

Readings for the week of Jan. 26, 2025:

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Our church family at St. Stephen the Martyr came together in May 2008. Our Mission Statement says that we are “followers of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, proclaiming the Gospel.” Each member of our congregation is important, and has a place in the Body of Christ. Each person is valuable to the work of the church overall.

I am reminded by these readings of our early stages of development as a parish. The Lord led us wonderfully through the Book of Nehemiah. Just as it took 52 days to rebuild the walls in Jerusalem, it took 52 days from our first planning meeting to when we had our first official service. I’m also reminded by Luke 4:18-19 of a goal that the Lord gave us through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 61:1-3, which says,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

In his sermon on Sunday, our Pastor reminded us of the importance of being faithful to our Mission Statement. A Mission Statement for any organization is meant to set goals for that organization, and also to establish boundaries for the group’s work. Without a clear Mission Statement, there can be confusion that comes when many people come with suggestions about the direction they think the organization should take.

As followers of Christ, our personal lives need to be led by a Mission Statement also. The one that Jesus left for believers; past, present (us), and future. We can find that in the passage of Scripture known as “The Great Commission,” which is found in Matthew 28:16-20, it says,

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In our personal lives, we need a clear sense of our God-given goals, and a strong faith that He has given us everything that we will need to be successful. Some of the necessary gifts and talents won’t be given to us until the exact, right time when we need them.

Whatever goal we are reaching for, will likely require us to have endurance, regardless of whether it is a personal goal, or as part of a team with a shared goal.

In order to accomplish our mission, there are some things that we need to remember. but there are three things that these readings inspire me to recall. Those things are;

1. Keeping our joy is important...

Nehemiah 8:10b tells us, *“the joy of the Lord is your strength.”*

James 1:2-4 tells us, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

When the going gets tough, keeping our joy isn't always easy. Therefore, we need to be intentional in keeping it, and even putting it into practice. Jesus Christ is Lord, and He has saved us, redeemed us, and forgiven us. Because of Him, we can be reconciled with our heavenly Father and have eternal life, if we choose to accept Him.

All of us have challenges in one way or another, some are obvious and some are not. If we are able to respond to trials with perseverance, we can learn firsthand that God's love for us is unconditional (see Romans 8:37-39), that if we communicate with Him in prayer, He will answer (Jer. 33:3), and *“that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”* (Phil 1:6),

2. Remembering God's faithfulness in times past is essential...

Deuteronomy 8:11 tells us, *“Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today”*

Psalm 103:2 tells us, *“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits”*

I encourage you to read all of Deuteronomy 8 and Psalm 103 as both Scriptures are filled with examples of the things the Lord has done. Also, as we meditate on God's faithfulness to us personally, our faith and trust in Him will grow.

3. Trusting in His presence with you in every situation is vital...

When we are facing hard times for any reason, or new challenges/endeavours, it is not strange that we would be fearful, but we can always remember that the Lord promises us in Matthew 28:20, *“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*