

Serve the Lord, Serve the People

2021 Winter Daily Devotions

INTRODUCTION

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 17, 2021

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. – **Mark 8:22-34***

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 18, 2021

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. – Philippians 4:8

Reflections from Sandi McLaughlin

"If you see 'therefore,' you should ask yourself what it is there for?" "Are you with me?" "So, what difference does this message make in my life?" C. S. Lewis quotes (a lot), Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Newton, Martin Luther references, warm relationships with our Friendship Class members, a big smile as he holds up a newly baptized child for the congregation to behold.

These are a few of the things that come to mind as I contemplate what I have admired most about Pastor Pete. These are some of the things I will miss most when he retires next month. But among the many more excellent things I could choose, I have decided to write about geese.

If you were at VPC at the time, do you remember honking encouragement to one another in church? I may have made that up. It may have been a hypothetical pulpit suggestion, but the idea caught my imagination.

Pete taught us that flocks of geese are a model of excellence for the Christian community in three ways:

1. By flying together in a V-formation, scientists estimate that the whole flock can fly about 70% farther with the same amount of energy than if each goose flew alone.
2. Geese help each other along the way. When a goose is ill or injured and falls out of formation, two additional geese will fall out of formation to stay with and protect the fading goose (e.g., Stephen Ministers).
3. Geese honk at each other. They communicate constantly and encourage each other along the way. (Honk if you love Jesus!)

As an introvert who would just as soon keep my relationship with Jesus private, this idea that we are called into Christian community and that as a group we will be able to better serve God is something I need to be reminded of frequently.

I am not good with elegant or sentimental words, so I would like to honk my appreciation to Pete for his four decades of faithful service to VPC. I would also like to honk my encouragement to Pete and Chris as they set off on their next adventure. You will be missed by your VPC flock.

JANUARY 19, 2021

Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. The Teacher sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly. – Ecclesiastes 12:9-10

Reflections from Bill and Carolyn Carter

Proverb: a brief popular saying that gives advice about how people should live or that expresses a belief that is generally thought to be true.

So now we come to the “so what” moment: What difference has Pastor Pete’s ministry made in our lives? Peter James, as a long-serving senior pastor, has been part of many life events for VPC families, including ours, and each way he serves is most worthy of appreciation. This meditation focuses on Pete the Teacher. Eleven chapters of Ecclesiastes pessimistically lament the futility of earthly strivings, but the final chapter emphatically, optimistically proclaims that remembering our Creator and obeying God will fulfill earthly life.

Solomon, probable writer of Ecclesiastes, self-labeled “Teacher,” reminds us that the human experience includes beginnings and endings while we are alive on earth, that is, “under the sun.” Thus, within that order of earthly life, Pete’s ministry with VPC must end. Yet our faith in Jesus Christ, the Greatest Teacher, assures us that beginnings and endings during earthly life are unimportant compared to the Good News of Eternal Life.

Peter James loves words, and his sermons demonstrate just how diligently, in the words of today’s Scripture, he “searched to find just the right words.” When he preaches, it is obvious that he has studied and pondered deeply. He brings alive the Bible stories he chooses and offers challenging analysis and thought-provoking interpretations. Pastor Pete demonstrates confidence and humility when he quotes other preachers and authors to enrich the results of his own study and formulation. (Some lucky Gordon-Conwell Seminary students will soon learn a lot about C. S. Lewis!)

After Pete challenges us with deep and broad analysis, he brings it home with easily remembered, and always conveniently numbered, applications. Those enumerated applications are gifts of proverbs for us from Pete, as in the Ecclesiastes passage above. How very special that Pete delivers both a fully-formed exposition and a “mini-sermon-for-dummies,” all within 25 minutes!

Good preaching may inspire, good preaching may encourage, good preaching may admonish, challenge, or correct, but if the preacher is not an enthusiastic teacher, ears may not hear and hearts may not receive the message. VPC has been blessed for over 40 years to have a pastor who works hard to prepare and deliver sermons we look forward to hearing. What a *great teacher!* Thanks be to God!

JANUARY 20, 2021

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. – Ecclesiastes 4:12

Reflections from Bill and Judy Ichord

In July of 1980, Pastor Pete read, and spoke to this verse at our wedding in front of the cross of the old sanctuary. Although we don't recall choosing this verse specifically, it remains the most significant of the day for the 40+ years that have followed.

We were introduced to Pete early in 1980 through a friend who knew him at Gordon-Conwell. He was one of two pastors recommended to us since neither of us were members of a local church at the time. While turned away by the other pastor (a 'Member's Only' approach), Pete warmly welcomed us to VPC, indicative of his ministry of a "Welcoming Church." We were one of his first weddings at VPC and, according to Pete, his very first 'non-member' wedding. In the 40 years since, Pete (and Chris) have not only ministered to us, but also have been valued friends, spiritual and prayer 'allies', and part of our Christian 'family.'

Pete offered many customary words at the wedding about God's design for two to join in marriage, and to love, honor and cherish each other. It was the reading of Ecclesiastes 4:12 that created the "so what difference does this make in our lives" moment. He invoked this verse, often called "God's Knot," to remind that as individuals, or as a couple, we could not withstand all the pressures of the world. Yet bringing the faith and love of Jesus Christ into our lives and our family – "God's strand" -- would bind us with lasting strength. A simple and profound message.

Over 40+ years, through good and challenging times, we have followed Pete's admonition and found strength in our faith and through programs at VPC: with Pete and Chris as members of the old '20's & 30's' and 'Questers' groups, through Pete's encouragement of small groups and bible study, and through his support of VPC music programs.

Ecclesiastes holds an at once complex and simple message for God's people. We live together in community in God's creation, yet the material alone is insufficient, 'futile.' Only by adding God and Jesus Christ to the human experience do we enjoy a fulfilling life.

Forty years later as we hold hands in prayer or walk by the old cross in the hallway at VPC, Pete's words, and 'God's Knot' bind us. We are forever thankful for yours' and Chris' ministry and friendship.

JANUARY 21, 2021

Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. – Mathew 20:28

Reflections from Paul Cicio

I love this passage because it brings absolute clarity that as followers of Christ, we are to serve others ... not to be served. This is in contrast to a world that is more focused on receiving than giving and on self rather than others. And Jesus loved us so much that he did the unthinkable, that he died for us so that we would inherit eternity with him. There is no greater gift.

Jesus's entire ministry was a demonstration in what it means to serve. He humbled himself to wash the feet of his disciples. He attended to and healed the sick, the lame and those who were castaways of society and sinners. No one was too sick, too old, or too poor to receive his love and blessings. We too are called to help those less fortunate than ourselves. And Pete's favorite closing prayer, "And now, go forth from this place to love the Lord and love the people, to serve the Lord and serve the people," is spot-on. Thank you, Pete!

To serve takes love. Jesus said that God is love and God wants an intimate relationship with us. Feeling God's love is central to serving because serving requires a grateful heart that emulates God's love. When we feel his love, it is then that we have the capacity to truly serve as Jesus did.

I have experienced firsthand how the Lord has used the ministries of VPC to serve when we discovered that my wife had glioblastoma brain cancer. For nine months, she was visited by pastors who prayed and sang hymns with her; VPC members visited and provided meals, flowers, and cards to lift her up. As a result, we did not walk through that terrible time alone. We had Christ-lovers who gave us comfort by serving. Jesus had to be smiling as his followers at VPC served. Words cannot adequately express my appreciation.

Pete's ministry is also an example of Christ-like serving: a tireless devotion to his Savior, leadership in every important church decision for 42 years, untold numbers brought to Christ, a church with an exciting future, a vibrant youth program, comfort to the sick, food for the hungry and financial support to missionaries. Let us honor Pete for his serving God by praying for him and Chris as they open a new and exciting chapter in their lives.

JANUARY 22, 2021

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. – John 1:5

I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. – John 12:46

Reflections from Kelly Eldridge

John 1:5 has always been a favorite verse. There is beauty in John's powerful juxtaposition of light and dark, warmth and cold, victory and defeat, comprehension and ignorance. Through the years, I have loved this verse for all those reasons. Whether viewed as "Good wins," "Love wins," or "Life and Light wins," don't we all applaud when good triumphs over evil?

Myriad concepts are packed into this compelling sentence, and each has held sway over the years. But the one that comes to the forefront these last few years is God's constancy, faithfulness, and everlasting promises to us. God's promises are true, and we can count on them. As the sun rises each day in the east, his light shines in the darkness. It's the same now as it was thousands of years ago: God's unchanging love for his people.

I've been attending VPC since the mid-nineties. I take notes during the sermons, and there are two particular points Pete made that I return to. The first is that John writes in the present tense: "Light Shines." Again, a wonderful reminder that Light is a constant, present, unchanging force right now among us. We can count on the Light and nothing can overcome it.

When we are grappling with the challenges of a global pandemic, illness, aging, grief, job loss, financial insecurity, changing relationships, or whatever our personal wilderness is, the constancy of a true Light is more than comforting. It is ageless and timeless and unshakeable. Pete, you so often remind us that even though our circumstances may change, God's promise to be with us will never change.

The second point you made is that "Word is both a Light-Giver, dispelling darkness, and a Life-Giver, destroying death." John 12:46 expands on this and points us directly to Jesus as the Light of the World. Pete, you've pointed us to Jesus every day of your ministry. You've reminded us that the only truly important things in life are Faith, Family, and Friends. All the rest is transitory. Our triune God and his love for us is forever.

Pete and Chris, as you "Go from this place to love the Lord and love the people; to serve the Lord and serve the people," know that your friends here at VPC will keep lifting our eyes, opening our hearts, seeking and finding. His Light will lead us onward displacing our darkness and proving a constant source of hope and grace. May we all keep walking in the Light.

JANUARY 23, 2021

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. – Ephesians 2:1-10

Reflections from Shannon Jordan

The phone at my house doesn't ring often at 8 a.m. I was surprised to answer it that 2007 morning and hear, "Shannon, Pete James here."

I knew he knew my name as I had started seminary and I had to go through Session to do so, but getting a call from Pete was not expected, especially since I still felt very anonymous in such a large church.

He shared that he had seen me in the hall at church the previous night and felt led to call me to ask about my filling in as an interim doing congregational care. My first reaction was that I was in seminary and had elementary and middle school kids, so, a hard no. I was already floundering with time management. But then he asked me to pray about it and I said I would.

So I did—anticipating a "no."

As soon as I started praying, it felt as if God were saying, "Shannon, you have been praying about being ordained as a pastor. Do you not think this will give you a great opportunity to do so? Don't ignore answered prayer!"

Thus began my professional ministry.

I learned so much from Pete over those 10+ years in the office next door to his and in countless meetings, strategy sessions, and my first Growing Your Soul group.

I learned about God's grace and love.

I learned to put God first.

I learned the importance of prayer and humility.

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I learned to embrace who God created me to be.

And I learned practical things like not to step on the Astro Turf near a grave or you may fall in and that you can do a children's message with a guide dog puppy and two teens, even if Pete challenges you to tie it in to the Transfiguration.

As a solo pastor of a small church in rural Alabama, I recognize that phone call from Pete was one of the first steps for my call as a pastor, and my time at VPC equipped me and sent me to do God's work. I will forever be grateful for the impact that Pete and VPC have had on my life and so many others'.