

# Serve the Lord, Serve the People

## *2021 Winter Daily Devotions*

### INTRODUCTION

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As a new year begins, there are many things ahead for each of us as individuals, for our country, and for our world. As a church, we are facing a pastoral transition. We have known about it and even been talking about it for almost two years, but the time of Pete's retirement is imminent. January and February will be the last season of Pastor Pete's 42 years of ministry. Over the next two months there are a variety of ways we plan to recognize and celebrate his long and faithful ministry.

Pete is going to be preaching on what matters most to him and our church, and our daily devotions will complement his sermon series. Each day we will have the opportunity to read scripture chosen by a member of the congregation and listen to their reflections on how God has transformed their lives through the ministries of VPC, particularly under Pete's leadership.

This is an opportunity for all of us to reflect on our own experience of transformation and to celebrate and give thanks to God for the gift of Pete's presence and ministry among us and all that he means to us individually and collectively.

## JANUARY 3, 2021

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*Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. – Genesis 1:26-27*

### Reflect

What stands out to you from this week's readings and reflections? What stands out to you from today's passage and sermon? Remember your experiences of God and your glimpses of truth during the week. Write down what seems most significant from the past week.

### Respond

What do you want to say to God at this time? Take time to express your gratitude. Consider how God is inviting you to arrange your life in this new season and new year to deeper transformation and community and greater service in becoming like Christ together for the world.

## JANUARY 4, 2021

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*But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. – Isaiah 43:1*

### Reflections from Jim and Jill Roberts

It's early spring of 1978, and a tall, young pastor stands at the rear of the sanctuary greeting folks as we leave. It's our first visit to VPC, and as the pastor grasps our hands, he says, "Now tell me your names." He never again asked. He has called us by name since that spring morning.

The Bible repeatedly makes clear that names and naming are important (think Genesis 1 where God gives names to his creations). Isaiah 43 has helped us get through some rough times. It is wonderfully overwhelming and reassuring to know that God calls us by name to be his, as God called Israel.

It's also pretty nice when we follow that example and call each other by name. When Jim and I returned to VPC the next Sunday (and truth be told it may have been a longer hiatus, since we were returning to a church routine after an extended period of Christmas and Easter attendance), and Pete said something along the lines of, "Good to see you, Jim and Jill", we knew we had found our church home. Sadly, we don't remember our introduction to Chris, but Jill remembers their first meeting in the Oakton Giant, where Chris called her by name and chatted with her about the planned painting of the sanctuary (that would be the old, long-gone sanctuary) as if they had been friends for years.

Being welcomed by name into a new community was a gift to us. "Come, be one of us." The warmth of the inclusion by Pete and Chris was mirrored by others at the church, as we began to recognize, and be recognized by, other worshippers ... and then to be invited to participate and to serve together.

After having been warmly welcomed into a community, it becomes easier to welcome others, no matter how shy or introverted or self-doubting you might be. The responsibility for welcoming, or maybe more appropriately the gift of providing welcome, has been something that both of us have tried to incorporate into all aspects of our lives.

Calling someone by name is no small matter. We are so grateful that our years at VPC began at the rear of the sanctuary with Pete asking our names.

## JANUARY 5, 2021

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*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

– **Matthew 9:35-38**

### Reflections from Patricia Bronson

My favorite part of Pete's sermon is the "So what" portion that he uses weekly to draw us from education and contemplation and into action. Likely, I'm not alone. Like Matthew's description of Jesus, I have often thought, Pete must realize how lost we are when he looks on our lives both midway through the Sunday sermon and through our stories. But like the good shepherd, he meets us where we are and calls us to embody Christ with our action in the week ahead. I encourage, you, the reader, to spend a few minutes this morning, reflecting on Pete's SO WHAT over the years. Which ones spoke to you the most? Is there an area worth revisiting during January 2021? Where is God prompting you into action?

Years ago, we served communion wafers with gluten, which meant that the preaching pastor (usually Pete) spent the first half of communion service looking around the crowd to see who raised their hands to request gluten-free bread. So, every month (since I am gluten-free) I attempted to sit near the front so he could find me easily.

But every once in a while, I would delight in sitting with a spiritual friend elsewhere and only realize late in the service that my choice would place a burden on pastoral staff. Yet, it was also strangely comforting to see Pete's eyes scanning the crowd for this misplaced sheep. And I delighted in the simple lifting of his chin to acknowledge me when he noticed my outstretched hand. You know, God looks for you as well, nodding and rushing to your side like the good shepherd he is when you are willing to raise your hand.

But the scripture does not stop there. We are called to work in the field of harvest. Did you know that most people come to Christ because someone came along beside them as a friend and showed them compassion? As everyone knows, our world is hurting right now. I cannot think of a better time in my life to share the love of Christ with my friends in the world. My prayer is that God who began a good work in you will do the same with you. Your world needs you. We need you to become more like Christ together for the world.

Thank you, VPC and Pete, for shepherding us.

## JANUARY 6, 2021

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*When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. - Matthew 2:10-11*

### Reflections from Michelle Rahal

Today, January 6th, marks the Feast of the Epiphany—the zenith of the Advent-Christmas season—the manifestation of Jesus as divine savior of the world. Isaiah prophesied his birth (Isaiah 7:14), an angel announced the good news to the shepherds (Luke 2:9-12), and the Magi sought to honor him as king (Matthew 2:1-2). The gifts they brought were symbolic: gold to recognize Jesus' majesty, frankincense to attest to his priestly position, and myrrh to acknowledge his imminent death.

I sometimes envy the faith of the Magi, who not only quoted to Herod the Old Testament reading that foretold the coming of the Messiah (Micah 5:2), but packed their bags with extravagant gifts, sure that a star would lead them to a newborn king. And when they arrived at a stable, they did not turn away thinking they had the wrong address, but “bowed down and worshipped him,” a baby wrapped in rags, lying in a trough. They had so little to go on, yet they were certain of what they had found.

Where is our faith? Where is our certainty? Do we bring our first fruits to the King of Kings, or do we bring him our leftovers?

When I first started attending VPC back in 1995, I had very little understanding of what it meant to follow God, and as a result I gave him my leftovers. But one Sunday, Pastor Pete gave a sermon on giving. I squirmed in my seat. He caught my attention though when he said that Jesus talked more about money than heaven and hell combined. He went on to say that everything we have belongs to God and that we are just the overseers of his gifts.

I contemplated that statement for many days and eventually came to realize that money can be an idol that takes control of the mind, turning us into self-centered creatures. I also learned that it is relatively easy to give away that which you don't claim as your own. Thank you, Pastor Pete, for helping to free me from the chains of this world.

I imagine the Magi joyfully handing their gifts to Mary, smiling at baby Jesus, and asking Joseph, “What else can we do?” May we be like the Magi and find great joy in giving as we focus on things above.

Come, let us adore Him!

## JANUARY 7, 2021

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*They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. - Isaiah 40:31*

*Each of us is created in God's image, equally enabled by God's grace, and bound by friendship in the body of Christ.*

### **Reflections from Wood and Emmy Parker**

Did you know these phrases are engraved on plates on the benches outside the doors leading to the parking lot at VPC? The benches are gifts from Pat Flowe in memory of her daughter Jennifer Flowe, one of the members of VPC's Friendship Class who passed away last year.

Pastor Pete is one of the strongest supporters of the Friendship Class. Over the forty-plus years of his ministry here at VPC, Pastor Pete has become one of the best friends of the members of the Friendship Class. He has greeted members warmly and enthusiastically. He has referred to them in many of his sermons, and he has been instrumental in the Friendship Class becoming an integral part of the VPC family.

When Chris Falls, or any other member of the Friendship Class, wanted to talk with Pastor Pete after a worship service, Pete gave them his undivided attention, no matter how long the line. When Melanie Cornelius wanted to get up in the middle of the worship service and move to a pew closer to Pete, he handled it in stride. When one of the members of the class wanted to taste the gluten-free wafer instead of the normal communion bread, Pete accommodated the request with love and without any disruption.

Pete's care, concern, and obvious love for these special people have been consistent throughout his time at VPC. The inclusion of the Friendship Chimes—a group that includes virtually all the members of the Friendship Class—in periodic worship services and the Glorious Sounds concerts has been due in large part to Pete's support and commitment to these special folks. His loving devotion and faithful support of the Friendship Class has been inspiring to us and to many people.

The members of the Friendship Class love the Lord and love the people, and they serve the Lord and serve the people. As the Isaiah passage above states, they run and are not weary, and they walk and are not faint. The passage has always been an encouragement to us, and Pete's steadfast love for the members of the Friendship Class has been an inspiring encouragement to us as well.

## JANUARY 8, 2021

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*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” – Joshua 1:9*

### Reflections from John and Nancy Davidovich

“Faith, Family, and Friends.” We can’t tell you how many times we have heard Pete James say those words at weddings and funerals, and we know them to be true. We moved with our two young boys to Vienna from the Chicago area in May of 1985. We spent the summer church shopping, but kept coming back to VPC.

That September Pete and Chris James invited us to join a young couple’s Bible study. Although we had both grown up in the Presbyterian church and John had served twice as an elder, we had never done a Bible study. We both realized that in our faith journey, even with our church background, we had not been growing. While we knew the Bible stories, we were still infants in our faith. That Bible study was really the beginning of our faith journey.

It was a rich environment at VPC, and we have made many long-lasting friendships. Things began to change as we both started to read the Bible, study, and pray. Pete’s messages from the pulpit became our core values: Jesus is Lord, Scripture is our authority, and everyone is called to follow Jesus. Our lives were slowly changing and we were growing in our relationship with God. We began to trust in God’s promises, which gave us peace and enabled us to let go of our efforts to control our lives.

Over the years it is hard to recall when we haven’t been in small groups or Bible studies. We formed a prayer group with Pete and Chris and two other couples to pray for our children when they were in high school; we still meet. We have prayed and supported each other through deaths of parents and spouses, job changes, weddings, and births. Over the years at VPC God through his grace has prepared us for trials including deaths of parents, complications from John’s surgery for prostate cancer, and a stroke.

During that time, we adopted Joshua 1:9 as our verse of encouragement: “We are strong, not afraid or discouraged, for we know with certainty that our God is always with us.” God has always been faithful in answering our prayers, even if it is not always in the way or timeframe we wanted, but in his own way and time. We are so thankful to Christ, our Savior, for bringing us to VPC and for Faith, Family, and Friends.

## JANUARY 9, 2021

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*I am the Vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing. – John 15:5*

### Reflections from Lisa Baltzer

It is with joy and gratitude that I celebrate Pete and his 40+ years of ministry at VPC. This is a poignant and memorable time.

My family and I came to VPC almost 40 years ago, at just about the same time as Pete. As a new Christian then, I had discovered these words of Jesus about the vine and the branches. Oh how I wanted to be a branch. I knew I needed Jesus' healing and transformation, but the key—and the puzzle—were Jesus' words, "if you remain in me," you will bear fruit. How could I "remain in him"? Practically, what does that look like?

I have found the answer in *Growing Your Soul* and *Renewing Prayer*. I have learned to be with God in Centering Prayer and Scripture meditation, and I have learned of God's extravagant love for me. I had known about God's love; now, I knew God, and, little by little, I have surrendered to his love.

My greatest blessing of "remaining in him" is how much I look forward to and enjoy my times alone with God!

Gradually, without my realizing it, God has worked a transformation. Fruits of these practices have begun to show up in my life. As a result, I am more able to live into Pete's familiar and much-loved weekly benediction: "Go from this place to love the Lord and love the people; serve the Lord and serve the people."

I must add one more celebration of Pete—as a long-time prayer partner. He faithfully gathers for prayer with a group of staff and congregation at noon once a week, whether in the parlor or via Zoom. It's a time of quiet, of listening to God together, seeking God's will and guidance for our church and the church world-wide. Pete is always there, making time for God and fellow pilgrims in the middle of the day.

Thank you, Pete, for leading our body of Christ, guiding our ministries, and sitting beside us when we pray.