

What Kind of Year Has This Been?

- *A Time to Draw Close to the Father's Heart*

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Dec. 27, 2020

This year has been rough. It's been tiring. I think it's fair to say that we all are experiencing symptoms of P.T.S.D. Have many of our family's have experienced strife or divisions during this holiday season? I think I've heard a record number of stories from Thanksgiving. May you find grace for each other as we all have trouble dealing with the invisible enemy Covid-19 and the aftermath of a contentious election.

This year I've found help in reading. I have for you a unique sermon, sort of my year through the books I've read. As many know a book in some way becomes a friend after you've read it. Some books I've listened to in audio format and as I've driven through Kansas these are some of the milestones I've enjoyed along the way. Let me start with a fiction book, because the rest of the books are about theology and discipleship.

My Antonia by Willa Cather

This story is set on the prairie in Nebraska and follows a boy and his immigrant neighbors. The title character Antonia is a sweetie! It is a delight to see how she adapts to get along and encourages the good in people. It's a must read or must listen audiobook - a classic about prairie life.

The Journey of Desire: Searching for the Life You've Always Dreamed Of by John Eldredge

Ever wonder why you desire some things so deeply? It's probably because you were made for them. *"Many good people have been told that the path to a holy life requires us to kill our hearts' desires."* *"... But what if God is the author of our deepest desires?"* Psalm 37:4 declares, **"Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart."**

In this turbulent year, I've been encouraged to learn more that the desires I have in my heart are there, not to be denied, but to be fulfilled in God's good timing and ultimately in the Kingdom of Heaven. Much better than trying to get rid of these desires is the hope that God wants to fulfill them.

Beautiful Outlaw by John Eldredge

Reflecting on the results of years of the Christian teaching we've received, if we've been presented a bland religious Jesus, *He isn't any help to us*. Jesus is much more endearing and followable, when we see He is brave, strong, and very surprisingly funny. Jesus is actually the opposite of boring and religious, He's an enjoyable friend. No wonder people enjoyed hanging around Him so much.

Orthodoxy by G.K. Chesterton

A modern Christian classic about the Christian faith. Perhaps *canonical*, but that might be heretical to say.

Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul
by John Eldredge

Sooner or later we all get caught in the rat race, but there's got to be something more that God had in mind for me. Rather than race to get more, there's got to be something about me that is already as it should be. Something of me that was meant to be. The Christian Life can't be all about denying myself and trying to be a better person of whom God will approve. Good news: There is already a lot about me that *God meant when He meant me!*

Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul
by John & Staci Eldredge

(Yes, I read a women's book and I thought it was beautifully written.) There is something to Eve that God designed that our world can't live without. There is a beauty in every woman that our world needs. This is a wonderful book.

He Loves Me!: Learning to Live in the Father's Affection by Wayne Jacobsen

Before we try another church program designed to help us "*get it right this time,*" let's go back to why Jesus even came to rescue us. Why? We are the apple of God's eye! He delights in us! To behold and believe that truth is where we all need to start.

This book helps us cut through any beliefs we've had that say we have to be more this or more that, more religious

or more acceptable. *He Loves Me!* is probably the one book I'd start any conversation about God with. We have a Father in heaven who loves us. Nothing will ever change that, but have we even begun to grasp how wonderful that is? Let's let that be the foundational truth on which we live.

Waking the Dead: The Secret to a Heart Fully Alive by John Eldredge

I love that there is a cup of coffee on the cover of the latest edition of this book. On many a morning that truly is our hope and goal for living: **COFFEE!** Honestly, no one wakes up thinking "GOD!, CHOCOLATE!, or STEAK!" We wake up thinking **COFFEE!**

So the book is about coffee.... *No... No, it isn't. And that's a good thing.* If you've ever woken with the feeling that, "*Something doesn't want me to enjoy this day,*" then this book is eye-opening. Hebrews 12:1-3 encourages us by talking of the "**great cloud of witnesses**" who "**persevered**" in the faith. Why persevere? Because there is real opposition. Opposition that can cause us to "**grow weary and lose heart.**" When I think of my kids growing into teenage and adulthood, the main hope I have is that *they will not lose heart.* What talent for creating beauty, what gift of showing love and hospitality, what genius for creating cures is thwarted in a man or woman when we "*lose heart.*"

In wanting my kids to live fully alive in the abundance of our Heavenly Father's love, I know I'm ready to fight for their hearts, that they will not lose heart. I'm willing to fight for the hearts of those I love: my family and our church family. ***Waking the Dead*** has been helpful for knowing there is a battle for our hearts and then knowing what to do about it. We overcome hopelessness by the power of the Spirit of God within us. Romans 15:13, "**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.**" We do not live as people without hope, because we have not put our hope in comfort, in the calendar, in our government, or in the world. Our hope comes from Jesus our Lord and best big brother who has and is saving us.

Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God
by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge

How many have said something like, "*If we could just get back to Kindergarten, to those timeless joy-filled moments of childhood when we felt fully alive, then life would be perfect?*" Why? Because in those moments, life pretty much was perfect. How so? In ***Sacred Romance***, the authors say we were connecting with and enjoying God in those moments. I think they are right.

What were you doing in those moments of complete childhood joy? Playing with dolls, sword-fighting an imaginary dragon? With so much joy, it seems true that in those moments you were also experiencing God's love and delight over you.

Getting back to that joy and finding out what stopped it, what brought us back down to the hardness of life on earth, that is the help this book gives. Just putting into perspective what stopped the joy, what “*arrows hit our hearts,*” that’s enough to start encouraging us to embrace the joy again and not let it be thwarted. I love this book because of that help.

Fathered By God: Learning What Your Dad Could Never Teach You by John Eldredge

OK, pause: No one needs another book that throws our Dads under the bus for being less than perfect fathers. They are/were human after all. And, I don’t need a book that needles me for being an imperfect son or father either. So let’s continue: That’s not what this book does.

Throughout our lives we live in relationship with the Trinity: *God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.* So what does it mean for God to be our Father when we’re 20, 30, 40 or 80 years old? Good question. I love this book’s answers. I love that our True Father in heaven has been Fathering us all along: fathering us, our kids, and our Dads. I love the way He wants to Father us now.

I think even reading the introduction and the first couple chapters is encouraging. Knowing we’re the “*apple of His eye*” is something we all need to hear often, if not daily. Our Father has our pictures on His refrigerator, because He loves us!

In Season: Embracing the Father's Process of Fruitfulness by Wayne Jacobsen

Why did I think every day and every season was supposed to feel like the abundance of harvest? Why did I think winter, spring, and summer were times when God wasn't doing anything? Wayne Jacobsen writes of the vineyard and the vine with experience from his youth growing up and working on his father's vineyard. When we consider Jesus' statement to "***abide in Him***," we can see how the harshness of summer or the silence of winter can be times when God is at work for our harvest and when we can choose to *abide in Him*. Jesus' analogy makes every season a time for drawing close to the Father's heart of love for us. That's what I believe 2020 and 2021 are about for Christians: time to draw close to the Father's heart.

Misunderstood God: The Lies Religion Tells About God by Darin Hufford

You may have heard of the bumper sticker that says, "*I don't mind God, it's His people I can't stand.*" Ever known someone who said, "I WILL NOT GO BACK TO CHURCH"? Ever wonder if they even know the God they think they are rejecting? They might not. They might have good reasons to reject the teaching they've heard, the conformity required of them, or the religious fear of rejection they're running from. I'd run too.

Frankly, we don't need a religious God, we need a relational God. Enter the Father that Jesus' speaks of and the life of love Jesus shows us. If we could only see God the way **1 Corinthians 13** speaks of love, then we might want to be embraced by that God. This book shows us that God is the love of **1 Corinthians 13**.

So You Don't Want to Go to Church Anymore? by Wayne Jacobsen

You might be surprised that you might not need to go to church, because the things a lot of churches require may be more religious than a relationship with God. You might be surprised when you hear your loved one has stopped going to church, and you may be surprised to hear that it might be better for them to not go to church. Depending on the church they went to, maybe we can be glad they've stopped going to church every Sunday. (Here's a helpful tip about this book: There's a summary at the end of each chapter and you can breeze through the book quickly that way, then go back to the chapters you want to read in full.)

The Utter Relief of Holiness: How God's Goodness Frees Us from Everything that Plagues Us by John Eldredge

Wait a second, don't reject church folk like so many do. Don't reject the church lady. Those may seem like "goodie to shoes" people, but they may also have found *there's an utter relief in holiness*. It's worth a read, if you're stuck in a rut.

It's Your Call: What Are You Doing Here? by Gary Barkalow

“*Lord, what should I do?*” has been asked by probably every single Christian in their life, for we are told to do the Lord’s will. Having helped some discern the answer to that question through my professional work, I see this book as a needed and helpful resource for answering that question. Through the author’s personal stories and useful questions, we find there really is a lot in our stories to help us answer the question with confidence and inspiration. This book can help us reflect on our desires and passions to find a clearer discernment of our calling. It is possible to feel confident in your answer.

Walking with God: How to Hear His Voice by John Eldredge

Ever wanted to know what it’s like for others to “*walk with God*”? We use the phrase for the dailyness and adventure of being a Christian, but then most of what we hear in organized religion is programs for Christian living, not personal stories. Programs are supposed to apply equally to all people, but what part of life is ever like that? In *Walking with God* we get some personal, storied examples of what it’s like to “*walk with God*”.

All Things New: Heaven, Earth, and the Restoration of Everything You Love by John Eldredge

Seriously, if heaven is a place of love, then I expect to find all that I love there and all that was taken away restored

there. *Heaven, Earth, and the Restoration of Everything You Love* is the subtitle and this book renews my hope that hoping in heaven will be worth it, BIG TIME!!!

The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God by Dallas Willard

Ugh... this book is thick. I'm glad a lot of authors have read it and gleaned its insights to share with us. It has a great and thorough examination of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and offers helpful points that church based discipleship needs to include to help people live more like Jesus: to live life abundantly.

Moving Mountains: Praying with Confidence, Passion, and Authority by John Eldredge

As a "New Year, New You" moment is upon us, grow your relationship with God, not just your list of To Do's for God. How much of prayer is just adding to a long list of things to pray for? With Jesus' perspective on prayer, passion, and authority, there are a lot more reasons and ways to pray.

Running with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best by Eugene Peterson

Examining the life and writing of the prophet Jeremiah might not seem interesting at first, but when you consider the turmoil of Jeremiah's time, then this book is more relevant than ever. Jeremiah 29:11 gives us the promise, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a

future.” Eugene Peterson writes in a very engaging way and you might enjoy the audiobook version of this book. It is excellent. Honestly, I think this book has been the basis for a lot of Christian books we’ve read on discipleship, but just never knew it. This book written in 1983 is to me a classic, must read. It’s beautiful!

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If you’ve made it through this list. Thank you. If you’re wondering what book I’d want everyone to read? I’d say ***He Loves Me!*** by **Wayne Jacobsen**, because we all need to be reminded of our Father’s unconditional love and continuous delight in us. I’d also say, if you want more from the Christian life and you’re ready to fight for the hearts of those you love, then I’d recommend ***Waking the Dead*** by **John Eldredge**. We need our hearts fully alive!