Watch your habits, they become your character.
Watch your character, it becomes your destiny.”

E – Encourage your children to pursue their dreams

We must talk to our children about their dreams. We must take note and take appropriate actions so that our children can pursue their dreams. Walking on the moon surface might have been a farfetched dream for a young child. But we can surmise that the parents of Neil Armstrong nurtured his dream of becoming an astronaut.

R – Relate with your children

Let us listen and pay attention to our children. Let us always find time for our children. Let us plan activities that we can go and have fun together. Let us also remember to be a kid.

There goes KINDER, a basic reminder as to how to care for the younger generations. This is best to be started in the childhood years but is not only confined in kindergarten. As our children grow, we need to continuously apply K-I-N-D-E-R to nurture the Christian within.

“No matter how tired or distressed we are, giving up on our children is one the worst things that we can do. If we give up on them, then it is like telling them that they have no worth or value.”

How to Bring out the Best in People

Life is all about relationships. If we always relate to one another, then how can we bring out the best in each other? 1 Thessalonians 5:11 reminds us to “Encourage one another and build each other up...”

Let us ponder on six biblical principles.

First, let us accept the uniqueness of each other.

God made every one of us different. Even twins are different. We cannot relate to other people if we do not accept them. 1 Corinthians 12:6 says, “God works through Different People in Different Ways.” Relating to one another does not mean that you are identical to each other. There just needs to be a common ground.

Second, let us trust each other.

A quote says, “Nothing brings out the best in people faster than having somebody believe in them and trust them with responsibility.” In these troubled times, we may find it difficult to trust others. But God reminds us that our relationships should be rooted in trust.

Luke 16:10, 12 says, “Whoever can be trusted with a little can also be trusted with a lot. If you cannot be trusted with things that belong to somebody else, who will give you things of your own.”

Third, let us expect the best from each other.

1 Corinthians 13:7 reminds us that “If you love someone... You will always believe in him, and always expect the best of Him.”

Our expectations have a great influence on others. Studies show that people tend to perform at the level they are expected to perform.

Another quote says, “Every great leader knows the power of positive expectation. Expect the best.” If we believe that our

colleagues are bound to fail, they will most likely fail. If we believe that they can do it, they can still fail from time to time but will surely grow.

Fourth, let us affirm the value of each other.

Psalms 130:13-14 declares that we are not born by accident. The Psalmist is saying to God, "You made my whole being. You formed me in my mother's body. I praise You because You made me in an amazing and wonderful way. What You have done is wonderful."

We need to hear that we are valued. Actually, studies show that people are striving to be affirmed. We want to know that we matter; that our life has a meaning and significance.

Fifth, let us correct each other without condemnation.

Let us accept that all of us need correction. But we can correct with love and not through condemnation. If we really love somebody, we will correct them in a way that we will not hurt them. Let us correct the deed. A true friend and loved one will appreciate an honest correction.

Hebrews 10:6 tells us that "The Lord disciplines those whom He loves."

Sixth, let us never give up on each other.

1 Corinthians 13:7 summed up what love can do -- "Love knows no limits to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope. It can outlast anything."

All of us have failures in life. One of the most important things that we should learn is on how to forgive ourselves. Even if we have God's forgiveness, we sometimes do not know how to move on because we have not forgiven each other.

Let us give each other another chance! Through these, we may be reminded as to how to be a better version of who we are yesterday and how to bring the best out of people. You do not need to be a leader or someone in position to do so.

How should I give?

Giving of offerings for the ministry of the church is one of the things that the Bible teaches us. Luke 21:1-4 give us some insights on how to give. Let us learn from the following verses:

First, let us give with the consciousness that God is watching what we give and how much we give.

Luke 21:1-2 say, “As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins.”

If we know that God is watching what we give, then it changes everything!

Another thing to see here is that they gave to the temple treasury. There was an offering box. This means that we have to give to the church.

It is good to give to other causes like charity or giving our scholarships. But it should not be a substitute in giving to the church.

Now aside from giving to the church, we have another responsibility. And what is that? To give to the needy. There are many passages in the Bible that remind us of this responsibility.

Paul reminds us in Romans 12:11-13 “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

Second, we must give whether we are in plenty or in want.

Luke 21:3-4 say, “Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

Jesus actually did not put down the rich people here. Jesus did not say do not follow them. Jesus is actually telling the rich people that they should continue in giving large amounts. In a parallel verse in Mark 12:41, it says, “Many rich people threw in large amounts.”

Jesus is also telling us that even if we are poor and does not have enough, it is not an excuse not to give. We can still have something to give. In this instance, it was two small copper coins.

How can Jesus say this to a widow and a poor woman? Jesus could have said to the poor widow: do not give because you are poor. But Jesus did not stop the poor widow from giving.

We can see two things here:

1. The poor widow trusted that God would provide for her needs. Remember the widow of Zarephath? She did not have enough but she shared her last meal to Prophet Elijah. God provided for their needs.
2. God provided for her needs through the community of faith. Widows and orphans were people who had no means to take care of themselves during Biblical times. This was because they had no right. Their right was attached to a man. All that she could do was to beg in the streets.

So, Jesus had this command to the Christians, the church, the community of faith. James wrote in 1:27 “Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.”

Let us give not just because God is watching but also because God will use what we give to help others and to spread the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ.

Be Involved!

One of the subjects in the CPU College of Theology is Contemporary Issues and the Church. This subject teaches us of biblical and theological reasons why the church should get involved in socio-political issues.

Let me share some of the reasons why the church should say something about what is happening around us:

First, God is the Creator of everything. Meaning, our mission is not limited in the four corners of the church and other “churchy” affairs.

Second, God is interested in the affairs of His people. The exodus experience teaches us that God is watching what is happening. Our God is not a distant God. This means that we should also see what is happening around and be interested in what God wants to say about it.

Third, God has appointed Prophets to remind the people what kind of society God wants. Meaning, we have a prophetic ministry. We are modern-day prophets and prophetess. Throughout the Bible, prophets do not concern themselves in predicting the future but on preaching on an impending disaster if the people will not repent and turn from their wicked ways.

Fourth, God has given His people the responsibility to be the stewards of His creation. Meaning, we have the mission of restoring the integrity of God’s creation. We must re-read Genesis 1 and know the command that God wants us to fulfill.

Fifth, God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ to teach us how we ought to live. Matthew 5-7, for example, is full of imperative commands that we should do.

Sixth, God’s message through the Epistles teaches us that as Christians we must overcome evil with good. Our lives should produce the fruit of the Spirit. Our faith in Jesus should produce good works.

Seventh, God has given us a vision of what kind of world He wants us to live in. A world with no violence (Micah 4); a world where we co-exist peacefully with others (Isaiah 11); and a world where righteousness and justice are evident (Amos 5). This could be realities in our communities when we live out our faith daily.

I hope that these biblical reasons give us the courage to speak on what is happening around us and do something about it.

“Our God is not a distant God. This means that we should also see what is happening around and be interested in what God wants to say about it.”

“Our lives should produce the fruit of the Spirit. Our faith in Jesus should produce good works.”

How to Treat Others?

Most of us have experienced discrimination in one way or another. This is because if somebody is not of the same race, gender, political color, or economic status, we tend to look up to them or look down on them.

What can we learn from the Bible? What should be our attitude in dealing with others?

Moses was given some commands by God before they entered the Promised Land. Let me share some of these commands that can be found in Leviticus.

Leviticus 19:33 “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them.”

First, we must not mistreat other people.

This tells us that when something bad was done to us, we must not do it to others. We should do what is right even if we were wronged.

How do we mistreat others? Emotionally, when we withhold our love to them. Physically, when we abuse them. Intellectually, when we belittle their ideas or do not acknowledge them. Spiritually, when we believe that God is with us only.

Leviticus 19:34a “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.”

Second, we must love others as we love ourselves. Jesus repeated this later on.

This was very difficult for the Israelites, but God commanded them to do it. The natural instinct would be to cast away others who are not in your family. But God told them to accept others.

God is actually telling them and us now that all of us are brothers and sisters because there is only one Creator. If we understand this, then there will be no war. There will be no territories and no borders. Why? Because everything belongs to God and we are just caretakers.

In the history of Israel, there was a time that they followed the commands of God. But later on, they forgot about it. Prophets would always remind them of these commands. Most of the time the prophets would tell them that their freedom was granted by God so they must obey the commands.

The commands of God in Leviticus are not for the Israelites only but for all of us. Let us not mistreat others but love them the way God loves all of us. We should learn to see ourselves as creations of God rather than separate ourselves in terms of country of origin and religion.

“Let us not mistreat others but love them the way God loves all of us. We should learn to see ourselves as creations of God rather than separate ourselves in terms of country of origin and religion.”

The CALL of God

The advent of telephone technology, and later the Internet made the word “call”, a mainstream in our society. In the Bible, what does it mean to be called by God?

Let me share four things:

C - Call comes from God.

In Ephesians 4:11-13 Paul wrote that “Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers...” In other verses, Paul mentioned also other gifts that God has bestowed to people. This means that God continually calls people according to their gifts.

What is the purpose of the calling? Paul continued “so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

A - Accept the call of God.

God calls but we have to respond to it. For example, we can in the story of Jonah that God called him to preach in Nineveh, but he refused to accept it.

He said no to God and ran away. This is the same with some of us. We ran away when God calls us. This is because we have a choice. But then God is persistent. God through a big fish got Jonah, and he eventually went to Nineveh. God will always find a way to remind us of our call.

We will always have a choice. But the best choice is always to follow the command of God.

L - Learn how to do the call of God.

Paul wrote to Timothy to remind him that after he has accepted the call of God, he must learn how to fulfill the calling of God.

2 Timothy 2:15 is also a reminder for us - “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

L - Love and live out the call of God.

One great example of a person who lived out the call of God despite the odds is Ezekiel.

Imagine the content of his call - Ezekiel 2:4-5 “The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' And whether they listen or fail to listen--for they are a rebellious house--they will know that a prophet has been among them.”

Who among us can readily say “yes” if you will be sent to obstinate and stubborn people? Probably not all of us. But Ezekiel gave us a great example.

We must live out your calling from God even though the people will not listen. This is because all of us will someday be accountable in front of God. This is not a call that you will just listen to and drop. This is a call that we need to accept, fulfill, love, and live out.

“We will always have a choice. But the best choice is always to follow the command of God.”

University DAY

University Day is one of the events that Centralians look forward to every year. Since CPU is a Christian institution of higher learning, what reflections can we draw from this week of games and activities?

Let me use UDAY as the outline of our reflection. U-Day is a time to:

U - Unite in our vision of Exemplary Christian Education for Life (EXCEL)

Our vision challenges us to live Christ-like lives. Are we up to the challenge of being an example of what it means to be a Christian?

D - Declare God's goodness and faithfulness

The festivities of U-day should be geared towards the declaration that God is to be glorified for all the wonderful things that He has done in and through CPU.

A - Attend to games and literary events

U-day is a time to take a break from academics. Centralians must have a balance of curricular and extra-curricular activities. This is a time to nurture our God-given talents as we share it to others.

Y - Yearn for more fellowship

Centralians always look forward to celebrating U-day with classmates and friends. Let it be that we will all find time to cultivate our relationships.

This is a reminder that U-Day is not only intended for us to have fun, but for us to celebrate God's blessings to our University.

Grandparents as APOstles

At one time, I introduced my mother-in-law, Melida Agriam, to Dr. Lee Spitzer, a good friend who later became the General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches. My mother-in-law introduced herself as an “apostle” who is doing “apostolic ministry.” Lee was baffled and asked her “how could it be?” She answered that “apo” is the Ilonggo word for grandchild, and she is doing “apostolic ministry” because she is taking care of her “apo.” Lee was visibly overjoyed by this explanation that he said that when he goes back to the US, he will tell his daughter to give him an “apo” so that he too will become an “apostle.”

Looking back at this conversation I reflected that in the truest sense of the word, grandparents are indeed apostles.

Apostle is defined as “one sent on a mission” or originally, an apostle is part of a “New Testament group sent out to preach the gospel and made up especially of Christ's 12 original disciples and Paul.”

Naomi in the Old Testament and Lois in the New Testament are great examples of a grandmother. Naomi was the grandmother of Obed. Obed later became the father of Jesse and grandfather of King David. On the other hand, Lois was the grandmother of Timothy.

What they did was to pass on stories of their family so that the next generation will know their heritage. They also passed on the legacy of faith to their grandchildren.

Hopefully, we will have grandparents like Naomi and Lois - apostles sent on a mission to take care of their grandchildren. Prayerfully, we hope that the “apo” will soon embark on the mission and pass on what they learned from the “apostles” they learned from.

Make a Choice

Every day we make choices. It is disheartening to hear the testimonies of “whistleblowers” during the investigation of the 10-billion pesos “Pork barrel” scam in 2013. What the Philippine lawmakers did, who are involved in the corruption was a deliberate choice to steal the money of the taxpayers. This was a choice that they made.

Let us learn from Moses on what were the things that he considered when he made his choices. Moses is teaching us that:

First, we must discover the purpose of our lives.

Moses went through an identity crisis. He was asking himself, “Am I a Hebrew or an Egyptian?” “Am I a slave or a royalty?” What was his choice? Hebrews 11:24 says “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.”

Like Moses, we need to be ourselves and discover what God made us to be.

Second, we must accept responsibility for our own life.

We need to stop making excuses and blame others for what is happening in our lives. The choice that Moses made is written in Hebrews 11:25 – “He chose to be mistreated along with the People of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.”

A quote says, “A mark of maturity is when we stop blaming other people and start accepting responsibility for our own life.” This is oftentimes heard but rarely practiced.

Third, we must establish what is valuable in our life.

Moses identified his priorities and values. Hebrews 11:26 says, “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.”

Moses worked what was important and what was not. We should do that also.

Fourth, we must put our eyes on the goal.

Moses visualized his goal and focused on it. Hebrews 11:27 says, “By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the King's Anger; He persevered because He saw Him who is Invisible.”

Like Moses, our choices must be geared towards our goal. In the same way, we understand that the choices made by our political leaders and the people around us are anchored on what they perceive to be the purpose of their lives. Let us help them see the light amidst darkness that they may be able to accept responsibility and establish what is valuable based on what God has taught us.

“We need to stop making excuses and blame others for what is happening in our lives.”

“We must establish what is valuable in our life.”

Miracle of Sharing

Central Philippine University held a “Prayer Rally Kontra Pork Barrel and Other Corrupt Practices sa Sentro ng Pilipinas” on September 25, 2013 at the University Flagpole Area. A message was delivered by Ms. Sharon Rose Joy Ruiz-Duremdes. The collective voices of Centralians were heard!

The problem of corruption in our country is the problem of greed. Why is there a paradox of poverty and abundant natural resources in the Philippines?

Aside of corruption, the problem is not the lack of resources but that of distribution.

I remember another interpretation of Dr. Johnny V. Gumban with regards to the Miracle of the Feeding of 5,000 in John 6.

Dr. Gumban said, “The miracle is that when the people who were there saw what the boy did (giving his 5 loaves of bread and 2 pieces of fish), their hearts were touched and the provisions that they were keeping for themselves started to come out. They started to share what they had with others.”

I agree with Dr. Gumban that “The moment we learn how to share, a miracle happens. Abundant life is given and is experienced.”

We need to show compassion and care for one another. Sharing sparks kindness. Let us distribute God's resources.

“We need to show compassion and care for one another. Sharing sparks kindness.”

Lessons from CPU

On October 1, 2019 CPU celebrated its 114th founding anniversary.

What are the lessons that I learned from CPU?

C - Central is Jesus Christ in Central

Why did the foreparents of CPU change its original name from Jaro Industrial School into Central Philippine College and later as Central Philippine University? They could have changed it to Jaro College or Jaro University. They used the word “Central Philippine” because the school campus is situated in the central part of the Philippines. Literally, they believed that the CPU Flagpole is the center of the country.

From this central area of our country, let us continue to bear witness that Jesus is at the center of our lives.

P - Partners in spreading the gospel

The University Church is a testimony that we need to be partners in evangelization. If you picture out in your mind the structure of UC, then you can see a building that looks like a Malay Balangay boat with oars in its sides.

This symbolism reminds us to paddle together towards the same direction as partners.

U - Unity of Science and Faith

Science actually enriches our faith. For example, the more we study our human body, the more we can discover that we are not a product of an accident but someone who is wonderfully created by God with a definite purpose.

I hope that we have learned a lot from our alma mater.

Central Spirit Leading Us Onward as One

On October 1, 2019, CPU became 114 years old. Last September 28, 2019, I was given the privilege to give a reflection during CPU Alumni Homecoming. Let me share with you a portion of what I shared.

Reflecting on the theme of the U-Day and Alumni Homecoming which is “Central Spirit Leading Us Onward as One,” I read again 2 Corinthians 3:6 and reflect on what it can say to what Centralians call the “Central Spirit” -- “God has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant —not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

As Centralians we should be reminded that if the Central Spirit is convicted with the Holy Spirit:

First, our actions should give life.

In Genesis, it is written there that God breathed into us the breath of life and we became living beings.

Our actions then must follow the example of God. We must bring life wherever we go by giving words that give life, by thinking of ideas that give life, and by doing actions that affirm life.

We must also affirm life-giving initiatives of other people and other organizations. In this way, we make this world a better place to live in.

Second, our actions should lead us to check our policies, our plans, and our activities if it kills or not.

Paul said that the letter kills. Paul was referring to some laws in the Old Testament that Jesus changed. The famous is “an eye for an eye” in which Jesus changed to “love your enemies.”

This means that whatever policies we have is not written in stone. We have to check it with this criteria: does it give life or not? If not, then we have to change it.

My challenge to you is when you go back to your own respective offices, businesses, and organizations, check out your policies. Review it. If it is “anti-life”, then make your best effort to change it. Policies ought to be dynamic to address the changing landscape of the workforce. Changing the policy is part of quality improvement.

Third, our actions should give meaning to the life of others.

There is one Centralian who added meaning to my life. His name is Anatalio Viray. We became good friends when he was in his 80s up to his 90s. His life as a working student in the campus, and later as the Chairman of the CPU Board of Trustees left an imprint in my life.

Here is what he wrote in 1955 when he was President of the CPU Alumni Association: “Bethlehem has made its way to Central, so it was at Central that so many of us have found its way to Bethlehem.”

May the Central Spirit indeed be convicted by the Holy Spirit!

“Our actions then must follow the example of God. We must bring life wherever we go by giving words that give life, by thinking of ideas that give life, and by doing actions that affirm life.”

Have the Right Perspective in Doing Mission

Doing mission work in a new area is one of the hardest things to do in the ministry of the Christian church.

There is one story in the Bible that we can learn from in doing mission. This is the story of the 12 spies that Moses sent to Canaan. It can be found in Numbers 13.

In doing mission, having the right perspective is very critical. Everything starts in the mind.

There are three things that we can learn from the story in relation to having the right mind-set.

First, there will always be problems. We should not deny this. When you know that there will always be problems, then you can focus on the opportunities.

The spies saw the land flowing with milk and honey. They also saw how big and fortified the cities are. They even saw the descendants of Anak - the giants. For an Israelite who were slaves for more than 400 years, their height might have been affected by their manual labor. Study shows that these giants were just 7 feet more or less like Goliath who was “four cubits and a span.” This is normal now in the NBA but they were considered as giants before.

The 10 spies focused on the problems. The 2 - Caleb and Joshua - focused on the opportunities.

In our mission work, we have to face the reality of problems. But if we have the right perspective, we can say that our God is bigger than our problems. This is because our God is a God of endless possibilities.

Second, the majority is not always right. The majority decision led to the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Everyone suffered because of that majority decision. Caleb and Joshua were right, but they did not listen because they were only two.

In planning for mission, let us listen to all voices. It must be a decision of everyone. Let us not be hasty in making decisions because the majority said so. We should learn with happened to the 10 spies and their descendants. Let us make use of the unpopular idea as the eye opener. Refrain from considering them as resistance but view it as another perspective of looking into the concern at hand.

Numbers 14:32-34 says, “But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness. For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.”

Third, God will reward those who obey Him.

In Numbers 32, God said that those who did not follow Him wholeheartedly cannot enter the Promised Land except Caleb and Joshua.

It is sad to note that those who were punished by God were from the ages of 20 and up. They saw the wonders of God in Egypt. They had their freedom because of God. But then, they disobeyed Him. Even Moses was not allowed. On the other hand, Caleb and Joshua were described as those who “followed the Lord wholeheartedly.”

The keyword in doing mission is to “follow the Lord wholeheartedly.” No ifs, no buts. We must put our trust in God completely.

“If we have the right perspective, we can say that our God is bigger than our problems. This is because our God is a God of endless possibilities.”

We are all Missionaries

October is considered as Mission Month. This is in relation to the Reformation Sunday that churches celebrate to commemorate the protests of Martin Luther.

In Numbers 13, we can learn a few things about mission work.

First, leaders must always be at the forefront of mission work.

God commanded Moses to choose 12 leaders from 12 tribes to become spies. They were sent to Canaan to explore the land.

This tells us that God is calling out the leaders of our churches to lead in doing mission. This is a great responsibility for the leaders. But it must be done.

Second, we must know how to ask the right questions in order for our mission work to continue.

We have an inside joke in the CPU College of Theology before that says, “Jesus is the answer but what is the question.” We have to know how to ask the right questions.

Moses taught the 12 leaders to ask questions like “What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not?”

If we do not know how to ask the right questions, then there is a possibility that we cannot continue with the mission work because we do not know the situation we are going into, and what the needs of the people are.

Third, we must explore the possibilities of doing missions.

Moses instructed the leaders to explore the land of Canaan from the mountainside, to the hills and plains, and down to the sea. This was a thorough exploration in 40 days.

This tells us that there are many ways of doing mission. Some do it by preaching in big groups, some are doing discipleship in small groups, and some are having a medical and dental mission coupled with sharing the Gospel. The possibilities are endless.

One opportune area that we can all do mission is through social media. Yes, social media! About three-fourths (71 percent) of Filipinos are in social media. That means 76 million Filipinos out of 107 million are online daily using Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

On average, we spend 4 hours and 12 minutes a day on social media. This is the potential population that we can reach through a single post. We must use our social media presence as a good influence on people out there. Your post might be the post that can point a person in the right direction.

“God is calling out the leaders of our churches to lead in doing mission. This is a great responsibility for the leaders. But it must be done.”

Thank you, Lord, for being trustworthy

When November approaches, churches are preparing for the Thanksgiving Celebration. The November tradition comes from the Americans and maybe the October tradition comes from the Canadians. Nonetheless, we have to celebrate thanksgiving anytime, anywhere!

The book of Haggai, in chapter 2, gives us many reasons to thank God.

One of the reasons that we have to be thankful to God is that we can put our complete confidence in Him even in times that we are in doubt. We may doubt ourselves, but we cannot doubt the power of God.

Haggai 2:4-5 says, “‘Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the Lord, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the Lord Almighty. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’”

God said these words to the Israelites when they came back from exile in the land of Babylon. The people were called “the remnants” for only a few of them came back from the Diaspora. These people of God were commanded to build the Second Temple. Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah during that time was given the task by God to rebuild the Temple.

The First Temple was built by Solomon in about 970 BC. It was destroyed in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, when he conquered Jerusalem. Later in 538 BC, the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return to the Land of Israel. About 50,000 Jews came back. In 536 BC, they rebuilt the foundations of the Temple. And then doubt crept in. It took them 20 years to finish the Temple. It was in 516 when the Temple was dedicated (Ezra 6:15-18).

In times of doubt and fear, let us hold on to God. Like the Israelites, we, who trust in God, will rise up and finish what we have started.

The Return

When we visited Jerusalem for the Seeds of Faith Israel 2019 Tour, one of the things that we have learned is that some of the prophecies in the Bible were fulfilled only in the last 200 years.

The prophecy written in Zechariah 2:1-2 says, “Then I looked up, and there before me was a man with a measuring line in his hand. I asked, “Where are you going?” He answered me, “To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is.”

Scholars believe that this prophecy in Zechariah was fulfilled by Charles Warren, the father of Jerusalem Biblical archaeology who came to Israel in 1867. He was the one who measured Jerusalem and found the ancient city.

The prophecy was fulfilled. You only measure land when you want to buy it or return to it. This event set the stage for the Jubilee -- the time when the land will be returned to Israel.

What happened in Bethlehem, specifically in the Church of Nativity, was crucial in that fulfilment. Why? There was a conflict that started in the Church of Nativity about a missing star. The clergy of different Christian denominations quarreled.

The Russian government sided with the Orthodox clergy, while the Ottoman Empire, along with France, Britain, and Sardinia, sided with the Latin clergy. The conflict was the starting point that would lead to the Crimean War. The war became a turning point for the Ottoman Empire. The war happened from October 1853 to February 1856 in which the Russian Empire lost to an alliance of the Ottoman Empire, France, Britain, and Sardinia.

It led the Ottoman Empire to borrow money from Europe, and eventually, it led them to sell their lands. So, they sold portions of Palestine. The Jews secretly bought lands starting in 1867.

Charles Warren in that time also wrote what is considered the first detailed vision and plan for the establishment of a Jewish state in the land of Israel.

The events unfurled towards the fulfilment of another prophecy. During this time there were persecutions towards the Jews. This led them to go to Palestine. They began occupying and buying lands in their ancient home place. And the prophecy of Jeremiah 32:44 was fulfilled.

The prophecy says, “Men will buy fields for money, sign deeds and seal them . . . In the villages around Jerusalem, in the towns of Judah . . . I will cause their captives to return,’ says the LORD.”

Indeed, God works throughout all the ages and is faithful in fulfilling the prophecies that are in the Bible.

“God works throughout all the ages and is faithful in fulfilling the prophecies that are in the Bible.”

How to be Successful?

Success is defined as a “favorable or desired outcome.” There is a measurement of a certain result that makes it successful.

Joshua in the Old Testament was a successful leader of Israel. He was the successor of Moses. What was the secret of Joshua? The secret of Joshua was that He listened to the command of God.

In Joshua 1:8, God commanded Joshua – “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

God promised Joshua prosperity and success if he will abide on Word of God.

There are three things that we can see here:

First, let us talk about the Word of God.

God commanded Joshua – “Do not let this Book of Law depart from your mouth.” Let us not leave the theological discussions to the theologians only. In our own simple way, we can reflect and talk about the Scriptures.

Second, let us think about the Word of God.

God commanded Joshua – “Meditate upon it day and night.” Nowadays, the Bible is readily available in our mobile phones, computers and in printed material. Let us set aside a certain time to read the Scriptures.

Third, let us live the Word of God.

God commanded Joshua – “Be careful to do everything written in it.” It is not enough to have a lively theological discussion or to have a solemn private devotional and scripture reading. We need to live out the Scriptures.

Take a REST

Every semestral break, students and teachers are looking forward to having a rest.

As we take a REST, let us remember the following:

R - Recharge by connecting yourself to God.

Low battery is a common occurrence on smartphone users. This is why some are bringing portable battery banks so that they can readily charge even without electricity.

Every time we feel low, let us not forget that we can be “fully-charged” if we connect ourselves to God thru prayer, meditation, and worship.

E - Enjoy a time with your family.

It is increasingly alarming that family members spend time apart from each other. Our family is the basic unit of society. This means that what is happening in our society is a reflection of our families. It is high time to strengthen our family ties.

S - Study things outside of your field.

We need to be well-rounded people. Life becomes more interesting when we immerse ourselves into other fields of endeavor. Athanasius once said, “You can see God everywhere when you just look closely.” What you can learn from other fields can surprisingly enhance the way you do your work.

T - Try something new.

Our whole family tried the highest zipline ride in Southeast Asia. It was 700 meters long at a stunning height of 600 feet at Lake Sebu, South Cotabato. We saw the magnificent falls

amid lush vegetation while strapped and dangling on a cable. It was one memorable vacation.

St. Paul dared to try something new when he brought the Gospel outside of Israel. The result of his venture was the spread of the Gospel to the whole Roman Empire.

Let us take a rest but we must still be creative about it.

“Every time we feel low, let us not forget that we can be “fully-charged” if we connect ourselves to God thru prayer, meditation, and worship.”

“Let us take a rest but we must still be creative about it.”

Friendship

Athletes and coaches of Universities all over the Philippines participated in 18th Unigames last October 2018 at Bacolod City. The theme of the event was “The games that bring us together for friendship and peace.”

To have friends is very important. Jesus Christ put great value on friendship. In John 15:15 He said, “I no longer call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends.”

There are three kinds of friendship that we can see:

First, friendship that is deforming. Second, friendship that is reforming. Third, friendship that is transforming.

What kind of friendship do you have? If it is deforming your life and leading you towards destruction, then it is high time for you to leave those so-called “friends.”

If you have a relationship with your friends that is reforming, then it is good. Cultivate that kind of friendship until it becomes a transformative relationship.

The difference between a “reforming” and “transforming” relationship is critical. Reform implies some changes “here and there” in your life. While transform means that the core of your life is being changed.

If Jesus Christ is at the center of our friendships, then we can be assured of a transforming relationship. It is bound to have a fundamental change that starts in our inmost being.

“If Jesus Christ is at the center of our friendships, then we can be assured of a transforming relationship.”

Power to Choose

One of the greatest gifts that God has given us is the freedom to choose. Let me share two things to ponder as we continue to exercise our power to make a choice.

First, we cannot depend on the spiritual decision of others.

Every one of us needs a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We cannot have a vicarious faith. It should be our personal decision.

If your parents are Christians, then it does not follow that we will also be Christians. We cannot answer: “Of course, I am a Christian.” John 3:16 reminds us that we need to make a choice – “...whoever believes in Jesus Christ will not perish but will have eternal life.”

Second, we should not blame others for what is happening in our lives.

Our society, church, friends, and family are factors that shape the direction of our life. But ultimately, the mark of a mature person is that he or she makes himself or herself accountable with his or her situation.

No one can destroy our life except ourselves. We may not be able to control the circumstances around us, but we have the power to choose on how we respond to them. Choose wisely!

“Every one of us needs a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We cannot have a vicarious faith. It should be our personal decision.”

The Invitation

Last November 2, 2019, the Seeds of Faith Israel Tour group went to Cana for the re-affirmation of vows of four couples. Cana is the place where Jesus performed His first ever miracle during a wedding ceremony. The story can be found in John 2:1-12

What can we learn from the story of the wedding in Cana, especially to couples?

First, Jesus wants to be invited in our marriage.

The couple in Cana made the right decision to invite Jesus, His disciples, and Mary. The group of Jesus travelled for hours to arrive in Cana assuming that they came from the area of the Sea of Galilee. Currently, the travel time using modern roads is about 30 minutes by bus. This tells us that wherever we are, Jesus will come if He is invited.

Second, Jesus wants us to accept help in our marriage.

Whether we admit it or not, we encountered and will continue to encounter challenges in our married life. The couple in Cana had their first challenge when the wine ran out of stock. Mary promised to help them. Jesus, knowing their predicament, helped the couple. This tells us that in time of difficulties, Jesus will help us if we ask for it.

Third, Jesus wants us to enjoy our marriage.

Some couples are miserable, maybe because they married the wrong person, or they forgot to enjoy each other's company. The couple in Cana were having a good time with friends and family members that it came to a point that their wine had ran out of stock. For sure, they could have been miserable if they knew that they had no wine anymore. This tells us that if we have Jesus in our lives, there will always be joy.

Share the Word of God

The Bible is the bestselling book of all time. It has been the book that was repeatedly reproduced many times since the start of the printing press. It was one of the first books ever printed by the Guttenberg press. But even before the invention of the printing press, since the Old Testament times, the content of the Bible were painstakingly copied by committed people from one generation to another.

When we were in Israel, we visited Qumran which is across the Dead Sea. This place is now an archaeological site and a national park. The importance of this place is that in the caves of Qumran, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found between 1947 to 1956. The sacred manuscripts were stored in earthenware vessels buried in the earth or within the caves.

What is the significance of the 15,000 fragments? Why are the remains of 800 to 900 original manuscripts significant to Christianity?

First, the Word of God will always find a way to reach people. The Bible that we have is a copy of a copy of a copy. The Dead Sea Scrolls jumped back near the original copies. This tells us nothing can destroy the Word of God.

Second, the Word of God is meant to be shared. If we realize that countless people copied the contents of the Bible from one generation to another, then we should have a burden to share the message of the Bible to people. We do not need to find ink and parchment, sit down, and write for long hours anymore. We can easily share it via social media, and other media.

I saw the replica of these fragments at the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum, and I can feel the commitment of those who copied it and shared it.

Reflect on this: The Prophet Isaiah wrote, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” Isaiah 40:8 was written between 740 BC and 686 BC. Later, 1 Peter 1:24-25 quoted the book of Isaiah. It was written between 81 to 96 AD.

This means that even after 800 plus years after Isaiah was written, people were reading it. Wow! Indeed, it takes commitment, passion, and faith that the Word of God is true, and is meant to be shared.

“The Word of God is meant to be shared. If we realize that countless people copied the contents of the Bible from one generation to another, then we should have a burden to share the message of the Bible to people.”

Prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane

Prayer is part of our Christian life. It is through prayer that we converse with God.

One of the must-see sites in Jerusalem is the Garden of Gethsemane. After seeing the panoramic view of Jerusalem on top of the Mount of Olives, you will go down via the Palm Sunday road, and then you will arrive at the garden where Jesus prayed on the night that He was betrayed and arrested. We stayed at this place and said our prayers also.

What can learn from this episode of the life of Jesus?

First, we have to establish a prayer time. In the Gospels, Jesus would pray early in the morning (Mark 1:35). Luke 5:16 also tells us that Jesus would oftentimes go to secluded areas to pray be it in the mountainside, the seaside or in the garden. This tells us that we can choose anytime, and anywhere to pray.

Second, we can share our prayer. The event in which Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane was recorded by Matthew (26:36ff), Mark (14:32 ff) and Luke (22:40ff). But it is very interesting to note that John was able to record Jesus' whole prayer in John 17. The three Gospel writers also recorded it but only the famous statement “not my will but Thy will be done.”

Why were they able to record it if they were sleeping, and a stone's throw away from Him? The only logical explanation is that Jesus shared His prayer with them. This sharing was not recorded. When has Jesus done this? It was most probably after His resurrection. He was with them for 40 days.

Let us write our prayers. We can share them also so that others who have the same experience as ours can also read it and be inspired by it. The Bible is full of prayers of people. They recorded their prayers and passed it on to us.

Let us continue to pray! Let us be assured that God hears us!

The Picture of Psalm 23

One of the most beloved Psalms is from chapter 23. We have memorized it and recite it in our worship services and in our personal devotional time. The image that would almost always come to mind when we read Psalm 23 is of a very green grass, a nearby brook, the scattered sheep and the shepherd watching over them. But when we were in Israel, this kind of imagery was challenged. It is very seldom that you can see that kind of pastoral setting in Israel, more so, in ancient Israel.

Our guide, Marcos, a Venezuelan Jew who is a Christian Pastor, told us to erase the imagery of the lush green grass with a nearby brook whose waters gently glides. He said, “That's the Psalm 23 if you happen to be in New Zealand. But it is not. David wrote it in Israel, and the geographical setting is a desert.” He then pointed us to the desert with very dangerous hills and dark valleys. He then challenged us to rethink Psalm 23 in the light of that perspective.

As I reread Psalm 23, I cannot help but appreciate it more fully this time around. Why?

First, finding grass, and quite waters in the desert was a difficult task for shepherds in ancient times. There could only be patches of green grass, and an oasis was difficult to locate. This tells us that no matter how hard it is, God will find a way to feed us and quench our thirst.

Second, the valley of the shadow of death was a very dangerous place. One false move in the rocky hills will lead you to death. This was the terrain that the shepherds during Old Testament times travelled in order to find another patch of green grass, and an oasis in order for the flock to survive. This tells us of the great love of God for all of us. And this was proven true when Jesus sacrificed himself for us.

A change of perspective in reading Psalm 23 can indeed make us appreciate more about the kind of shepherd that God is. What David wrote is a picture of a good, loving, and courageous shepherd. And that is what our God is.

Possess your Future

Most, if not all of us, go to the cemetery every November 1 to visit the graves of our loved ones.

On this reflection, we will learn about Joshua and how he handled the death of his mentor Moses. They were together for a long time.

Joshua 1:11b “Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.”

God is telling Joshua to take possession of his future. Joshua was able to do it.

We can learn three things from Joshua's experience.

First, Make a Plan.

Joshua 1:11a “So Joshua ordered... the people, 'Get your supplies ready.’”

A wise person said, “The future belongs to the person who prepares for it.”

Second, Abide in the Word of God.

God promised Joshua that he will be prosperous and successful if he will abide on the Word of God.

In Joshua 1:8, God commanded Joshua – “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

Third, Go out with faith.

Faith involves action. Go out with faith means to be strong and courageous.

Three times in chapter 1 God says, “Be strong and courageous!” (v 6,7,9).

The Israelites had been wandering in the desert for 40 years. Now they had had a chance to enter the Promised Land again. Forty years before they did not do it. They were afraid.

What gave Joshua the confidence to move ahead?

Joshua, through the promise of God, became courageous. Courage does not mean that you are not afraid. Courage is moving forward in spite of the fear.

“Faith involves action. Go out with faith means to be strong and courageous.”

“Joshua, through the promise of God, became courageous. Courage does not mean that you are not afraid. Courage is moving forward in spite of the fear.”

Lessons from Typhoon Yolanda

Super Typhoon Yolanda (International Name: Haiyan) brought massive devastation to the Philippines in November 2013. Scenes from Samar, Leyte, North Iloilo, North Negros, Capiz can only be described as “overwhelming.” The death toll was more than 6,000.

What reflection can we get out of this catastrophe?

First, natural calamities do happen. It is a fact of nature that typhoons and earthquakes will always be there. Actually, another typhoon named Zorayda made its way to the country after Yolanda.

Second, we must expect the best but prepare for the worst. We all hoped and prayed that the typhoon will be swallowed up by the ocean or will simply vanish or change its track. But we should not be caught unprepared. There are reports that some did not heed the warning and went to evacuation centers. We hope that this would not happen again.

Third, pray and help. Immediate relief goods are really needed by the victims. In times like this, we need to send our resources so that it can help alleviate their situation. We need to show them that we care.

Here is the Aaronic Benediction for all of us:

“May the Lord bless you and protect you.
May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord show you his favor and give you his peace.”
(Numbers 6:24-26)

“Pray and help!”

How could God Let this Happen?

The Super Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) brought havoc to the Visayas region of the Philippines last November 2013. The devastation that you can see in the pictures and television just break your heart. The outpouring of love, support, and donations from fellow Filipinos and other countries were so overwhelming.

There are a lot of questions that are on our minds nowadays. Foremost on this is – “Why did God allow this to happen?”

Here are the answers that I heard:

First, God is punishing us. The Filipino people is deserving of this punishment because we have become corrupt, idolaters, and unrighteous.

Second, God has a grand design. The super typhoon that hit us is part of God’s purpose. We do not know yet what the purpose of God is, but it has a purpose.

Third, God is teaching us a lesson. The country is being taught by God how to properly prepare for the next calamity. Some are also saying that God is teaching us how to be a blessing to others by sharing our resources to the survivors.

Fourth, God is testing us. Our faith in God is being tested by this calamity. Should we cling on to Him or should we put our trust on icons or other gods.

Fifth, God liberated the dead from the suffering of this world and brought them to a better place. Some are being comforted by this explanation.

All the responses that we put forth have one thing in common – we are assuming that God is the cause of our suffering and we are trying to find answers why God made us suffer. In a sense, we are defending God.

Harold Kushner put forward another answer. He wrote “Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God.” He further states that Psalm 121:1-2 does not say that “My pain comes from the Lord” or “My tragedy comes from the Lord.” The Psalmist is telling us, “My help comes from the Lord.”

I do not pretend to answer in behalf of God. I am clinging to my faith and I am praying that God will help us as we face any tragedy.

Could it be that we are asking the wrong question when we asked, “How could God let this happen?”

“Harold Kushner put forward another answer. He wrote “Maybe God does not cause our suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than the will of God.”

“Psalm 121:1-2 does not say that “My pain comes from the Lord” or “My tragedy comes from the Lord.” The Psalmist is telling us, “My help comes from the Lord.”

Rejoice, Pray and Give Thanks

On November 24, 2013, the ring announcer said it all, “He’s back!” Manny Pacquiao, the fighting pride of the Philippines, won a convincing fight against Brandon Rios in their 12-round boxing match in Macau. The Filipino people have another reason to rejoice and thank God for this brief respite and a ray of hope amidst a calamity. Pacquaio, a devoted Christian, said it best: “This is not about my comeback. This is about my people’s comeback from a natural disaster and a natural tragedy...To God be the glory!”

How can we be joyful, pray and thank God in the light of our circumstances?

Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 is teaching us to “Be joyful, pray and give thanks.” This is a very good admonition to us. But when you add the adverbs that says, “...always, ... continually, ...in all circumstances” – this is where we pause for a moment and ask: Really? Always? Continually? In all circumstances?

Three things that we can learn:

First, let us find reasons to be joyful always. Despite of our circumstances we must consciously search for things in a situation that we can take delight in.

Second, let us continually have an open communication with God. To pray without ceasing is not to always utter words but to connect our will to the will of God. As Jesus taught us – “...not my will but Thy will be done.” Prayer is not just expressing our thoughts to God. It is also listening to the thoughts of God.

Third, let us trust God by giving thanks in all situations. The aftermath of Typhoon Yolanda taught us to be thankful of many things – the love and care of many people; the realization that life is valuable and that we should never squander it because in an instant it can be lost; we must always be prepared and heed the warnings given to us.

Christmas is a Time of Hope

On the December 6, 2013, the annual Festival of Lights and Music opened with the theme “Masanag nga Paglaum sa Paskwa” (A Bright Hope for this Christmas).

Why is Christmas a time of hope?

First, Christmas is the time that we are given the opportunity to give.

God gave us Jesus Christ for our redemption. In return, we are challenged to rise above our selfish human nature and give ourselves in the service of God through serving the people. It is truly a blessing to give than to receive.

Second, Christmas is the time that we are given a second chance.

When Jesus was born, we are reminded that another kind of life is there. Paul wrote, “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”

Third, Christmas is the time that we are given a vision of a brighter tomorrow.

The angels sang the hope of mankind – “Peace on Earth and goodwill among the people.” We hope that all Christians will work towards the realization of reconciliation and friendship among men and women.

“God gave us Jesus Christ for our redemption. In return, we are challenged to rise above our selfish human nature and give ourselves in the service of God through serving the people.”

What Christmas Means to Me

Every Christmas time, we can see Christmas dramas presented in churches and gatherings. I made a script using a first-person recollection of what happened in the first Christmas story. Here is the script for all the characters:

Angel:

When the heavenly Father chose who will come down to Earth and bring the announcement of the birth of Jesus, I was hoping that I will be chosen. My hope was answered. Our choir conductor made us practice and practice for many times. It was emphasized that the announcement that we were giving is not an ordinary one. We will be declaring the birth of the Son of the Most High.

I was wondering if we will go to the palace of the earthly kings and sing our songs there. Will there be many people? But on the day that we will come down on Earth, we were informed that we will be singing and announcing our good news to the shepherds. How could this be? And then I knew. God uses simple and humble people to bring His message. As an angel, I was chosen not to bring glory to myself but to declare the glory of God. Great things start with small beginnings. Indeed, with God nothing is impossible.

With this in mind, I told the shepherds with a loud voice, “I bring you good news. Today, a Savior has been born to you. You can find him in the town of David, and he is wrapped in swaddling clothes and is in a manger.” Then the heavenly choir sang with me. Oh, we sang a beautiful song – “Gloria in excelsis Deo – Glory to God in the highest, peace on Earth and goodwill to all people!”

Shepherd Boy:

One night, I was with my father and his friends in the field tending our sheep. It was a cold evening. We are about to go home after leading our sheep to some green pasture when we saw a great light coming down from heaven. We are so afraid of what was happening. Then a voice told us not to be afraid. It was an angel. The face of the angel was so beautiful. The angel told us that a

savior has been born in Bethlehem. Then, they sang a wonderful song of praise to God. Yes! The Messiah that we are waiting for has finally come. The prophecies are really true!

We look at one another and we told ourselves that we will immediately visit the Savior. When God commands you to do something, you must really hasten to obey it. When we arrived at the place, we saw Jesus the Christ, our Messiah. We bowed down and worshipped him. Joseph and Mary told us that we were the first visitors. And then to our great joy, Mary got baby Jesus and made us carry him in our arms. I cried because I was so happy. I kissed him in the face and baby Jesus smiled at me. Oh, what a wonderful night!

Wise Men:

I am a magi. I practice astrology. One night, while me and companions were studying the sky, we saw a great star. It was a kind of star that we have never seen before. It was so near yet so far. We studied it and came to a conclusion that someone great, perhaps a king is born somewhere.

I and my two friends decided to seek out the star and find out its meaning. We left the comfort of our homes and started a journey that will take us many days. The bright star was our only guide. We are determined to come to the place where its rays are pointing. We finally arrived in Israel. The land is full of Roman soldiers. We ask directions of where the palace is. We thought that the star is pointing us there. We asked King Herod if a new king was born. We saw a flash of anger in his face. He summoned the priests and asked about a prophecy. The priests answered that in the prophecy of Micah, a king who will be the messiah will be born in Bethlehem. But they do not believe that it has come already.

We left the palace and went to Bethlehem. Along the way, we ask ourselves – are we ready to worship this messiah? The star is beckoning us to go on. What we found shocked us. A manger is glowing with heavenly light.

As we moved closer, we found the baby Jesus. Joseph and Mary were speechless. They were probably asking themselves why we sacrificed a lot just to find them. They do not know yet that it was a foreshadow that Jesus was not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles.

We gave them gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then we bowed down and worship the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We have found what we are searching for!

How about you? Have you already found what you are searching for?

News would later arrive to us that Jesus and his family fled to Egypt because Herod ordered the massacre of newborn babies up to two years old. We were comforted by the fact that we gave them gold for their basic needs in Egypt; frankincense as a smoke deterrent against flies and mosquitoes in their arduous travel; and myrrh, an herb that helps stops the bleeding of the bellybuttons of new born babies.

How about you? What kind of gifts are you giving this Christmas?

Mary:

I am Mary, a simple teenager. I have a boyfriend named Joseph. He is rugged and handsome. We were preparing for our wedding and everyone was already invited.

But one day as I was doing my tasks, angel Gabriel appeared to me. I was so afraid. The angel told me that I am favored to be pregnant with a child that will be the King of kings and Lord of lords. Is this a joke? No, the angel was so serious. This was really happening. With great faith, I answered the angel, “Yes, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me.”

After this, I endured the shame and the gossip of people. They called me names like harlot and prostitute. I even had to go to my cousin Elizabeth and hid there for a while. But Joseph was so

good. He stood by me and assured me that God has a beautiful plan for us. Oh, I love him more and more.

I was more than 8 months pregnant when we travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was hard. It was even harder because we cannot find a place where we can rest. It was the hometown of our ancestors, but nobody opened their homes for us. Deep in my heart I asked, “I am giving birth to the Son of the Most High but the only place that is available for us is a manger. How could this be?” I gave birth to Jesus with animals by my side. Jesus was so cute. Joseph and I were so happy. Later, we became even more overjoyed when shepherds came to visit us because they want to worship Jesus. Wise men from the East also came and brought gifts.

Indeed, God has a wonderful plan for us. I hope that people will obey the will of God for their lives even if it entails difficulty and sacrifice.

Joseph:

I am Joseph, a carpenter. I was engaged to be married to Mary. I was excited and looking forward to our wedding day. But one day, I was so shocked to learn that my soon to be wife is pregnant. How can this be? Did she find someone and had an affair? I wanted to break off our engagement and report her immorality to the religious authorities so that she can be punished. But one night as I ponder upon these things, an angel of the Lord came to me in a dream. The angel said that Mary is pregnant with a baby who will be the savior of the world and we will name him Jesus. Can this be true? Yes, I believe in the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. And we thank God for making me and Mary as His instruments in making the prophecy come true.

There are still many prophecies that has yet to be fulfilled. I hope that you will believe on it and make yourself available to be used by God to fulfil His plan.

Hope for the New YEAR!

Every end of the year, we have a lot of realizations and also new hopes for the coming year.

We hope that this New YEAR will bring us:

Y - Yearnings to serve God and people

There are many opportunities to glorify God. Are we making excuses not to engage ourselves in serving God and His people? Every year is an opportunity to make ourselves available to serve God.

E - Encouragement to go on

Every year has a lot of unexpected twists and turns. It has tested our resolve and resiliency. With Immanuel - God with us - we can go on and put our hope in God.

A - Attention to what is dear to us

At the end of day, let ask us ourselves truthfully - “for whom or for what am I doing these things for?” I hope that God and family are part of our answers.

R - Reconciliation in our relationships

Life is all about relationship. May the next year bring us closure to bad relationships and open ourselves to new and life-giving relationships. Yes, closure is part of reconciliation. It is reconciling yourself to the reality that there are persons in this world that you cannot get along with. We do not wish them ill, but we hope also the best for them.

What to do with the information?

With the advent of technology, people are now informed round the clock about an impending typhoon. There is also an hourly updating from weather apps so that we will know where Typhoons are currently at. The only thing that technology cannot do is to make a decision on what to do with the information. The decision still lies upon us. Those who acted upon the information that they received will be spared, and those who do not will sadly suffer from it as history would tell us.

In the Christmas story, we can see three kinds of people who had the information about the birth of the Messiah. What did they do with the information? Let us find out.

First, the shepherds got an information from an angel. The angel proclaimed that in the town of David, Christ the Lord has been born in a manger.

What did the shepherds do with the information? They acted on it. They hurriedly went to Bethlehem.

Now, the Shepherds' Field - the place where it is believed the angels visited the shepherds, is about 3 to 4 kilometers away from the Church of Nativity, the traditional place where Jesus was born. This means that the shepherds travelled about an hour to go to the manger. But yes, they obeyed and saw for themselves the Savior.

Second, the magi from the East got their information from a star. They believed that the star proclaims the birth of a king.

What did the Magi do with this information? They travelled from their place to Israel. Scholars have theorized that they travelled from the land of Balaam which was called East during the Old Testament times. If this is so, then they travelled at least 400 miles to reach Israel.

It could have been a month of travel, or longer since the star only comes out on night-time. They made sacrifices and in turn they saw the King of kings and worshipped Jesus.

Third, King Herod, the chief priests and teachers of the law knew the prophecy where the Messiah will be born. They have read the Scriptures and knew exactly the place where the Savior will be born.

What did this group of people do with the information that they had? They did nothing to welcome the Savior. Instead, they plotted to kill him. A lot of innocent lives died during those times because of their wrong decision.

In what kind of group do we belong? The shepherds, Magi, or the group of King Herod? Let it be that we will act on what the Bible tells us to do so.

In the Christmas story, we can see three kinds of people who had the information about the birth of the Messiah.

“What did the shepherds do with the information? They acted on it. They hurriedly went to Bethlehem.”

“What did the Magi do with this information? They travelled from their place to Israel.”

The meaning of the word Christmas

Have you ever wondered about the meaning of word Christmas? It comes from two words - Christ and Mas. *Christ* means the Messiah or the Anointed One while *Mas* means Mass or Missa in Latin. Mass means the celebration of the Eucharist - or the Holy Communion celebrating the sacrifice of Jesus. In other words, Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Passover Lamb, our Savior.

To make it even more meaningful for Filipinos, we call Christmas as Pasko or Paskwa (in Ilonggo). This comes from the word Pascha which the word Paschal (Passover) Lamb comes from. No wonder that the first visitors in the birth of the Christ were the Shepherds. The first on the scene when the Passover Lamb was born were the shepherds. It was not a coincidence but the plan of God.

The Passover Feast in the Bible is a celebration of the passing over of the Angel of Death on the houses of the Israelites in Egypt because the blood of the lamb was painted in their doorposts. This is why every year they retold the story of their liberation in Egypt by God, and how they were brought to the Promised Land, Israel. This was the foreshadowing event of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

When I was in Israel, I learned that in the Diaspora or the spreading of the Israelites all over the world starting in 70 AD, they would continue to celebrate the Passover in their homes every year on the same date with other Jews all over the world. After the Passover Seder, they would say one line that is full of hope - "L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim" (next year in Jerusalem)." For thousands of years, they repeated this hope. One can only imagine how many thousands of times this line was repeated. They hoped to return to the land of Israel. And yes, the Jews eventually returned to Israel in 1948. They became a nation again. And this line of prayer and hope is still being repeated every year all over the world. This tells us about the hope that is being fueled by faith.

Christmas is a celebration of hope. The meaning of Christmas should always be connected to the Passover. Let us put our faith in the Passover Lamb who took away the sins of the world!

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The Genealogy of Jesus

Most Christians that I know would skip Matthew 1:1-17 in reading the Christmas story. Most would go directly to verse 18 up to Matthew 2. Some said that they found it boring. Others said that they cannot properly pronounce the names. Thus, the reading of the genealogy of three fourteen generations from Abraham to Jesus is largely ignored.

We may skip reading Matthew 1 from time to time, but its importance should not be ignored. I personally heard of an American Jew who testified that he accepted Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah when he read Matthew 1. Why then is the genealogy of Jesus important?

Matthew 1 narrows down the bloodline in which the Messiah will come. It says that the Messiah will come from Abraham. It then narrows down to Isaac's line, and not Ismael's. The Old Testament prophecy further says that the Messiah will come from the line of Jacob and not from Esau. And not just from any son of Jacob which was 12 in number but from Judah. From the many lines from Judah, the prophecy specified that the Messiah should come the line of Jesse.

What is more interesting is that Jesse had 8 sons, but the prophecy narrowed it down again to his son David. As 2 Samuel 7:12 says, "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom." The genealogy continues to narrow down to one person as pointed by the prophecies.

Matthew 1 then tells us how the prophecies in the Old Testament were so specific that it can only lead us to one person. It leaves no room for doubt that Jesus is the Messiah.

This is the beauty of the genealogy of Jesus. May you take the time to read it this Christmas season.

A Message from Mary

Christmas season is a very busy time of the year. There are a lot of Christmas parties, travel, and reunions. Amidst this busyness, what suffers the most is our moment of reflection on why we celebrate Christmas in the first place.

Luke 2:19 gives us a model that amidst the mystery of the birth of Jesus, the unavailability of a room, the visit of the shepherds late at night with accompanying stories of a host of angels, one can still have a moment of reflection. The verse says, “But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

What can we learn from Mary?

First, we must intentionally have time for reflection. The verse starts with the word, “but” which means a contrast of the previous statements. This means that Mary was not swallowed up with the bustling activities. She found the time to meditate about the birth of the Savior of the world. The verse tells us that Mary “pondered” in her heart on what happened. Most probably, Mary remembered the visit of angel Gabriel, the joy of Elizabeth, the faithfulness of Joseph, and her sacrifices. She was also looking forward to how to take care of Jesus, and on how Jesus would become the Savior of the world.

Second, we must intentionally select memories that will go into our hearts. The verse tells us that Mary “treasured” all these things in her heart. When you decide to treasure a memory, then it will stay there. Let us choose to treasure positive memories that could continue to inspire and encourage us. Mary, most probably, drew from the memory of the birth of Jesus when she, later on, became a single parent, and up to the time when Jesus was crucified. Mary was strengthened by her memory.

So, in this Christmas season, let us find the time to meditate, treasure and recollect memories that could help us move forward into another year in our lives. May we never forget to ponder why we celebrate Christmas in the first place -- the birth of our Savior.

Healing comes from God

With the pandemic caused by COVID-19, we have received a lot of prayer requests. Indeed, we pray for both healing and a cure.

Is there a difference between healing and curing? A Centralian medical doctor who is also a pastor told me one time about these two terms. Dr. Florentino Alerta II said that a cure is primarily medical in nature and the objective is the elimination of the physical illness. Healing, on the other hand, may not necessarily mean a physical cure, but the improvement of the quality of life that includes the mental and spiritual health even if no physical cure is possible.

Indeed, healing and curing are different. Finding a cure involves medicine while healing is becoming "whole."

Jeremiah 30:17 says, "But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds," declares the Lord..." In this verse, we can see that God is both capable of curing us of our physical illnesses as well as healing us of our wounds -- meaning, our traumas, our fears, and anything that was broken because of the disease.

As prophesied by Isaiah, Jesus the Messiah can bring healing to anyone who believes in Him. Isaiah 53:5 says, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds, we are healed."

So, in this time of the pandemic let us pray not just for a cure but more importantly, for healing. Let us pray the prayer of Jeremiah "Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise." (Jeremiah 17:14)

May God's healing be upon all of us.

How to Celebrate the New Year?

We celebrate the New Year on the eve of December 31 following the Gregorian Calendar that started in 1582. Previous to that the Julian Calendar was used. The Jewish Calendar, on the other hand, is different because it uses the moon rather than the sun. So, in the Bible, it was sundown to sundown, and not midnight to midnight as Genesis 1:5b says, “And there was evening, and there was morning -- the first day.”

So how is the New Year celebrated in the Bible? What can we learn from it? There are three significant celebrations in the Bible with regards to the New Year.

First, in Exodus 12:2 God said to Moses and Aaron, “This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.”

What happened in this chapter? The angel of death passed over the houses of the Israelites because they have slaughtered the Passover lamb, and painted the blood in their doorposts.

After they left Egypt, the Israelites celebrated Passover every year to commemorate their freedom.

So, the lesson for us is this -- celebrate the New Year by thanking Jesus for being the Passover Lamb, the Savior. Remember that the time that you accepted Him was the time of your new life!

Second, in Numbers 10:10 “God that at the appointed feasts and New Moon festivals--you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. This tradition is to be a reminder that the Lord is God.”

Fireworks are now the norm in celebrating the New Year. In the Bible, the Israelites sounded the trumpets. So, as we make some noise to welcome the New Year, let us remember to acknowledge that Jesus is the Lord of our lives.

Third, in Ezekiel 40:1, the beginning of the year was mentioned. This is called the Rosh Hashana, and this is the time that

the Jews started to celebrate the New Year up to the present. It usually falls on the 3rd week of September.

Rosh Hashana is a time for reflection and repentance. The Shofar or ram's horn is blown during this time as a call to repentance. So, as we celebrate the New Year, let it be that we will have a time of reflection on what happened during the year, and also ask God for forgiveness for the sins that we have committed.

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About the Author

Rev. Francis Neil Gico Jalando-on comes from a family of pastors.

He earned his Bachelor of Science in Accountancy at Central Philippine University (CPU). He did not become a Certified Public Accountant but instead answered the call of God to become a pastor. He enrolled at the CPU College of Theology where he finished his Master of Divinity.

His masteral paper entitled “A History of Philippine Baptist Pastors from 1898-2002” was later published into a book by the Institute for Advanced Theological Studies.

During his college days, he was a two-time CPU Republic Senator and was later elected as CPUR Vice President. He supported his studies with a sports scholarship as varsity of the CPU Table Tennis Team. He was also the first webmaster of CPU.

From 2002 to 2008, he had served as Administrative Assistant of the Institute for Advanced Theological Studies. This organization helps in the continuing theological education of pastors and publication of theological journals.

During these years, he was a part-time teacher at the Convention Baptist Bible College in Bacolod City where he taught Church History, Contemporary Issues, Ecumenics and Systematic Theology.

In 2009 he became the Assistant Director of the Office for External Affairs and Public Relations of CPU. He hosted programs in Radio DYVS, DYSI, RMN, and TV programs in the CPU TV Channel. During his tenure he was also in-charge of the publication of the alumni newsletter, *The Centralian Link*, and the weekly online newsletter, “Letter from Central.”

He writes a weekly reflection entitled “Seeds of Faith” which is published online with more than 25,000 recipients. Some of these reflections can be found in this volume.

On weekends, he serves as the Pulpit Pastor of Bacolod Bethany Church, and La Carlota Evangelical Church, Negros Occidental.

He was previously an Associate Chaplain of Central Philippine University, and later an Associate Pastor of the University Church. Presently, he is the Director of the CPU Office of Communications. Under this office is the Information Center, the Educational Media Center, TV Channel, Website and Media Relations. This office manages the official social media accounts of the university, and spearheads the publication of the *Weekly Centralian Link*. He is also a part-time teacher of the College of Theology and College of Business and Accountancy, and the coach of the CPU Golden Lions College Table Tennis Varsity Teams.

He also has involvements in national organizations. He previously served the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC), and the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) as member of the Faith and Order Committee. This is the body that decides matters on church doctrines, and practices. Since 2018, he has been with the CPBC Ordination Council as its youngest member. This council examines pastors who are recommended by their churches for ordination.

He was the National President of the Convention Baptist Ministers’ Association from 2011-2013. This is the national organization of Baptist pastors serving the churches and institutions of the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches. He also served as the President of the Haggai Institute Alumni Association Iloilo Chapter from 2017-2019.

He is married to Hermely Agriam, Purchasing Officer of CPU. They have two children: Kairos Rye and Francheska MJ.

