

*Agenda Materials for the 154<sup>th</sup> meeting of*  
**Classis Lake Erie**  
**of the Christian Reformed Church**  
to be held in Ann Arbor, Michigan, March 7, 2020, 9:30 a.m.

**I. Reports for the Agenda**

1. Stated Clerk (Ben Van Arragon, p. 3)
2. Executive Committee (Harry Winters, pp. 3-4).

**II. Ministry Committees**

1. Specialized Ministries
  - a. (Nathan Gritter)
2. New Church Development
  - a. (Mark Van Andel)
3. Leadership Development/Student Fund
  - a. Examination of Candidate Nathan Groenewold (Pastor; calling congregation: Ann Arbor CRC). Sermons, pp. 8-19.
4. Congregational Life
  - a. (Chris Lanham)

**III. Denominational**

1. Resonate Global Mission (Regional Network Connector, Carla Bieber).
2. CRCNA Ballot 11 (Letter and Ballot, pp. 6-7).
3. Council of Delegates (Reappointment of delegate Laurie Harkema).
4. World Renew (Appointment of new board member Gerald Van Wyke, p. 4).
5. Selection of delegates, Synod 2020 (June 12-18, Calvin University, Grand Rapids, MI). *Each Classis will send four delegates: 1 pastor, 1 elder, 1 deacon, and 1 additional officebearer.*

***Other significant items will be added!***

**Covenant for Officebearers**

*(All first-time delegates to classis will be asked sign this document.)*

We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God, which proclaims the good news of God's creation and redemption through Jesus Christ. Acknowledging the authority of God's Word, we submit to it in all matters of life and faith.

We affirm three creeds—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed—as ecumenical expressions of the Christian faith. In doing so, we confess our faith in unity with followers of Jesus Christ throughout all ages and among all nations.

We also affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith, whose doctrines fully agree with the Word of God. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.

Along with these historic creeds and confessions, we also recognize the witness of Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony as a current Reformed expression of the Christian faith that forms and guides us in our present context.

We also promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its supplements. If the church asks, we will give a full explanation of our views. Further, we promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority.

We honor this covenant for the well-being of the church to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## Stated Clerk's Report

1. Prepared and distributed the minutes of the October, 2019 meeting of classis.
2. Tended to various items of correspondence.
3. Updated and redesigned Classis Lake Erie website (classislakeerie.org).
4. Prepared an agenda and minutes for the Executive Committee.
5. Prepared materials and made arrangements for the March, 2020, meeting of classis—this is a work in progress.

## Executive Committee Report

### Minutes – January 23, 2020

#### **I. Attendance**

Present: Carla Bieber, Eunice Bossenbrook (by phone) Paul Bouman, Joe Creech, John Park, Alex Snider, Ben Van Arragon, Harry Winters

*Ben opened in prayer.*

#### **II. Continuing Business**

- A. Treasurer/Budget. Joe Creech reports on budget and Classis finances.
- B. Classis President/Vice-President. Harry Winters completes his term as president in March 2020. Alex Snider will assume the role of president from March 2020 to March 2021. The call for a new vice president will be made at Classis on March 7, 2020.
- C. Other CLE roles: Regional Pastors. Ben committed to working on recruiting a second regional pastor.
- D. Classis Strategic Planning/Vision. It was agreed that at the March 2020 meeting, an invitation would be issued for participants to join a Strategic Planning Team for Classis.
- E. Classis meeting format/schedule. At the October 2019 meeting, several lay leaders stated that, should Classis meetings be held on weekdays, they would be unable to attend. In response, every congregation was asked to canvass their lay council members to ascertain the feasibility of holding Classis meetings on weekdays. Feedback will be gathered at the March 2020 meeting.
- F. Classis/regional seminars. In response to periodic invitations to/requests for special events

#### **III. New Business**

- A. Review Classis Website (classislakeerie.org). Some corrections/edits were requested. The following additions were also suggested: 1. A News/Events panel on the home page; 2. A list of Classis committees and

leaders.

- B. Resonate Presentation topics and representative update. Discussion is underway between Resonate staff members and Classis leaders to determine ways that Resonate can best support and promote mission and revitalization in Classis Lake Erie.

#### **IV. Preparation for March 2020 meeting of Classis (March 7, 2020, Ann Arbor CRC)**

- A. Resonate Presentation: Encouraging local ministries to “think missionally”.
- B. John Bolt (CRCNA): Rethinking Ministry Shares.
- C. Council of Delegates: Term Renewal, representative Laurie Harkema.
- D. Delegates to Synod 2020: Alex Snider will serve again; three additional delegates are needed.
- E. Synodical Deputy term renewal. Both our primary (Rev. Randall Engle) and alternate (Rev. Chris Lanham) synodical deputies complete their terms this spring.
- F. Candidate Examination: Nathan Groenewold (Calling congregation: AACRC. Ministry: Cohort Detroit).
- G. Denominational Boards – Regional Ballot. Vote will be required on ballot provided in Classis Agenda.

Meeting Adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

## **World Renew**

### **Board Member Nominee: Gerald Van Wyke**

Gerald is a lifelong member of the Christian Reformed Church. He is a product of Holland (MI) Christian Schools and graduate of Calvin University. Gerald brings a wealth of professional and volunteer experience. In addition to a career as a lawyer, he has served both his home congregation (North Hills, Troy) and our Classis as a member of council and multiple boards. He currently serves as board chair and tutor at the Arab American Friendship Center; and has served a term on World Renew’s board in the past.

## CRCNA Board Delegates: Ballot Region 11

**To:** Stated Clerks of Classes

**From:** Dee Recker, Director of Synodical Services

**Date:** February 2020

**Subject:** Ballot for Denominational Board Delegates

Dear friends:

Enclosed is the ballot for denominational board membership for distribution and vote at your upcoming *winter or spring* classis meeting.

**If you do not have a classis meeting scheduled prior to the end of May:** Please (1) send the ballot directly to the *organized and emerging* churches (if seated at the meetings) in your classis for completion by the minister, elder, and deacon (if applicable) delegates *who attended the most recent classis meeting*; (2) ask that the ballot be **returned to you** by a specified date; and (3) compile the vote total from your classis. Please (4) forward the total to the Synodical Services Office as soon as possible but no later than **May 23**.

**If you have a scheduled classis meeting prior to May 23:** Classical delegates will vote for only one nominee per slate presented. When voting for regional representatives, the votes are limited to **two or three** credentialed delegates from organized and emerging congregations, depending on whether classis seats deacon delegates.

Please enter the **total votes** for each nominee and **return your “tallied” ballot** to the Synodical Services office by scan/email (drecker@crcna.org), fax (616-224-5895), or by snail mail (see address on bottom of the ballot) immediately following your classis meeting—**no later than May 23**.

The votes from all the classes within your region will be totaled to determine the person elected as delegate. The voting results will be presented to **synod in June for ratification**.

Thank you for processing the attached ballot! Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions related to this process.

Cordially,  
Dee

# **BALLOT—REGION 11**

(Classes Grand Rapids East, Grand Rapids North, Grand Rapids South, Grandville, Lake Erie, and Thornapple Valley)

When voting for regional representatives, limit the votes to ***two or three votes per credentialed delegate*** from organized and emerging congregations, depending on whether classis seats deacon delegates.

## ***Calvin Theological Seminary***

(Vote for one of the following nominees.)

\_\_\_\_\_ *Rev. R. Scott Greenway* is a pastor at Caledonia (Mich.) CRC. He has served there since 1995, and he previously served as the pastor of Irving Park CRC in Midland Park, New Jersey, from 1991 to 1995. Rev. Greenway has also served on the CRCNA Board of Trustees and on the board of Back to God Ministries International. In addition, he has twice served as president of synod, and he was part of the search committee for the most recent Calvin University president.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Rev. Shannon Jammal-Hollemans* has been an ordained minister since 2014 and is currently a member of Oakdale Park CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She served in the Office of Social Justice as collaborative program developer from 2013 to 2017 and as racial justice team leader from 2017 to 2018. Rev. Jammal-Hollemans also served as coordinator of the Calvin Theological Seminary Dig program (formerly known as Facing Your Future) in 2019.

***Calvin University***

(Vote YES or NO for the following single nominee.)

\_\_\_\_\_ *Rev. Nate DeJong McCarron* is a 2006 political science graduate from Calvin University with a M.Div. from Calvin Theological Seminary in 2009. He has been the lead pastor at Fuller Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, since January 2014. As the lead pastor, Rev. DeJong McCarron helps his church to best follow God's vision and share the good news of the gospel. In his position, he presents messages at the Sunday worship services, cares for hurting members of the congregation, leads the staff toward gospel ministry, and oversees a variety of church ministries. He has served churches in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Denver, Colorado; and Orland Park, Illinois. Rev. DeJong McCarron is passionate about the good news found in Jesus, developing leaders, and preaching the scriptures. Grand Rapids East stated clerk, Al Mulder, describes him as an "up and coming pastoral leader with experience in new and established churches and in both the western and mid-west U.S."

\_\_\_\_\_  
Stated Clerk

\_\_\_\_\_  
Classis

Please return this ballot with total votes for each nominee to:

**Ms. Dee Recker, Director of Synodical Services**

1700 28<sup>th</sup> Street SE

Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407

Fax: 616-224-5895

Email: [drecker@crcna.org](mailto:drecker@crcna.org)

# Leadership Development

## Examination: Nathan Groenewold

Nathan is a recent graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary. This year, in partnership with Resonate Global Mission, Ann Arbor CRC, and Classis Lake Erie, Nathan launched “Cohort Detroit”, a ministry that provides training and internships in spiritual formation and urban ministry. Nathan and his wife live in Ann Arbor, where she does doctoral work in English and Education.

## Sermons

### Catechism Sermon: *Living the Renewed Life*

Lord's Day 32 / Colossians 3:1-14

**Key Takeaway:** Christ is renewing us so that our lives stand out and point to Christ

[Intro]: Today we dive into an age-old question, among Christian circles at least: ‘If we are saved by grace through Christ, why should we do good works?’ If we know how the story ends, what’s the point? The non-religious version seems about the same: if our destiny is more or less fixed, why should we try to be good people? What does it matter anyway?

This question is timeless. It shows up in the middle of the Heidelberg Catechism, a pamphlet of Reformed teachings written back in the 1500s, written—among other things—as a sort of Sunday school curriculum. It asks:

“Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why then should we do good works?”

One of the authors, in his 20s himself, clearly had experience with Sunday-school teaching. You can almost hear him anticipating the 6<sup>th</sup> grader’s question: ‘You said last week, Pastor Ryan, (which you did, by the way) that we are saved 100% by God’s grace...so why do I have to be nice to my brother? You said that God will love me anyway.’

I actually ask that same question, but it takes a bit of a different turn. I’ve been serving in Detroit now for just over a year. I have met incredible leaders and kind neighbors, like Theresa and Jonathan, here today from the Brightmoor neighborhood. But I have also seen poverty, racism, lies, violence, and systems that are stacked against some of the poorest communities in Detroit. And sometimes I ask: God, what is even the point of doing good works? What good is our little contribution in the face of Sin that is universe-wide? We’ve all felt that, I think. Even (and especially) this week – watching the news, it seems we’re on the brink of yet another war.



[Transition] Today, we turn to Colossians 3 as a guide that helps us answer this age-old question: “Why then should we do good works?” What’s the point? And though the passage is as deep as it is wide, we’ll focus on two reasons it gives us:

**1) First, Christ has renewed us into (or is transforming us into) good-works-loving people! (3:1-4)**

- Colossians 3 helps us reframe the question from “Why *should* we do good things?” to “**How can we not do good things?**” That is to say, Colossians—instead of jumping in with a list of ‘shoulds’ and ‘should nots,’—Colossians 3 begins with words of comfort: On our own power, we simply can’t do good works.
  - 3:1 “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.”<sup>1</sup>
  - 3:3 “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”
  - 3:4 “When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”
  - These three statements are all far too profound for us to fully understand. But here’s the implication: we belong to something so much bigger, so much more beautiful, so much better than ritual performance or surface-level behavior change: we belong to Christ. Christ’s death is our death. And Christ’s victory is our victory. Christ’s image is our image. How can we resist this life? How can we resist doing good works? Bringing positive change? Brian Walsh puts it this way: “Christ’s story is your story. Your narrative is tied with Christ’s narrative.” (139)
    - And if our story is Christ’s story, that means that—though we are currently in the slog of day-to-day hardships, we look ahead to when, according to 3:4, we will be revealed with Christ in glory!
- [Illustrate]: I came away from own HC instruction with a very simple answer to the question (why should we do good works?): we do good works out of gratitude for what God done. I understood: God did us a favor. Now we do God a favor by being grateful.... And that’s not untrue. But it’s only a fraction of the story... As it turns out, I learned an incomplete answer: before the HC gets to gratitude, it says, “Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, is also restoring us by his Spirit into his image, *so that...*” and then continues into the good works we should do. The first response to why we do good works is: Because Christ is renewing us into good-works-loving people, the kind of people who simply cannot help but do good works.
- [Illustrate]: Dallas Willard... in his book, *The Great Omission*, says, “You cannot keep the law by trying not to break the law (outward behavior change). That will only make a Pharisee out of you. Instead, you have to be transformed in the functions of the soul so that the deeds of the law are a natural outflow of who you have become.” For example: outer transformation is our good Christian teaching that we must turn the other cheek. However, we often do this with bitterness or anger. Inner transformation involves God transforming us to *be* the type of person that has the “interior character of Christ,” and turning the cheek will be done out of willingness, not with bitterness or anger (152). This is the kinds of change that Colossians begins with.
- [Recap]: Key: we’re not doing good works just to do them; we’ve become, thanks to Christ, the type of people that love to do good works. This is a huge comfort for me as I continue work in Detroit, and hopefully a huge comfort to all of us. If my colleagues and neighbors in Brightmoor

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<sup>1</sup> “Seeking that which is above is a matter not of becoming heavenly minded but of allowing the liberating rule of Christ to transform every dimension of your life” (Walsh, 155).

know that the small and faithful good works that we are doing are wrapped up into the all-powerful work of Christ, who is renewing us and renewing our neighborhoods, *then* we will be able to stay the course. As we allow ourselves to be renewed by Christ—through prayer and small steps of faithfulness wrapped up into the Spirit’s leading, we can’t help but become people that do good works.

[Transition]: So why should we do what is good? Because Christ is renewing us so that we can’t help but do them. We’re compelled to. We hardly have a choice in the matter. And that’s good news. We’re not merely called to modify our behavior to please God. Christ’s renewal runs much deeper. Behavior modification would be like filling a cavity in a tooth, when what is needed is brain surgery. Only through our inner renewal in Christ are we able to do good works.

**But, what are those good works? What does a renewed life look like?** In short, a renewed life looks... **Different.** Living a Renewed life in Christ **stands out.**

## 2. Why do we do good works? Number two: so that our renewed lives stand out and point to Christ! (3:1-12)

- [Context] The context of the Colossian church was a group of believers whose very core beliefs clashed with those of the Roman Empire which they were subjected to. When the Colossians boldly declared that Christ was Lord, they became enemies of the state: declaring that Caesar, the god-figure of the Roman Empire, was not—in fact—God. They also became enemies of some religious factions/cults of the day who declared that Christ was not God.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, When Paul declared that the “whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God (2:19),” he was directly contradicting the myth that Rome, with its military might and arsenal of weapons, was the primary protector of its citizens.
  - When the Colossians boldly declared with their actions (surely standing out from those around them) that fornication, evil desires, and greed must be avoided (3:5), they were waging a subversive war against the same kind of self-centered and consumption-driven sexual desires that have created our own cultures of sexual abuse and scandal.
  - When the Colossians boldly declared that there is “no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all,”<sup>3</sup> (3:11) they were challenging the economic bedrock, the very systems of exploitation that kept the rich in power and the poor silenced. Rome was built on hierarchy, and the Christian message subverts this when it declares that ‘the first shall be last, and the last first.’
  - Let’s not forget that the commands and the encouragements that Paul gives to the Colossians would have been somewhere on the spectrum between downright offensive and outright absurd to many who heard them. (These kinds of declarations keep me excited and nervous about Christ-led ministry. We serve a loving God, but a God that isn’t always safe. A God who makes the first last, and the last first.)

<sup>2</sup> A faith in danger of hijacking. Of Deists denying Christ’s power (a shadow without substance (2:17).

<sup>3</sup> We ask: ‘Does the church believe that the gospel is for everyone? That the good news is for everyone? Are there still dividing walls?’ (we try to get at the profundity of this in its original context). “The dividing walls are our work.” “Tearing them down is God’s work” – Pastor Ryan

- Though Paul's commands and warnings (first fornication, then greed, then on to malice and lying and slander) may seem random, they all have one thread of unity: they are relational sins. They are sins that we commit that very directly affect those around us. They can cause pain and trauma. Paul is calling the Colossians away from these kinds of relationships, the ones they had before they were in relationship with Christ.
- [Challenge] When we live a renewed life, we look different. Strange, even. Let's take some time to read slowly through 3:12. Let's ask, how would this world, our lives, our families, our relationships stand out if we practiced these?
  - 3:12 "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with humility, meekness, and patience... Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...."
  - [Story of devotions in the mayor's office of Mangulile – if time] – are these the characteristics we want to put on? The manifestations/fruit of the grace and renewal we have received? So that through our strange-looking lives people may see Christ?
  - The HC puts it this way, in answering the question, why then should we do good works? "So that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ."
- I need to ask myself: how is my life standing out as renewed in Christ? What are the markers? Imagine our world where above all-- our leaders prized love and unity? What if our leaders conducted ourselves in this way? What if our religious leaders served with forgiveness and meekness? A community shaped by these values should stand out! It should be strange – meekness in the face of ever-increasing profit margins. Kindness in the face of threatened missiles... etc. (186). How do our lives point to Christ?

**Transition:** Very quickly, we begin to spiral into the feeling of hopelessness that I began with. The problems are too big. Our own power too small. But this reality is precisely the one that Paul spoke into, and though our efforts are often miniscule, we serve Christ, who is our 'all in all!' (3:11b).

I conclude where I began: reminding us that we haven't heard a simple list of commands aimed at behavior modification. These are markers of a life renewed and transformed by Christ, grounded in the work of Christ at the cross. The good works are not in our own power to achieve. Christ is renewing us so that our lives can stand out: not proudly, not showfully, but in humility, meekness, and kindness.

Why do we do good works? We do them because Christ compels us. Because as we do good works, our strange-looking actions point to Christ.

Above all: we do good works knowing that Christ goes before us, behind us, and beside us.

**Old Testament Sermon: *Faith Within the Darkness*****Psalm 88**

**Intro:** Many of us have been taught from the liturgies and the patterns of our everyday lives that feelings are meant to be suppressed... the art of putting a sock in your emotions—especially the sad ones—was passed down to me by my Grandpa. In the period prior to the 1950s, the American Psychological Association urged parents to show as little love as possible for their children. John Watson, the head of the American Psychological Association, said, “there are serious rocks ahead for the over-kissed child, and then he defined over-kissing as kissing your child more than once a year.” That was a generation that has shaped many of us—that was how many of our parents were parented. How some of *us* were parented. Just like this strange caution against showing love, today our systems also caution us against publicly showing grief, pain, and suffering. When it comes to death and bereavement, our North American funeral practices are unusual. In most of Latin America, a velatorio, a funeral wake, follows a death... following a death in most rural Latin American towns, an entire community comes together in the home of the deceased to gather and mourn with the family. These wakes can last between 12-36 hours. I attended several, and I was always impressed with the space that the community allowed for a raw expression of grief. Where we in North America tend to applaud a brother, a mother, or a son “for holding himself together “being strong” at a funeral eulogy,” my brothers and sisters in Honduras looked on the wailing mother and said, “see how much she loved her son.”

In Psalm 88, the psalmist does not attempt to cover up his emotions, as blasphemous as they will sound. He does exactly the opposite. He directs his pain and anger at God. And if there is one thing to learn from this psalm today, It’s ok to ask God, Why?” It’s ok to doubt God’s faithfulness. It’s ok to dwell in these emotions.

**Today we learn through a Psalm of lament that it’s ok to feel lost. It’s ok to ask God why. It’s ok to doubt God’s faithfulness.**

**I. The Context:**

Psalm 88 is one of around fifty prayers of lament in our book of Psalms. These psalms begin with cries to God about hurt and brokenness and pain. They often shift from anger to a posture of trust and praise. Some are communal, not unlike the candlelight vigil in Charlottesville mourning the act of white supremacy. It’s been said that these psalms are like the gymnasiums for the soul – they help us work out our emotions, our prayers, our feelings before God.

**Descent into Darkness**

Psalm 88 is an oddball psalm, even in the category of psalms of lament. Almost every psalm of lament ends with a hopeful declaration of God’s faithfulness, but not this one. Today, we will follow the descent of the psalmist. We do this not because we want to end up permanently in darkness, but rather to enter into a deeper relationship with God, one characterized by honesty. It’s now well-known in therapy that the only path out is through. Through pain, through tragedy, and through anger. This psalm guides us in these emotions.

**II. The Psalm**

**The psalm is composed of three parts, each set apart by a declaration, “O Lord!”**

The psalm can be divided into three parts, set off by the psalmist declaration, “Oh my God.” In the Hebrew these declarations come first in their lines. This is a guide for us as we learn to express our lament. We do not just direct the lament to ourselves (that leads to self-hate and self-doubt), or just at the friends around us, or only posted on social media. We don’t find our ultimate comfort in this. **We direct our laments to God.** And not just any God—**Yahweh, God...**

To the Hebrew hear, Yahweh is the savior God who brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, restored the Babylonian captives to Jerusalem. Yahweh God is a Savior God, a God of power who truly is mighty to save.

**Part 1: Raw honesty. You are my Savior. But I’m not seeing that.**

The psalmist starts with an affirmation of God as savior. He places our trust firmly in a God who has been in the business of delivering messed up people for thousands of years.

Verse 1-2 hold a straightforward request, “God, hear my prayer.” Picture the physical reality of it all – ‘the night time,’ ‘before you’ implies closeness, ‘incline your ear’. That’s always felt strange to me, though. A spiritual director—when I asked him why it seemed so hard to pray—asked me if I’d ever pictured God? Perhaps in a chair sitting in front of me. Maybe picture that. Picture God as scripture does, a mother gathering her children—her hens—to herself.

Then comes the honest expression of feelings:

- I/my: Look at just how many expressions of death/dead/grave there are here. The psalmist sees himself as a breath away from death.
- You/your: 6-8: in a surprising turn, the psalmist turns his complaints toward God directly. He dares to accuse the Savior God!

A picture of honest despair: The psalmist is in such a disgusting—and disgusted state—that even his friends won’t come near him.

**Apply:** What do you make of this? Does it feel strange? He dares to blame God. You’ve been here perhaps. One I’ve heard recently: God, it’s been four years since my son died. People tell me I should be fine now. People tell me you love me. But God, that hole inside me only gets bigger, like it’s clawing me into its pit. God, it feels like you’ve done this to me. I’m drowning.

Or, God, I spent four years, my entire savings (and half of my parent’s), and at least 40 all-nighters to get this degree. And now I’m still looking for a job. Debt is piling up like flood waves. What’s your end game, God? I want us to know that these kinds of raw and honest expressions, directed to God, are ok. They’re not sinful. They are part of an honest relationship. They show that you care enough to get mad.

**Part 2: Bargaining. You want praise? How can I do that if you let me die?**

Vs. 9b-12: The psalmist gets even bolder. The rhetorical answer to each of these questions is no. He is essentially reasoning with God, saying, ‘Look, God, if you want me to tell people about your faithfulness and your steadfast love, how can I do that if I’m dead? What good am I to you? Note that the word for ‘darkness’ (hesek) and the word for ‘faithful’ (hesed) are sonically similar. It’s as if they are placed in juxtaposition for the psalmist to say: ‘What’s it going to be, God, covenantal faithfulness or darkness?’

**Part 3: Descent. God, you still won’t listen?**

Vs. 13-18 parallel verses 1-9a. Vs 14, 15, 17, each portray the psalmist in an even more despairing posture... Vs 18b then breaks all parallelism and ends half-stanza. It would have sounded to the original listener like a joke without a punchline. The final word is darkness; it's as if the psalmist embodies dying. "God, you didn't hear me, you never have, you won't hear me now. My only friend is darkness."

**Now that we're here in darkness. What do we do?** I want to provide a few footholds for us as we sit in the darkness.

- This psalm teaches us that struggling with God, asking God hard questions, is ok. In fact, this raw honesty strengthens our relationship with God.
  - Perhaps the best experts to turn to for advice are Jewish Rabbis – the Jewish identity is characterized by struggle. A constant wrestling and questioning of God's goodness, God's faithfulness, and God's presence.
  - This wrestling happens between two people in a relationship, God and us.
  - **"The Jewish fury at God is not the vilification of an alien and hostile force. It is the distress and disappointment of being wounded by someone close."** 146
  - So, honest struggling with and even against God does not alienate us from God, it brings us closer into relationship.
  - Throughout the psalm, the psalmist is constantly bringing his lament to God. Every 'O Lord' is paired with 'day and night' or 'every night.'
  - David Wolfe writes, "The one answer [to the problem of evil] that was not offered by the Talmudic Rabbis is that God is indifferent. That was not possible. God cares, passionately, deeply, enough to be moved, enough to listen to the human protestations, enough to cry."
- How do we avoid remaining in the dark, when we hear no response?
  - Remember what God has done in your life. This psalm is followed by Psalm 89, a psalm of lament and remembrance. Hold your lament alongside memories of God's faithfulness in your life.
  - Hold these frustrations with God in community. This prayerbook is deeply personal, but it is also entirely communal. Don't sit in darkness alone.
  - Finally, even when we find ourselves in the dark, we know that we hold the bigger picture. From our point of view, we can see the irony of vs 10-12 clearly.
    - Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the dead rise up to praise you? We read in the New testament the story of Lazarus, who rose from the dead and praised God?
    - Is your steadfast love declared in the grave? We hold this question alongside an answer in Psalm 139:8.
    - Are your wonders known in the darkness? God promised Abraham children under a night sky full of stars, it was dark when God revealed himself to Jacob in a dream. In the dead of night God led Israel out from Egyptian captivity. In the swirling darkness of a cloud God spoke to Moses. And... It was dark in the tomb when the linens which clung to Jesus' arms and legs were loosed.
    - Are your wonders known in the darkness, the psalmist asks.

- **And though we do know the answer, we have the freedom to ask God the question again and again in the days and the nights that we don't.**

Levi Yitzhak, a well-known Rabbi in the 1700s from Northern Ukraine, earned the reputation as “defense attorney,” often interceding to God on behalf of his people. “A story is told about him, that right before the opening service of the Day of Atonement... he stood for a long time, silent, still, as the evening approached....” His students and disciples became uncomfortable...at the last possible moment, he spoke:

“Dear God,” he said, “We come before You this year, as we do every year, to ask Your forgiveness. But in this past year, I have caused no death. I have brought no plagues upon the world, no earthquakes, no floods. I have made no women widows, no children orphans. God, **You** have done these things, not me! Perhaps You should be asking forgiveness from me.” He paused for a long time.

He continued in a softer voice, “But since You are God, and I am only Levi Yitzhak,” *Yisgadal v’yiskadah sh’mei rahah*. This means, “May his great name grow exalted and sanctified.”

Rabbi Levi's prayer is accusatory, but raw, honest, yet faithful. While we profess—as does Rabbi Levi—that God does not, in fact, cause earthquakes or make children into orphans, we are welcomed to follow in the example of Psalm 88, of asking God the hard questions, the accusing questions. Rabbi Levi's conclusion to his prayer (May his great name grow exalted and sanctified) is the opening line to the Mourner's Kaddish, a Jewish prayer traditionally recited in memory of the dead.

As an echo to Rabbi Levi's prayer and Psalm 88, we are going to take two minutes to pause, to reflect on how we feel towards God. Imagine drawing your feelings on a piece of paper, if it is helpful. Picture God. Step for a moment into the darkness, as you are able, surrounded by a safe community. Ask of God what you thought you were never allowed to ask. Welcome that freedom. Or sit in stillness. After two minutes, we will close with a responsive reading from the last lines of the Mourner's Kaddish:

[Music plays during a 2-minute period of reflection]

**Nathan:** Let us read the final lines of the Mourner's Kaddish responsively:

**Nathan:** Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that are ever spoken in the world;

**All:** Amen.

**Nathan:** May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and for all Israel;

**All:** Amen.

**All:** He who creates peace in His celestial heights, may He create peace for us and for all Israel; and [together we say], Amen.

**New Testament Sermon: *Don't Lose Heart***

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

*Intro:*

As some of you know, I spent 11 days in Mexico City this January on a trip with my seminary. But, I'm not here to gloat about it. The warm weather. The bright sunshine. 70 degrees and not a cloud in the sky. But on 1 pm on Monday, I boarded a plane heading north. Around Northern Texas, we encountered patchy clouds. Around Nebraska, these transitioned into fog. By the time I touched down in Toronto, the sky was black and the fog was dense. My spirits sank. You can probably relate to the feeling of grey skies and pea-soup fog closing in around you.

[Transition: This feeling is something like what Paul may have been feeling as he wrote this letter. Today, we'll be diving into his words to the Corinthians, written to them after a visit to Asia minor. Paul was perhaps reckoning for the first time... with the possibility of his own death. He had returned from a missionary journey in Asia, threatened with his own life...]

**But Paul's suffering, though caused by persecution,** isn't unfamiliar to us... that pea soup fog that closes in when you've spent 2 months without any real job leads; The janitors whose work was furloughed for the government shutdown and have relied on payday lenders; struggling with rent. What happens when you wake up and the black bags under your eyes will not go away. Or your trips to the doctor seem never-ending? What happens when you get the call that your dad was hospitalized. What do we do in the midst of our suffering?

**I. Don't lose heart... we are being renewed (4:16-17, 5:5)**

These are the questions that Paul is wrestling with as he writes these verses, which is why 4:16 is so remarkable. What are his words to us? "Don't give up. Or better put, We Don't Lose Heart!" The message is as much for him as it is for the Corinthians. Paul comforts the Corinthians by giving two reasons to endure their own suffering: first, we are being renewed from within. Second, we await a heavenly body.

**The context:** 5:1-10 is rooted in Paul's own pain and struggle. Perhaps for the first time, he is wrestling with the reality that he might die before Jesus' return (1:3-11). 1:8 – "We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself." To add to his pain, opposition leaders have begun to claim that his suffering disqualifies him as an authority to the church. He responds with a defense: 'You may see the outward me wasting away, but the inner self is being renewed day by day.'

Yet Paul says, don't lose heart; don't give up: We are being renewed day by day (4:16-17). This is very profound. Here Paul isn't speaking of an **upbeat attitude**, but the reality that 'we cannot fail' and therefore must not dismay (Pillar, 214). We cannot fail because our inner person is being renewed. We participate in Christ's resurrection life (4:10-11), which will eventually affect the body as well (4:14; 5:1-4)." **While the world judges the person from the outside, Paul calls the people of Corinth to look within. For Christ is at work within.**

**Consider:** Corinth was a wealthy trading port. The brains, the culture, the ideas, the platinum rewards credit cards. The business class to Tokyo. Gowns fit for the met gala. In the middle of all this, Paul says, "We do not focus on what is seen. But what is unseen." (4:17) This passage follows Paul's teaching on the clay jars, mundane, everyday storage vessels. Outwardly we look



like margarine containers (that my mom collects. You'd open the fridge, you never know what you are going to find. Could be moldy broccoli, apple sauce.) Inwardly, we are much more through the renewing of the Spirit.

What does this inward look reveal? It's not just a look to the deeper self, a greater reliance on our own strength to overcome in a hard circumstance. Based on 3:18, it is a transformation into God's likeness (Dallas Willard) propelled by the Spirit (and not by guilt) and resulting in *freedom*. Paul says that even our 'momentary struggles' are somehow achieving for us an eternal glory.' We don't know exactly how, and we should be careful not to call all suffering redemptive, but Paul does say that we carry the death of Christ in our body so that the life of Christ might be revealed (4:11). Don't lose heart... if you find yourself not measuring up. If you look at the grades of your peers, the number of conferences they have attended, the position they have achieved. The tailored clothing they wear. None of this holds the "weight of incomparable eternal glory that is already at work within us."

It's hard to describe what inner transformation by Christ looks like. In fact, I'm not sure we can fully describe it. But I saw it. I saw it in the mother of a daughter on the street in Mexico City. This organization through counseling, relationship, and sharing the work of Christ... resulted in a complete turnaround in her inner spirit that broke out into her outward look – she said before she had encountered this organization and accepted Christ's transformation, she was bitter, angry, upset. Even violent. Now, looking at her, you could see that she radiated joy and peace.

In the middle of our own suffering. In the middle of our own frustration with the politics of our world around us and the turmoil within us, there is a simple reality to understand. Even if you feel like nothing is changing, Christ is at work renewing and restoring you. In the middle of the suffering... "we do not lose heart." Though we may not even see it ourselves, the Spirit is working a transformation within us. We are being transformed.

**[Transition]** Our daily renewal is not the only reason Paul urges the Corinthians not to lose heart in the face of suffering. We do hold onto the hope—however fantastical it may seem at times—to an eternal home. Take a deep breath. And let it go. One more deep breath. And let it go. Consider one place, thing, or space that truly allows you to rest. Perhaps it is one holiday where the family gets along, a day spent with a friend from high school, maybe a moment you felt you conquered an addiction, or simply a cozy sweater, tasty drink, and warm fire. Paul assures us that we await a heavenly home, perfect justice and peace (shalom) and rest.

## **II. Don't lose heart ... we have an eternal home (5:1-5)**

(5:1) **Context:** Paul, a tentmaker by trade, writes that even if his earthly tent is destroyed, he awaits a far better home, made not by his hands, but by God's. It's worth pausing right there. He doesn't say this lightly—tents are his life blood, and This is like Paul saying, look, even if my work and my life, my degree, my position, my money, and all I hold dear on this earth is stripped away from me... if my grad work, my most pristine lab project, even my 401k are taken, I have something better awaiting.

I'll confess I sometimes get uncomfortable talking about this future hope. It's so often been used to throw our hands up in the air and say, what's then point in trying. I think here I've learned so much from the black Christian experience in the States, and Latinos reflecting on their indigenous heritage, one often characterized by suffering and pain. These words are meant for

hope. And they are an ok hope to have. It's ok to hope and trust in our future dwelling with Christ. It's ok to acknowledge the brokenness in the world around us, and look ahead to what comes. That is one of the few hopes that oppressed people have had in the past.

In verses 2-5, Paul speaks again of a hope in his suffering. He doesn't mean to teach readers about the precise mechanics of how or when God will give us our new and perfect dwellings, but rather to *speak life* into what he and we already desire: that all our defects, our insecurities, all the hate we dish out and receive, the fears we carry, might be swallowed up by true *life*. *What a beautiful image! This verse is the climax.* Over our old Navy tshirt, we receive the coziest sweater imaginable. "swallowed up by life" is a climax of verses 1-4, and it echoes 4:16b (and 4:10b, 11b).

**"And the one who has prepared us for this very purpose is God..."** We've been given a taste of this true life: a deposit, a promise of this life; we carry the Spirit of God with us. We don't have a far off and abstract hope. It is breaking in even now. Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home. The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less."

5:7-8: We are at home with the body and away from the Lord – therefore, we can expect suffering, confusion, pain; it is a reality of our present state. Sandra McCracken, an artist who writes music for worship contexts, wrote the following refrain after enduring a messy divorce: "If it's not ok...then we know that it's not the end." There is something about brokenness that assures us there is something far better ahead of us. Because we hold the hope (already realized partially in the Spirit) of our future home, we don't lose heart.

[**Transition**] So what does it look like, then, not lose heart as we wait? Paul speaks of a tension between what is (Christ has died and we have the Spirit of life within us) and what is to come (full glorification and full reunion with God). According to the text, the time between is a mix of groaning (4:16, 5:2, 5:4), confidence (5:6-8), and obedience (5:9-10).

### III. **Don't lose heart ... seek to please God** (5:9-10)

Paul says, having been comforted by the reality that Christ is transforming us within, we seek to please God. The reality of the two comforts Paul has given: Christ at work within us transforming us to Christ's image; and the future hope of our heavenly home; they allow us to see the world differently. In 5:16, Paul says, "From now on, then, we do not know anyone in a purely human way." The way people look at us, calculating our status based on our accent, our brands, our mutual friends, likes and shares: those aren't the things that matter. Not as rivals, not as cases to be pitied, but fellow travelers in the journey. Even verse 10, "For we must all appear before the tribunal of Christ so that each may be repaid for what he has done."

Judgement, can be a great comfort to us.

As you are comforted through Christ, it only makes sense that we begin to live more and more like Christ. My host mother in Honduras embodied this so well. She was a woman who had endured so much suffering, abused by her husband, persecuted by her commitment to love those who others felt deserved no love, and constantly worrying about the safety of her children living in dangerous cities. Yet, for anyone who entered her house (and people cycled in and out all day), she would offer a cup of coffee, a smile, and a listening ear. This wasn't just her putting on a face, or a superficial sunny disposition. As I watched her live out her faith all year, I

realized it came from a deep transformation from the Spirit within, and a hope and comfort that she had a future home free from suffering and pain.

**Conclusion:** So, in the middle of Paul's suffering, he calls us: 'Don't lose heart.' Tomorrow morning, 7 AM. Facing another day. We hold this text as a great, great comfort. That Christ is at work within us, renewing us to be more like him. That despite our uncertainties in health, work, rent payments, in legal cases, in the safety of children and grandparents we await expectantly a future home of peace; and having received that great comfort, we go out to comfort others.