



MONTH OF MISSION 2020

Welcome to the UPCSA Month of Mission Devotions!

This year we are focused on the theme of "Overcoming." As has been our tradition, we'll have contributions from members and ministers across the Denomination blessing us with their insights.

In this first week we will be grounding ourselves in God's plan for us and our call and mission - there is no point to overcoming if our purpose and direction is not clear...

We pray that this will be a great blessing to you!

1. Created for Harmonious Stewardship

We are human beings. I love the idea that we are "be-ing".

We are a present-continuous tense.

We are unfolding.

We are works-in-progress.

And God has created us for **fruitfulness** and **stewardship**.

Both these concepts have been badly cheapened.

Fruitfulness is more than multiplication. It is quality as much as it is quantity. I believe God created us for healthy family and harmonious community. Have a look at the rules and feasts that governed Israel: Sabbath Rest; Passover Celebrations where even the children participated by asking questions; and the year of Jubilee which, although never put into practice, was about resetting balance and creating a just and fair society. And these are just some examples of God's call to grow a healthy and sustainable society.

For a long time "ruling over the earth" was understood as the right to take, take and take from creation. Now we understand that it means *stewardship* - that we are custodians of creation. Sadly, so much damage has been done that we are in serious catch-up mode in

As we emerge from the epicenter of the "Corona Crisis" many people express the need to return to "normality". But the "norm" we had before Corona was flawed and cracked - the virus has revealed that. We need to better than simply returning to what we had.

We need to set our standards higher:

- We need to strive for healthy societies that bear good fruit

- We need to take better care of our world.

May we overcome our own brokenness and the bad habits we have fallen into and be God's co-workers in a society that bears good fruit and cares for its world.

So God created humankind in His own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground--everything that has the breath of life in it--I give every green plant for food." And it was so. (Genesis 1:27-30)

(Theo Groeneveld is married to Brenda, is dad to Caleb (20) and foster father to a long list of abandoned kittens that they have re-homed over the years. He has served Emmanuel Presby Church in Garsfontein Pretoria since 1997 and is the convener of the General Assembly Mission and Discipleship Committee. He enjoys cycling and tech stuff.)

2. The Call of Abram

There's a children's Bible song called "Father Abraham." The words speak of Abraham having many children, and also speak of you and I being Abraham's children. I heard once of a couple that adopted two children because they believed they couldn't have any biologically, but then they had three. On one occasion the father of the family was wearing a T-Shirt someone had given him as a joke labelling him as "Father Abraham." Think of how difficult it must have been for Abraham. Confronted by a God whom he didn't know, he was ordered to go to a place he had never seen and was made a promise which sounded impossible.

God gave Abraham a promise. God promised Abraham land and family which constituted a promise of prosperity for Abraham and his family. It was a promise of a future for Abraham. It was a promise of hope.

What are we to make of Abraham's journey across a wild and primitive countryside? What are we to do with the vision Abraham received from God, projecting his fortune into the indefinite future? In what way is Abraham's story our story? What does Abraham's story teach about our relationship with this wonderful God?

As I reflect upon these questions, the following statement comes to mind: God calls ordinary people to do extra-ordinary things.

Abraham was an ordinary person, no different than you or me. Just as God called Abraham, so he calls you and me. Abraham had to cross a desert; we might just have to walk across the road to have conversation with a neighbour. Consider that for many months, we lived indoors, next to people who also were living indoors, but we never got to know who they were. While we think that we could never go like Abraham to a new country, will you consider that God might be calling you to reach out a hand of friendship to the person living next door?

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you." (Genesis12:1-3)

Peter Langerman is husband to Sally, father to Jaimee (and father-in-law to Tim), Natasha, Emma and Gabby. He loves to walk, cook, read, shout at the TV when the Boks are playing and serves the saints at Durbanville.

3. God has a Plan for us: To Discover Him

COVID-19 taught us, inter alia, that we should discover God in every breath we take in and out. The struggle for oxygen at the hospitals and the huge amounts paid to receive oxygen proved that, if we can still breathe, let us thank God. There is no life without breath. All the living should praise God for the gift of life and appreciate the sanctity of life.

Paul made a resounding pronouncement in Athens that God is the giver of "life and breath", and proceeded to say, "and everything else". He could have just said, God is the giver of everything. But he singled out "life and breath" to prove the importance thereof. Paul used the word *pneuma*, which the Stoic Philosophers knew well to mean both breath as in a breath of air (literal sense) or divine breath of inspiration (figurative sense) on one hand, and life, spirit, and vitality, on the other hand. This expression found its basis from Genesis 2:7(NIV), "Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Hence, Paul averred that in the Lord who is the giver of life and breath, "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

The UPCSA mission focuses, inter alia, on "building vital, reforming congregations for worship, ministry, and discipleship". Vitality is God's plan for creation. Every human and non-human being has a right to vitality (life). Every congregation should therefore promote the right-to-life attitude. Every being must discover and encounter the life-giving God, as they worship in a UPCSA congregation. Empowered by the vitality of that worship, they should continue, throughout the week, to make meaningful contribution in their homes, schools, societies, workplaces, as they promote life-affirming processes. As in doing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), they should breathe new life into those who have given up, to the oppressed, the impoverished and the marginalised. They should call for the removal of every knee from every person's neck and allow every being to breathe freely and have life.

It was in imvuselelo/tsoseletso, (the revival services) that many of us came to know God. Faith has diminished; spirituality is at its lowest; racial, gender and economic injustices and inequalities continue unabated; corruption is rampant; human trafficking is alarming; and COVID-19 has dampened the spirits of many. Let us go back to imvuselelo zoMoya (spiritual revival services), so that many can rediscover God and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, have respect for umntu (human being), knowing that umntu ngumntu ngabantu.

And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. (Acts17:25)

Lungile Mpetsheni is the General Secretary of the UPCSA. He is married to Thandiswa.

4. Our Missional God: The Call and the Promise

As we consider these challenging times, God offers us a Call, a Promise and a Mission.

- **The Call:** It is the Lord Yahweh, the God of Israel and the God of Judah, the God of World and the God of the Church who calls us in righteousness and who has taken hold of our hand. We are confident that we will not lose the way, as People of the Way, because it is OUR God who has made the Call. Our ministry has been wheel-aligned into God's Call and Will. We are not self-commanding soldiers, pulling in every direction we will for ourselves. We are a people who have been called, who have been led, who have been appropriately aligned.
- **The Promise:** It is the Lord Yahweh, who promises to be with us and lead us - the same God who divided the Red Sea for Israel to cross it on dry land; the same God who saved the three Hebrew boys (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) from the furnace; the same God who saved Daniel from the ravage of the lions in the den. It is the same God who expects us to live by the divine Code of Ethics, to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. The God of Promises will lead us on the missional trajectory.
- **The Mission:** To become a Covenant People and a Light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, free the captives and get back to light those who are sitting in a dark dungeon. If our God is missional God, our missional direction through the Call and the Promise is sealed. May God bless the us as we go!

This is what God the LORD says--
he who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
6 "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
7 to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
(Isaiah42:5-7)

Rev. Sipho Mtetwa is the Moderator-Designate of the UPCSA, married to Xoli and with three kids and numerous grandkids. He is Minister at St. David's in Pietermaritzburg with the Drakensberg Presbytery. He is a poet and jazz lover.

5. God has a plan for us... to do good.

In the 1992 movie, *Sister Act*, two of the nuns follow Sister Mary Clarence (Whoopi Goldberg) out of the Convent over the road to a Bar. Sister Mary Clarence orders a philli-cheese steak and a beer. The other two stare around the bar wide-eyed: the smoke, the alcohol, the crystal ball hanging from the roof. Then the youngest nun says: "So this is what it feels like to be a Protestant!"

As a lifelong Protestant, I can testify that what makes the hairs on a Protestant's neck stand on end is the notion that good works have anything to do with our salvation. How then can we come to terms with Paul's words to the Ephesians: "*For we are created in Christ Jesus to do goods works*"? If the grace of God saves one, then what is the use of works?

Matthew 24 and 25 contain a series of sermons Jesus preached, in which he described the Kingdom in ultimate terms. The series ends in a graphic description of the last judgement (25:31-48). A close reading shows that eternity is the reward given, not to the 'right thinkers' or even the 'right talkers' but to the doers, the people who 'practice' their faith. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: "The goats aren't condemned for doing bad things, but for doing nothing" although she cautions: "One thing is for sure. You cannot win this truth like a scavenger hunt, checking off one hungry person, one thirsty one, one sick one, and one in prison. You cannot toss a quarter in a cup or throw a dollar bill at a woman in the grocery store and call it done. "There! There's my good deed for the day, my ticket to eternity with the sheep!"

So we are saved by grace according to Paul (Eph 2: 8-9) but also by works, according to Jesus (Matt 25)! The evangelical writer, Dallas Willard, helps us split the hair. "The path of spiritual growth in the riches of Christ is not a passive one". Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning. Effort is action. Earning is attitude."

So there can be no doubt. Christians don't earn their salvation but Saved Christians discover that their ultimate vocation, the way they "work out their salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2: 12-13) is to do good works. After all, since we are God's workmanship -- why shouldn't we do a bit of work?

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
(Ephesians 2:8-10)

George Marchinkowski lives in Somerset West in the fairest Cape with his life companion, Sascha, and their daughters Leah and Zoë. He is a reader, a collaborator, and wants to be a catalyst for new ways of being Church.

6. Attitudes for Tough Times – Discouraged?

If ever there was a time when people's faith and perseverance was tested, it is during this time of Covid 19. There have been many expectations from people all over the world for someone to come up with solutions to the pandemic. Scientists, Religious people and doctors don't seem to have an immediate explanation as to the where, why and how questions beings asked. There is a sense of despair and discouragement.

But let us consider Heb12:1-3: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith..."

When we look horizontally, we get so discouraged. When we let what others say or think and the expectations of people have of us influence us, then discouragement sets in and we easily get weary. Jesus has opened a new and living way through His body and so it is important that we "look unto Jesus" and "consider Him". When we bring our lives before the Lord, we will find encouragement. All our troubles and all our reasons for discouragement fade away, when we look up and see Him. Hebrews says, "let us draw close to God...." When we do this, we realise that the difficulties we face are just another way for us to identify with His sufferings.

Philippians 3:10 "I want to know Christ- yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participating in His suffering, becoming like Him in His death." Jesus is able to turn around our difficult situations into means through which we become Christ like.

Discouragement simply becomes a way for His treasure to shine out through the broken clay vessels that we are. In our weakness He is made strong. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ's power may rest on me 2Corinthians 12:9. Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.

Faith by nature is based upon what we cannot see. Things happen and we can't understand why. But we can believe that God will work it out for the best. We can cling to Him in depression, hurt or sorrow knowing that these things are for a reason and that He is strong enough to carry us through. We may not know the solution yet, but He can give us peace as we trust Him to work all things together for our good, by faith we come to Him with whatever life brings, joys and sorrows knowing that He is our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble (Ps46:1)

Shalom

Therefore, sisters and brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 **let us draw near to God** with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews10:19-25)

Jane Nyirongo is a minister at Garden congregation in Mchinga Presbytery

7. When we despair...

"Great leaders help people have a larger vision of themselves" says Mark Sanborn, a motivational leader. This is who we are: ministers called to enlarge the vision of Individuals to include God in all of life. Then the rug is taken from underneath our feet - We are threatened on every side: the present pandemic squeezes the very breath of life from us: We see people losing their jobs, economy threatened, people dying from the virus in our midst, and we are called to say: "What???" Our fragility begins to show as we deal with the many sadnesses that come our way. If we are honest, our heavy hearts cry out: "Lord, Lord, despair is near."

It is in times like these Paul reminds us that "we may be pressed or squeezed on every side by troubles" yet WE WILL NOT BE CRUSHED. We may be perplexed by what is happening and struggle with the many threats of the day. We may be knocked down, and hard punches come our way to threaten and try to take our Godly breath away, but we are promised that God will not abandon us: Let us therefore not abandon God.

The Potter is ours to call upon: the One who created the beautifully, fragile, precious clay pots promises to hear our cry. When we are about to crack, it is the Potter who promises to mold us once more that we may continue to be the earthen vessels carrying the good news into dark and parched places. God asks us to carry the truth when things are not right; we are invited to cry out In lament and share God's light .

We are not called to be the Potter and solve all that is not Godly, but be the fragile clay pot moulded by the Potter to do great things in difficult times. We may see darkness surrounding us, but God's light promises to shine through. Our Christian identity will never be found in succumbing to the darkness, but in receiving, carrying, and sharing the GODLY TREASURE with those in darkness. Let the strength of God's treasure be yours and may your faith be tested positive now and always.

Prayer for the Potter and the Clay

Lord in this troubling time,
We pray for the strength
To carry your treasured
Let Your light cover the darkness
Let you strength overcome our weakness.
let us make wise choices.
For today and tomorrow.
We pray for a vaccine.
In you, we may know light.
In you , we may be carriers
Of new life... Jesus name,
We pray. Amen and Amen.

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure.[a] This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

8 We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. 9 We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. 10 Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.

11 Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies. (2Corinthians4:7-11)

Pat Baxter: "I love the passion God gives us to do mission. After 33 years of ordained ministry I am more in love with God than ever. My latest passion is to learn to paint the beauty that God has given us." (Pat serves as the Ministry Secretary of General Assembly)

8. When We Are Under Pressure

It is an understatement to say that the world is in a crisis at the moment. The challenges brought on by covid19 have put everyone under immense pressure. The normal support systems for most Christians are unavailable. The new normal with its social distancing and masks has left a lot of believers anxious. In today's devotion we look at Paul's words of encouragement in crisis situations. There are 3 stages to Paul's approach.

1. First of all believers are encouraged to rejoice in the Lord. Being joyful when life is good and going well is an easy thing. But when the world seems to be falling apart around us the story changes. On top of rejoicing in the Lord, believers are expected to behave in a reasonable (gentle, moderate) manner. That is obviously a hard expectation in the midst of one of the biggest global challenges of our time. How are believers to remain reasonable, gentle and moderate in these strange times?

2. Paul answers our question by first of all reminding us that the Lord is near. He then clearly states the actions to be taken. Believers are not to worry about anything, but they are to pray and petition God. They are to let God know what they need. This is to be done with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a very powerful action as we approach God. As we pray with thanksgiving we remember God's faithfulness in our lives. Many have lost loved ones, jobs, businesses and homes because of the covid19 crisis. The crisis is not over yet. This might require believers to really dig deep on what to be thankful for.

Paul assures us that as we pray in this way the peace of God which is beyond human understanding will protect our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. This is the peace that allows us to live with confidence as believers. All kinds of crises may come and we may be under great pressure, but God's peace will preserve us in Christ Jesus.

3. Lastly Paul gives us an instruction for maintaining this peace of God. The instruction is to focus our minds on the right things. These are things which are true, worthy, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. When we are under pressure it is easy to focus on what is not working, and on whose fault it is. There are instances when fault-finding is necessary, but when doing that causes conflict amongst believers/families/communities it is not helpful.

Therefore, bazalwane(fellow believers), in the midst of crises, let us keep our minds focused on helping those more vulnerable than us, and on sharing the good news of Christ Jesus.

Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice! 5 Let your reasonableness be evident to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in all instances by prayer and petition with thanksgiving let God know your requests. 7 And the peace of God which exceeds all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, bazalwane, keep your minds on things that are true, worthy, right, pure, lovely and admirable. (Own translation)
(Philippians4:4-8)

Rev Shingi Masunda is currently a PhD candidate of the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands. Her research is focused on the phenomenon of leadership as portrayed in the metaphors used in the Gospel of Matthew.

9. When we are blown and tossed

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. (James 1:2-8)

If you're like me verse 2 is not the easiest of advice to follow. I doubt there were many people that had a huge celebration when we were told that our 3 week Lockdown had now been extended to 5 weeks with a possibility of more still to come. This year has been a particularly trying one and there will be very few who would say they have not struggled at some point and even less who would be joyful about their difficult circumstances. As much as I would struggle to consider it pure joy at the time, in hindsight, I can often look back over the circumstances and find much that is good.

While nobody particularly likes going through difficult times, if we're honest with ourselves when we look back we are mostly able to find something positive that has come out of it, we find that we have grown, our relationships have been strengthened, our faith has been strengthened or as James puts it we have persevered. It's easy to look back and see the positives that have come out of difficult circumstances but it is not always easy at the time. That's why James tells us to pray for wisdom and to really believe that God will give it to us because that wisdom allows us to see things differently. One of the things that God has taught me about getting through tough times, is to keep a Gratitude Journal, to write down the things I am grateful for on a regular basis and then when things are really tough to pull it out and read it and add to it. It's amazing when you look back through it and see all the times that God has pulled you through and the things you were grateful for in the past. It helps you to be joyful even when times are tough because there is always something to be grateful for.

If you're really struggling pray to God that he will grant you wisdom and know with all your heart that he will grant it to you, then think about all the times that God has brought you through in the past and how he has not only strengthened your faith in these times but has allowed you to grow. Even if you're not up to celebrating with great joy just yet at least give God thanks for all that he has done for you.

Kim Brown. Serving at Elgin United Church, Western Cape. Convenor of the UPCSA Worship Committee. Enjoys baking, reading and running.

10. Don't try too hard...

Who would have known that in 2020 we would find ourselves in the thick of a global pandemic that no one understands? Or that the world could actually stop and people would be locked down in their homes? Or that the virus would cause other layers of suffering? Or that we would have to learn a new normal? With the way things are, it is easy to live a life of anxiety 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

But brothers and sisters, I've got good news to share with you in these times. There are three things God is able to do: God can "keep you from stumbling," God can "present you faultless," and God can bless you "with exceeding joy."

We live and operate in a world filled with stumbling blocks: uncertainty, trials, personal mistakes, temptations, opposition, burnout, abuse, sin, and the resulting guilt and shame that comes with such stumbling blocks. Therefore, we exert much effort trying to stop ourselves from stumbling or falling. We even become afraid to do things for fear of failure. We take on the burden of trying to keep our lives in order, our reputations clean, our images great, and our names good.

The truth is that this quest of ours is tiring, if not outright impossible. We are unable to keep ourselves from falling, no matter how much we try. And we end up disillusioned and bitter - because we are doing a job that is not ours, that we are not even qualified to do.

Only God can keep us from stumbling and present us as faultless. This is a work that Christ was and is qualified for - he is "able" to do it. The Greek word for "able" is *dunamai* which can also be translated as "powerful." God is the one who "has the power" to keep you from stumbling for he is the mighty God and the upholder of all things.

Which means you can go ahead and do a new thing! Go ahead and obey God's purpose! Go ahead and fulfil God's call upon your life! Because God is able to keep you from stumbling and to bring His work to completion through you. It's not about you anyway - it never was. It has always been about what God is doing -- through you. So take courage, God is able.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy-- to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.
(Jude1:24-25)

Lydia Neshangwe is wife to Paul, mother to TC and Melusi, and minister to St Andrew's congregation in Bulawayo.

11. JOSEPH: Trusting God by doing what is right.

For the rest of the Month of Mission we'll be looking at Overcomers in Scripture and learn from them. Today we look at Joseph.

The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, 4 Joseph found favour in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.
(Genesis 39:2-4)

Do we trust God in all situations and at all times? Are we faithful even in the small things? Joseph was a godly young man who walked before his Father in absolute integrity. Some people behave differently depending on where you meet them. You meet them at church, and they are one person; meet them in town and they are someone totally different.

After Joseph was sold as a slave, an Egyptian officer named Potiphar bought him. Joseph's life seemed to have fallen apart: To begin with, he was stripped of his coat. He was separated from his beloved father. He was betrayed by the very people who should have loved him most. He was sold as a slave and carried off to a strange land to live as a slave. I can imagine the fear that must have filled his heart and the hurt that must have shattered him. He must have questioned if God still loved him. At every stage Joseph would have been feeling hopeless. Imagine the disillusionment over the shattered dreams he had shared with his family.

While the events of Joseph's life appeared to be out of control, everything that occurred was controlled by God. It is amazing to see that Joseph trusted God whether things were going badly or well. Joseph was acting as a witness to the world that the Spirit of God was within him. How do we live today?

I am fascinated by the words of Joseph when he was tempted by Potiphar's wife. He said, "How then could I do such an immoral thing and sin against God?" It is amazing to note that he does not say that he cannot do such a thing because he might get caught, or because this might bring trouble for both. For Joseph, adultery with his master's wife would be a sin against God. Standing against such kinds of sin does not always guarantee success in life. In fact, it will often become a cause of trouble in our life, and that is exactly what happened to Joseph. It is however important to remember Hebrews 13:5, God reminds us, 'I will never leave you; I will never abandon you.'

You and I have the same protection that Joseph enjoyed. We do not have to become bitter or succumb to an unforgiving spirit. We can display a sweet spirit, even during the most trying of times, with our Lord's help. And so, like Joseph, we can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future, we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father, that no creature, no circumstance, no disaster in our life, can ever separate us from his love!

Tichaona Nigel Chikanya, a husband to Saviour and a father to Deuel.

12. JOB: Faithful and Trusting

Through Job's affliction and suffering he remained faithful to God. Job trusted God in spite of his suffering. Job's friends doubted his innocence because they believed health and wealth were signs of God's blessing. They insisted that God was punishing him; Job responded that he was innocent. The disagreement between them did not bring any answers and his friends gave up.

Job did ask God to appear and give him a reason for his loss and affliction. We too are able to speak and wrestle with God about what we do not understand.

Job is an encouragement to many as we realise that God often reveals His presence through circumstances in which He appears to be absent. The age old saying is "God is working behind the scenes". We may doubt God's presence however Job knew that God would not fail him. He was willing to wait on God and while he was waiting, while suffering, he worshipped God.

What gave Job the assurance that God was present? Job had a very intimate relationship with God. He was a man without sin. "He was blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:2). He offered sacrifices to God. He was a true worshipper. After Job lost all his wealth, he also suffered physically and, after tearing his robe and shaving his head, Job chose to worship God.

During this pandemic many of us have lost their wealth and livelihood. Some have contracted covid19 and suffered as a result of it. The physical affliction and loss of life and possessions reveal to us a new depth of the words that Job spoke that this life on earth is temporary and means nothing compared to the eternal life of glory with God in Christ.

After Job's friends failed him, he knew that the only One to trust was God. How do we know that Job trusted God? Job defended God and Job waited on God. He was able to discern the true Word from the superficial words spoken by those who did not know God the way he did.

Some reflection...

Is our relationship with God enough?

What is our response to the loss and suffering we are experiencing at the moment?

Are we willing to look beyond our own circumstances and reach out to others?

What are the questions that you would like to ask God?

May it be that we too are overwhelmed with the truth of God's majesty and sovereignty and may we receive a deeper sense of God's power and splendour, trusting God more especially as we move through and beyond unprecedented times.

I have heard about you from others; now I have seen you with my own eyes. That's why I hate myself and sit here in dust and ashes to show my sorrow. (Job42:5-6)

(Natalie Angela Barnard serves the congregation at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Cape Town. Mother to Christian, mom in law to Angela and grandmother to Isabella (4 years old), who all live in England, Mother to Natascha who works as a nurse and lives in Switzerland. She has a great passion for outdoor life including camping, hiking, sailing, swimming. Foster mom to several. Adopted mom, granny and aunt to many. She loves spending time with family, friends and her church family).

13. ESTHER: Faith in challenging times

Theme: The Missional God for Overcomers in all times.

Introduction: The Book of Esther is about the intervention and the faithfulness of the Sovereign God for the deliverance of his people. Look at the main characters: the King/Wise persons; the Queens (Vashti/Esther), the Prime Ministers (Haman/Mordecai) and the Nations (Persians/Jews) who all revealed the heart attitude characteristic of their times. Overcomers need wisdom to discern these extraordinary times.

The Overcomer Esther (Hadassah) was equipped to the point of having the courage to say "And if I perish, I perish"(4:16), in order to fulfil her assignment in the past, the present and the future.

Past to overcome: God knows all things in human hearts: power, wealth and fame for individuals, families, tribes, and kingdoms. The authorities abused, married, impaled, honoured and appointed in the varying times of disobedience, integrity, service, royal appointments, diabolical systems and enemies and they celebrated Purim (salvation). The God of Esther is also Christ-with-us today to overcome all situations.

Present to overcome: The presence of God is still directing his people to overcome. The mission of God is rooted in the love of God. In Covid-19, God is with us to discern the times. Christians today fear evil, yet Christ is present to help us, even if powers manipulate human weaknesses. The God-man, Jesus Christ cares for us more than we care for ourselves.

Future to overcome: Humanity has no lasting solution to overcome sin. Yet Overcomers like Mordecai were looking for liberation and protection from another source. Children of God, always hope to overcome in the face of challenges, be it be spiritual or physical. Jesus Christ will provide deliverance in times of Covid-19. Pray that the Holy Spirit may help us to interpret for such a time as this!

Conclusion: Yes! Jesus Christ in the same yesterday, today and forever. We are in the loving hands of God. Indeed, humanity is facing all kinds of challenges. Yet, the Missional God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who will give us strength in our times, to declare His Sovereignty.

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai:

"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

(Esther4:14-16)

Rev. Reuben Daka, Kaunda Square Congregation, Synod of Zambia of the UPCSA

14. MOSES: Walking by Faith

Moses is one of the most influential characters of the Old Testament and one of the greatest examples of being an OVERCOMER. Moses had barely escaped death at his birth, grows up in opulence in the house of Pharaoh and very easily could have never become the great leader we know him to be. But there was something different about him, something that changed the trajectory of his life from being ordinary to an overcomer. What was it? Moses had faith in God!

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith; "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

Faith recognises something bigger than oneself. In faith we place our confidence in the promises and protection of God. Faith keeps before one that awareness of God's presence in the darkest of moments.

Moses was not willing to give in to the pressures of Egyptian culture but remained true to his Hebrew culture. He saw the affliction of the Hebrew people and was willing to forgo a certain and secure future in order to do the right thing.

He knew the value of life was not found in what others think of us, but rather in what God thinks of us. We will never overcome in life as long as we are dependent on the approval of others. Our desperate desire for acceptance usually leads us to make compromises in order to feel good and this often causes us much pain and suffering. We ought to recognise what matters most. Moses made a choice because he thought it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ, for he was looking ahead to his great reward.

He knew it was always the right thing to do, even if it began in suffering. He knew that the value of God's rewards was far greater than the value of worldly rewards. He was willing to walk away from the things of this world in order to find meaning and purpose and fulfilment.

God had a plan for Moses from the moment he was born. Even in the midst of danger, uncertainty and fear, God provided the way to overcome. Knowing our salvation comes from and through God, is key to overcoming the problems of today.

God has a plan and purpose for you. To overcome requires faith in God through the saving work of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit! So, like Moses, our goal is to remain a simple servant of God and to trust Him, no matter how difficult the road may be.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command. By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned. (Hebrews 11:23-29)

Rodney Brits: Minister -- Darling Presbyterian Church - A true Trekkie, married to Sonia for many years and blessed with two married children and four grandchildren.

15. PAUL: Still Standing

Paul had many obstacles to overcome: Paul experienced great suffering and opposition in his ministry, he had 'a thorn in his flesh', was shipwrecked while travelling, spent time in jail and so on.

In the passage below we see some of the challenges Paul faced:

"...been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked..."(2Cor11:23b-27)

The life of Paul teaches us that we can overcome. We can overcome sin, suffering, disappointment, failure, criticism, fatigue etc. Paul reminds us that we may think we are at the end of the rope, but we are never at the end of hope.

We may be 'hard pressed', experiencing all sorts of pressure, but there is always a way out. We may be 'perplexed', but we never despair. There is always hope. We may be 'persecuted', but we are never abandoned by God. God will never leave you nor forsake you. He promised that by His Spirit to always be with us. There are times in our lives we will feel 'struck down', but we are never destroyed. If we fall, we get up again through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul teaches us that we CAN overcome!

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2Corinthians4:8-9)

Michelle Black, enthusiastic mountain biker, enjoys the outdoors, and been serving at North Durban Presbyterian Church for 17 years.

16. PETER: Learning from distraction

Of all the disciples we encounter in the New Testament Peter is probably the disciple we can relate to best. His misplaced zeal and tendency to speak without thinking often got him into trouble. Yet God restored and transformed Peter and used his zealous enthusiasm to lead and grow the Church in a powerful way.

The amazing fact is we can learn as much from Peter's "bungling" mistakes as we can from his teaching. I noticed that this was because Peter allowed his own perspective of what was happening around him to distract him from what was really important.

To be distracted is "to have one's thoughts or attention drawn away: unable to concentrate or give attention to something. (Webster's dictionary)

For instance: Distracted by the waves..... Peter sank in the water

Distracted by his pride Peter lost the point of the foot washing- a lesson on humility and a call to servant hood.

Distracted by his fear Peter denied the one who was about to save him.

We relate to Peter because, like him, we too are vulnerable to being distracted by what is happening in the world around us and lose sight of what Jesus called us to do and to be, or who Jesus and what He is able to do.

We, the Church, need to fiercely guard against allowing the Covid19 Pandemic (along with the fake news, politics, conspiracy theories, fear, frustration and the failing economy), to cause us to lose sight of Jesus' commands. We dare not allow these things, of as fearful as they might seem, to draw our attention away from Jesus calling to us to be The Church, His body on earth in spite of the challenges. His command to be faithful in prayer and worship, to share in Holy Communion, to teach and to preach the good news of the Gospel, to love God and one another as He has loved us.

By the grace of God, Peter the bungling fisherman became the Spirit-filled Apostle of Christ. Let us learn from Peter that we, who have everything we need in Christ, must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, if we want to do that which He commissioned us to do. Today let us take stock of that which is filling our mind and carefully us consider carefully what might be holding our attention and distracting us from the will and purposes of God.

Let us earnestly pray that God in His grace will help us to be "overcomers" in Christ for His names sake. AMEN

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2Peter1:3-8)

Joan Brummer. Living in the beautiful Midlands of Kwa Zulu Natal. Retired minister of Upper Umgeni Presbyterian Church in Howick. My joy in life is Jesus, my garden, and my six beautiful grandchildren.

17. ELIJAH: Headed in the right direction...

As God continues in this month to reveal His plan for us and how to focus on it even in tough times; we can also draw lessons from one of the overcomers, prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19:1-18.

Events in this text happened after Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal, defeated and killed them at Mount Carmel. When Jezebel learnt about it, she sought to kill him. Elijah was terrified and ran for his dear life. The exciting thing about his flight which becomes our first lesson in this passage is that Elijah ran to Horeb (Mount Sinai) which was called the mountain of God. When faced with challenges in this life as Christians we usually react differently. Despite our reactions to the challenge(s), it is best to first consider going straight to the Author and Sustainer of our faith, the Triune God. God is always ready to help us in all circumstances.

The decision of running to the mountain of God made God to sustain Elijah all the way. As Elijah was going to Horeb, he became hungry and tired that he was longing to die. God was ready to restore his strength through food which came with an angel. When faced with challenges as Christians, we are so drained spiritually such that it becomes difficult to go on with our faith. At this point in life, many have abandoned their faith, some committed suicide and others fell into depression. This happens because people are not ready to listen to what God is saying. Dear friends, God is always ready with His spiritual food (His Word) to feed our spiritual being. Just like food which gives our bodies strength to go on, it is the same with the Word of God to our spiritual being. The Word nourishes our faith that it becomes strong and be able to face any challenges and become overcomers.

Challenges causes despair and in such state one needs an ear and someone to give solutions. God is ready to do that to His children. When Elijah was at Horeb, God listened to him and told him what to do. Friends, is there any amongst us who is stuck and terrified with problems? Seek God's help through prayer and consultation. Our God who is all-knowing and present everywhere will help you.

Like Elijah, we need to go to Him, hold His hand and talk to Him always. For His mercies endures forever.

God bless you!

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."

3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." 5 Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

7 The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." 8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. 9 There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"
10 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."
11 The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."
Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13 When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.
Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"
14 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."
15 The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17 Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. 18 Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." (1Kings19:1-18)

Faresy Sakala, wife to Misheck, mother to Robson, Rose and Ronald and a minister at Trinity -- Gweru Presbyterian Church. My Trust Is In Christ

18. ABRAHAM: Walking ahead of God – get-up-and-go faith

Abraham is one of the super heroes of the Bible. His presence hovers over the entire Bible and if we recall that he is the spiritual ancestor of some 2.4 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims and 13 million Jews then we might say he was one of the most influential people that ever lived.

We remember Abraham as the man of great faith, but something strikes me about Abraham that was fundamental even to his faith and is vital to understanding him -- as per this week's theme -- as an overcomer. I am thinking of Abraham's mind set.

Abraham had a 'can do' attitude to life. He was a true overcomer not just because of his faith in God but because his was a 'get up and do it' approach. God called and Abraham responded. He dreamed dreams but he knew how to translate dreams into reality. For sure he had faith but he did not wait around waiting for things to happen. He didn't dilly dally. He didn't mess around. He got off his butt and went for it. "Leave your land, your birthplace, your father's house and go to the land I will show you..." So Abraham left...

Abraham was a passionate man and he made mistakes -- many of them -- but it is better to try things -- and possibly fail - than to sit passively at home with every good intention, waiting for the Spirit to move, and achieving nothing.

Abraham dreamed, he listened, he responded, he went forth. It was a breath taking decision to set out in the way he did. To his relatives it might have seemed cousin Abraham was out of his mind, but notice what God says to Abraham, "Walk *ahead* of Me and be perfect."

That gives us a wonderful insight into Abraham's temperament and mind set. Noah, we are told, walked with God. Abraham, we are told, walked ahead of Him. Abraham was adventurous. He took risks. He pushed the boundaries. And God loved it. Maybe that is why his spiritual descendants, the Jews, are such a phenomenal people.

"Leave your land, your birthplace, your father's house and go to the land I will show you... So Abraham left, as the Lord had told him." (Genesis 12:1-4)

"... the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, 'I am God Almighty, walk ahead of Me... '" (Genesis 17:1)

James is the Pastor of the Hermanus United Church. He is married to Mariette.

19. DAVID: Courage in Crisis

One of the amazing stories of courage and valour in the Bible is that of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. David was a shepherd boy who occasionally played the harp for King Saul. He was a talented musician, armour-bearer, and a handsome young man but what stood him out in the crowd was his courageous spirit. There was no one in the army of Israel courageous enough to stand against the giant Goliath. David rose to the challenge and eventually defeated Goliath with only a sling and a stone. What was the reason for David's victory?

David answers this for himself in verse 45, "You (Goliath) come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty..." It is clear that David's courage is grounded in God. So David, in the midst of a crisis in Israel, displayed courage and determination to honour the name of God.

There are many adversities, giants and challenges we face in this life in relationships, finances, health, etc. Currently we are struggling with COVID-19 and we have seen the devastating effects on lives and livelihood. In such a context we are called to be like David to believe in a God who has come in his son, Jesus Christ, to save the world. God's unconditional love for us is to help and not destroy us. Such knowledge should give us assurance, hope and courage to face our giants; because God is with us we are more than conquerors! David knew this, I wonder if you can say the same?

David eventually became king after Saul and ruled for at least 40 years and under his leadership Israel prospered. However, David was by no means perfect. This can be seen in his cry to God in Psalms 51:10-12 in the face of his sinfulness. In his prayer: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me..." David shows us that courage is also displayed in repentance, lament, humility and forgiveness.

In the midst of continuous corruption in our country and world we need the courage of David to prophetically proclaim God's presence, justice and righteousness. We also need the courage to confess our own sinfulness and seek repentance. In the midst of crises we need renewal of faith, hope, love and the courage to follow Christ. May this be our prayer and joy!

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands." (1Samuel17:45-47)

Jerry Pillay is married to Sandra; they are blessed with three children: Jessie, Janice and Aaron. He currently serves as Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

20. SARAH: Learning to Laugh

What did Sarah overcome?

For me, Sarah shares a difficulty experienced by many women, particularly those in the past: they are seen as an adjunct to men rather than as the individuals God created them to be in God's image.

From the time we first read about Sarai as Abram's nameless wife in Genesis 11 to the place in her story where we find Sarah giving birth to Isaac, Sarah has shared the ups and downs of Abraham's life with all its battles and disappointments. What most of us remember about Sarah is her humiliation about not giving birth to an heir for Abraham, the woman's role that gave honour and respectability and all the prestige that accompanied it.

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Gen.21:1 It is this that made Sarah overcome. Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me'(Gen.21:6). The birth of Isaac was the proof that God was faithful to Sarah, that throughout the humiliation of the preceding decades when Abraham had obeyed God, followed God's directions and also passed Sarah off as his sister, God was with Sarah as well as with Abraham. Her laughter of disbelief is turned into the laughter of the victor who knows God is with her. Sarah made mistakes but God honoured her as the Grand Matriarch of the people.

There are many like Sarah who feel that they are insignificant, that God does not see them because they can't live up to expectations -- like Sarah's lack of children. We need to look to Jesus, God's Son, who saw the insignificant, like the tax collector, Zacchaeus, and spoke to the 'untouchables', like the Samaritan Woman at the Well.

Sarah's laughter spoke of the lesson she had learned as God overcame her childlessness; let our laughter speak of the victory we have in God through Christ in the Holy Spirit as we rejoice and laugh and bring light into our covid time.

Sarah the Overcomer:

1. Sarah became respected as a person in her own sight as well as others';
2. God was faithful to Sarah showing God knew her disappointment and humiliation;
3. As people laughed with Sarah, may we too laugh joyously in Christ's victory.

Prayer: Holy God, you cause us to laugh after difficulties and reach out to others in challenging times. May our laughter show that Christ in us and for us and with us is what makes us face the obstacles and overcome them. Thank you for this gracious gift through Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. 2 Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' 7 And she said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.' (Genesis21:1-7)

Rev Zephney L Kennedy -- married to British Paul whose residence permit was not renewed by the Dept of Home Affairs so we are prematurely settled in Hickling, North Norfolk, UK, where I serve in the Church of England church. My son is in SA living independently.

21. NEHEMIAH: Choosing Courage

Nehemiah faced opposition to his God given assignment from within and from without. He remained courageous and resolute basically because he trusted in the Lord to grant him success.

As the work progressed the intensity of the opposition increased. Sanballat and the group frowned at the idea of the rebuilding, and were more incensed with the actual building works.

Their enemies employed the strategy of mockery in order to discourage the rebuilding of the walls. And the enemy went further to plan to attack those who were working on the walls.(Neh.4:7-9)

Satan has not changed in his tactics against those who desire to see the up-building of the kingdom of God. Satan is incensed against you when you begin serving the Lord, he further uses discouragement and mockery to persuade you to stop serving the Lord. He raises opposition from within and from outside of those who are enemies of God.

And with any progress made in the rebuilding of God's work Satan intensifies his army against you. You and I must emulate Nehemiah who went ahead and successfully rebuilt the walls because he chose not to be afraid as he remembered that the One who called Him is great and awesome and for the sake of his kinsmen he had to employ spiritual weapons and physical weapons.

If you want to serve the Lord in any capacity beware that you may face opposition but we are not of those who give up and backslide(Heb.10:39). Like Nehemiah you too can overcome as long as you trust in the Lord.

"And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes." (Nehemiah4:14)

I'm Richard Mkandawire Minister at St. Columba's Presbyterian Church in Kabwe Copperbelt Presbytery. I'm married to Aretha and we are blessed with three kids, two boys Khumbo and Mbawemi and one girl Chimwemwe.

22. THOMAS: Overcoming Doubt

We have all had that moment of doubt, that feeling of insecurity, and the moment we need a little more in our Christian walk.

Thomas wasn't prepared to believe until he had seen Jesus with his own eyes, he went as far as saying "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." Vs 25.

Eight days later Jesus appears to all of them behind locked doors, telling Thomas to place his fingers in the holes in Jesus hands. "Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Vs 28 Thomas overcame that doubt.

Verse 29: Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus is reminding us that we need to have unconditional faith in Him, and in this faith, we will be able to overcome, Thomas overcame his doubt, when meeting Jesus face to face. We are reminded to continually come face to face with the Lord in prayer and walk with Him in faith.

Thomas' example of overcoming is so important to us in 2020, a reminder to have faith in Jesus, and to overcome the world around us as Thomas did, this can only be done through God.

The moment we allow ourselves unconditional faith in God, we are brought closer to Him, Jesus is waiting for us to trust in him to lay ourselves at His feet in faith.

Thomas is instantly forgiven and accepted back into the fold. This is an excellent example of how Christ forgives any of His Followers who have strayed, and at the same time encourages us to not doubt Him, but to reach out in Faith, totally trusting in His grace and love, and to have a personal relationship with Him.

As you step into this new day, step out in renewed faith and trust in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Be an overcomer, walk in faith and victory.

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John20:24-29)

Greg Howse minister at Alfred County Presbyterian church in Port Shepstone, husband to Anita, father of Malcolm and Angus and Grandfather to Quinnevere and Arwen.

23. RUTH: A Model of Death to Self.

The story of Ruth is constructed upon a traumatic crisis presented and concludes with the crisis resolved. Naomi lost her husband and two sons; she and her two daughters-in-law; Orpah and Ruth were widowed. Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. Ruth decided to go with Naomi and treated her as her own mother.

Naomi and Ruth began with emptiness. Naomi pointed to God as the cause of her emptiness. Ruth looked to God's providence for her future and shows unselfishness, brave love, the unshaken truthfulness. Ruth's devotion and trustworthiness are clearly displayed. Her faithful loving service and commitment to her mother-in-law was rewarded. She finally got married to Boaz. She gave birth to Obed, David's grandfather. She was restored. This is what Boaz said to her, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband---how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before" Ruth 2:11 -- 12.

Ruth, a woman from a despised community has been included into the genealogy of Jesus. This shows that, you do not have to be a special person from a particular breed of people in order to be used by God. Ruth, an ordinary woman, under a very traumatic situation, had an open heart to others, the people of her mother-in-law. Naomi's pain was her pain. The common pain revealed to her that all people are equal. She realised that pain does not discriminate.

In this context Ruth chose to be the wounded healer. In her deep pain of having lost her husband she chose to be a pillar of strength to Naomi. Ruth played the meaning of her name; 'a friend or companion'. She is one of the heroes of faith in the Bible.

Coronavirus has exposed that we are all vulnerable. Our communities are traumatized, stressed and depressed. God is calling us to commit our service to each other. The story of Ruth has much to teach us about relationships with each other and healing in our churches and communities. In this story we are taught to welcome those who are considered outsiders and offer equal treatment to those the community despised and treated as outsiders. Ruth teaches us that in the family of God, we are all equal, accepted, and loved.

Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." (Ruth1:16-18)

Rev Mukondi Ramulondi ministers at Mt Horeb Presbyterian Church in Polokwane, Limpopo. He is former Moderator of General Assembly, Married to Konanani, have four children, Dzilafho, Vhushavhelo, Ngelekanyo, Tshilidzi and a daughter-in-law Yamkela and two grandchildren; Mulweli and Orinea.

24. JEREMIAH: Honest with God

O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me. (Jeremiah20:7)

Jeremiah was honest. He felt deceived by God. The word "deceived" means to be enticed or seduced. Obviously, God does not mislead or trick people, but Jeremiah felt that God had lured him into the ministry only to make him a laughingstock. He felt like a helpless girl who had been seduced and overpowered by a deceptive lover. He felt ridiculed and offended. His voice was not making a difference. He was crying out for the people to repent, yet they continued toward destruction and judgment.

Jeremiah's intense lament was private -- for God alone, not public.

God wants us to talk to him, even when we are angry, upset, and frustrated. He wants us to tell the truth. A lot of dishonesty goes on in relationships, even with God.

People ask me: Is it wrong to be angry with God? First, we must remember that anger is an emotion, and oftentimes emotions are neither right nor wrong: they just are. What we do with our emotions is a separate issue. People are sometimes surprised by the answer I give them: "If you feel anger toward God you should tell him. God is big enough and strong enough to handle your hurt and anger. So tell him about. He wants you to pour out your heart to him. He wants you to express what is in your heart."

Didn't Jesus pour out his heart to the Father in Gethsemane and on the cross? We should do the same. Hold nothing back when you pray. Tell the Lord exactly what's in your heart, especially the bad feelings. By pouring out these emotions we are freed from their hold, and we enter more deeply into the loving embrace of the Lord.

God does not want us stuck in anger or any other negative feelings we may have. This is why we should be honest with God in prayer. We should go before God as we are, not pretending to be someone we are not. If we are honest with God in prayer, we will feel a sense of deep freedom, and we will find ourselves having a deeper relationship with God and less discouragement.

To bottle up our anger - even anger toward God - does only harm, never good. To be dishonest - even in our prayers - clouds our relationship with God. God desires real people, honest and forthright, who pour out their hearts before him, bringing him all their motives and emotions. The truth is that God knows the depths of our hearts - our thoughts, our motives, our emotions - even before we speak them. So, if we fail to be honest with God then we are only deceiving ourselves. Honesty with God is liberating.

Teddy Zimba is Engaged to Rhudo Moonga, and is currently serving as a Church Development Evangelist (CDE) at Makeni Villa Presbyterian Transitional Congregation, Munali Presbytery, Lusaka Zambia.

25. GIDEON: God sees more than we do...

Names are an important part of most cultures, and so often names get passed down from one generation to the next. I wonder if you know what your name means? Have you ever looked it up? Does the meaning of your name impact who you have become or who you are today?

Gideon is a Hebrew name and it literally means "hewer" or "feller", as in someone who cuts down; it also seems to mean great warrior, perhaps someone who "cuts" down the enemy. The angel in our narrative calls Gideon a 'mighty warrior' (v 12); but what is interesting is that Gideon doesn't seem to be a mighty warrior or believe that he is a mighty warrior.

You see, the Midianites are consistently defeating and raiding the Israelites land and produce, so much so that the scriptures tell us that Gideon is threshing wheat in a wine press, which is totally bizarre, but it tells us that Gideon was trying to hide the wheat from the Midianites. Not really mighty warrior material to me! What is more, when the angel tells him that he will save Israel, Gideon's response is to tell the angel that he has the weakest clan in Israel and that he himself is the least (smallest).

Thank goodness the Lord sees beyond who we think we are, and with Him we can be and do anything for the Kingdom, all we have to do is be willing to allow God to use us. If you read the rest of the narrative, you will see that Gideon goes on to defeat all of Israel's enemies, and he even reduces the number of soldiers who go to fight, so that all the world would know that it was God who gave them victory and not in their own strength.

The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." The Lord answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive." (Judges 6:11-16)

Gordon Cook's wife, Joshua and Rebecca's mom, minister at St Giles. The Rev Melanie Cook.

CONCLUSION

This brings us to the end of the Month of Mission... A very big THANK YOU to our writers: Peter Langerman, Lungile Mpetsheni, Siphon Mtetwa, George Marchinkowski, Jayne Nyirongo, Pat Baxter, Shingi Masunda, Kim Brown, Lydia Neshangwe, Nigel Chikanya, Natalie Barnard, Reuben Daka, Rodney Brits, Michelle Black, Joan Brummer, Faresy Sakala, James Gray, Jerry Pillay, Zepheny Kennedy, Richard Mkandawire, Greg Howse, Mukondi Ramulondi, Teddy Zimba, and Melanie Cook. Thanks to Wayne van Heerden who helped with social media. Also a very big thank you to Ruth Armstrong who worked with me on the theme, recruiting writers and editing the contributions. I have been blessed by everyone's inputs, the encouraging comments and the enthusiasm that has been generated... SOLI DEO GLORIA!

Theo Groeneveld
on behalf of the Mission and Discipleship Committee of General Assembly
