



2021 Celebration of Church Life

# Deep & Wide

March 20<sup>th</sup> at 9:00 a.m.

*Join us for this virtual only event.*

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## Devotional Readings for Youth

Title:

Enlarge for the Peace of the City

Suggested Scripture Readings:

Jeremiah 29:4-7; Genesis 1:27-28, 3:1-7; Genesis 12:1-3

Submitted by: Alysha Argot

Congregation: Habecker Mennonite Church

Title: Youth Ministry Intern

## Devotional Thoughts \*

There are many ways to think about growth and enlarging, as there are many different ways someone or something can enlarge. For example, something can grow physically in size, your bank account can enlarge numerically, you can enlarge your popularity or your friend group. We can also grow in our intimacy with God, in our ability to listen to His voice, and in our attitude and actions becoming more like Jesus.

Let's think about the first way this concept of growing or enlarging is used in the Bible. The first command that humans are given in Genesis 1 is to be fruitful and increase in number. We were meant to live vibrantly and fully, growing and expanding. Of course, this was meant to happen with God, with God providing for all of our needs so that we could grow. We would fully trust in Him and never worry or feel stressed, about the need to grow faster, or about running out of what we needed to grow.

However, you probably know happened next. Humans stopped trusting God to look out for their best interests and truly provide for all their needs. They wanted to enlarge themselves, maybe faster than they were able to, or in a different way than they were meant to – they wanted to become like God and they felt like God was holding out on them. And so began the spread of sin, humans out of right relationship with God and each other. Many of the times we treat each other in ways contrary to the way God made us to treat others, it is because we think we need something that we don't have, and we feel like we can get it, like we can enlarge ourselves, by taking it from someone else. This may be something physical, like money, possessions, or land. It may be something like reputation or self-esteem, we think that if we lower that of someone else's, it will raise our own. This is not the kind of enlarging we were created to do, and it is not what God calls us to now.

But growing, enlarging, increasing, those are still things that God originally called us to in the Garden, and they are still things we are meant to do, with Him. Sometimes, it is easiest to see the kind of growing God calls us to when we have lost many of the things we thought we needed. Let's look at Jeremiah 29:4-7, to see what advice the prophet Jeremiah gave to the people of Israel who had just lost their land and their homes and were perhaps in danger of losing their faith. Israel had been conquered by Babylon, and most of the people were forced to leave their homes to live in Babylon, a foreign land and a foreign culture. Babylon did many things differently than the way Israel did them, including worshipping other gods, or idols. And yet, Jeremiah does not tell the Israelites to form reclusive communities and ignore their Babylonian neighbors, or wish them harm. He does not tell them to conform to the pagan practices and worship of idols of Babylon of course, they are to maintain their faith in Yahweh, but Jeremiah says that does not mean they have to hunker down and wait out the exile trying to stay exactly the same. Instead they should increase, enlarge! And what does that mean? Jeremiah gives very practical examples – build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children, and seek the peace and prosperity of the city.

The Israelites were in a pretty rough place, I can imagine that they probably felt like licking their wounds and sulking, not thinking about growing or expanding. I think maybe we can relate to that now. The world we find ourselves in right now is in some ways a different world than what we are used to, and trying to grow and enlarge seems like a lot of work. How do we grow personally when it is hard to talk in person with our friends and neighbors? How do we grow our ministries when we can't always see and be with people face to face? But I think Jeremiah's words can be for us in this time. Even when things seem to be at their bleakest, God is calling us to keep moving forward, because He has good things for us, good plans (as we are reminded just a few verses later in Jeremiah 29:11). And maybe that doesn't mean things will go back to "normal" in the timeframe we want – the Israelites were in Babylon for seventy years before they went back

to Israel. But it does mean that God can bless us and enlarge the things that need to be enlarged in our lives – our faith, our compassion, our ministry, even here, where we are in our own “exile” from each other.

I want to come back to verse 7, the idea of seeking the peace and prosperity of the city. In exile, in a hard, unexpected, unfamiliar place, I think it is easier to try to enlarge ourselves in the selfish, sinful ways we talked about earlier. We might feel insecure and uncertain, and so we focus inward, on ourselves, and what we think we need to survive, and that can lead to us ignoring or even abusing those around us. Maybe we are more stingy with our financial resources, or maybe we verbally attack anyone who disagrees with us about any of the contentious issues we are facing. But the kind of enlarging God is calling us to is not just for us, it is for the good of all people, of the whole city. In the Israelites’ case, Babylon was not exactly a city that deserved it – they worshipped idols and did not follow God’s ways. And yet, Jeremiah tells the people that as they are enlarging, as God is blessing them, they are to be a blessing to the people around them (reminiscent of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3). Their lives should not just be focused on themselves, but they should be living in ways that increase the peace and prosperity of the place in which they live, so that all the people can benefit, even those who are “undeserving.”

As we navigate this difficult season, let us resist the urge to pull into ourselves and focus only on what we think we need. God has good, enlarging things for us, even in the uncertain, frustrating time we live in. And those good things are not for us alone. God wants to bless us, not so that we can be comfortable in our own little circles, but so that we can work for the peace and prosperity of the people around us. While we are called to be set apart from the world, the fact is that our lives and those of the people around us are intertwined, and so we should, as Jeremiah says, pray for the city, because if it prospers, we will also prosper. And seeking the prosperity of the city, for a follower of Yahweh who is so concerned for the foreigner, orphan, and widow, means looking for ways to lift up those who are on the bottom, not merely increasing the wealth of those on the top – because that would be going back to the wrong kind of enlarging. God’s kind of enlarging is when everyone can flourish. It often looks like peace and reconciliation between people who were once enemies and restoration for those who have been oppressed. It means repenting of our selfish tendencies and instead pursuing peace and abundance especially for those who have the least. This is what we are called to work for as God’s people who are meant to grow and enlarge.

Here are some questions to think, pray, and/or journal about to help you think about the theme of enlarging with God and for the good of others in your own life:

What are the ways you have been enlarging recently? Have you been growing in love and faith and compassion or have you tried to enlarge the things you want at the expense of others?

In what ways has God blessed you or what has He increased in your life recently? Is there anything you think God might want to increase in your life that requires a step of faith or action on your part first? How can those things relate to the peace and prosperity of the people around you, both those you know and those you don’t? How might God be calling you to look beyond yourself to seek the good enlargement of others?

Craft, game, activity, video, song or image recommendation \*

Song: One Day by Koolulam <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjPpMXMjjj0>

This song talks about a hope and a longing for a day when all people will be able to flourish together, when we will learn to love each other and live in true peace, no matter our differences. It is sung by thousands of people from different countries and of different religions. I think it fits the theme of enlarging for the good of others because it is about opening up our hearts and lives to include other people who we normally wouldn't, and overcoming hatred and fear with peace and love, which ultimately comes from God. We should always be striving to increase our capacity to love, and doing it in such a way that other people are also brought into the abundant life and love of Jesus.

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## Devotional Readings for Youth

Title: Focus

Suggested Scripture Readings:

Revelation 4:2-6

Submitted by: Jann Denlinger

Congregation: New Danville Mennonite Church

Title: Director of Youth

## Devotional Thoughts \*

I am a photographer, and I have a favorite quote. "When life gets blurry, adjust your focus". Right now, we are living in a very blurry world. Guidelines keep changing. Schools and leaders are struggling to figure out what is best. Everyone seems to have an opinion, and things are just not clear.

Thinking from the perspective of a Christian photographer, I see that I need to adjust my focus onto God. But, what does that mean? I know that God is there for me, and that He doesn't change. I can see that part clearly.

When you pray, what are you focusing on? What does God look like? There is a description in Revelation 4:2-6. Go ahead, get out your bible and look it up. You can come back to this page after you read it.....

A throne with someone sitting on it. Before I read the description in Revelation, I thought of a man dressed in a long white robe sitting on a big throne. Kind of like the Lincoln Memorial. But after reading Revelation 4, I am thinking He appears shiny and bright (jasper and ruby), with a rainbow around Him. There are flashes of lightning and thunder coming from the throne. In front of the throne is a sea of glass, clear as crystal (not blurry). So now when I pray, I can envision who I am praying to. WoW.

How can we focus on God? We can start by beginning our day with a few minutes with Him. That can be something consistent in our lives when the rest of the world is spinning. You can use a bible app with a short devotional about something you are interested in. Think about how you can serve Him in your day today. Keeping your focus on helping others to share His love is a great way to move ahead, and not focus on what is behind us, or worry about what is going to happen tomorrow. End with a short prayer, asking Him to widen your view to see how you can help guide others to see His love, and praising Him for who He is!

Focusing on your relationship with God is important. What kind of relationship do you have? He loves you, no doubt. You only have to look around to see the many ways He loves you. How do you show your love to Him? Think about your parents or others in your life that you love. How do they know that you love them? How does God know that you love Him? Tough question.

When snapping photos, there are different kinds of lenses that help you focus. Some are wide angle, which helps when you're taking a selfie, and what to include others around you. Other lenses magnify things so that you can see them very clearly. You can use filters from an app to change a photo to appear the way the world thinks it should look. When you are focusing on your relationship with God, you want to have a camera bag with all the lenses. You want to focus tightly and clearly on Him. You also want to widen your view to see who God has put in your path. You can expect that God will put others around you. You don't want to use filters to change your relationship to what the world thinks it should be. You are a unique individual, with a unique relationship with God. "When life gets blurry, adjust your focus."

Craft, game, activity, video, song or image recommendation \*

I couldn't attach an image, so here is a link where you can download it by clicking the little download arrow on the bottom of the photo. Let me know if you have any trouble getting it. This may be formatted so the teens can download it to keep or share it on their social media pages if they want.

<https://janndenlingerphotography.smugmug.com/2021/Focus/n-bmmWfF>

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## Devotional Readings for Youth

Title: Even If ...

Suggested Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 55; Romans 3:4

Submitted by: Ashley Litwiller

Congregation: Menno Haven Camp & Retreat Center

Title: Program Manager



## Devotional Thoughts \*

Do y'all worry about the future? Isaiah 53 talks of the suffering servant and what we know now would happen to Jesus. And then in chapter 54, we are learning what it means to prepare for the future God has in store for us. While I love that God has a plan, sometimes I can't always see that plan and that unknown feeling freaks me out, honestly. I can read and hear "do not worry" from the Bible multiple times but then I think, "well why should I NOT worry? What if I mess up? What if I fail? What if I lose what I love? What does God have up his sleeve that I don't know about yet? What if..."

There's a phrase I'm training my mind to shift my thought process from 'What if' to 'Even if'. Isaiah uses it in the first verse of 55. "Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink – EVEN IF you can no money!" Outside of a potluck or an invite to a friend's house, I cannot imagine there being a place where I can go and drink for free! (My personal choice would be Gloria Jeans or milk straight from the cow at the farm :) Everything in this world comes with a price. And yet, Jesus paid the final price for us on the cross. Jesus can satisfy our thirst like no other because He did what no other would do. Jesus did not get cash up front for this sacrifice from us. We didn't earn it and I sure don't deserve it.

I don't deserve it because even knowing the truth that God says he'll provide for me, I still question if it will be as good as what I could get on the other side. Romans 3:4 tells us "Even if EVERYONE ELSE is a liar, God is true." We can trust God. Anything that other side offers will not be better, even if it whispers to use saying it looks that way. Isaiah 55:2 says, "Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen to me, and you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the finest food."

That food or drink that I get from somewhere else will never satisfy me like how God will. Our phones, friends, and neighbors may tempt us to stray from what this good Bible book says, but we have to be prepared for the enemy who wants to lie to us. Isaiah 55:3 gives us a promise of God's to cling to: "Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David." All we have to do is Listen to God and we will find that unfailing love and safety we are craving!

If we think too long about the unknowns of building and spreading out, fear can weasel its way in. Even if we are tempted to doubt God's power or believe in that future God says he's preparing for us in chapter 54, we can listen to God's Word that has the defense we need to fight off the enemy of doubt. Here's just a few that come to mind:

-Put on the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18)

-surround yourselves with friends who will do whatever it takes to get you to Jesus so he can heal you, especially when you are in too much pain to do it yourself (Mark 2:1-5) These can be the friends we are making space for.

-have an answer prepared to tell anyone who asks why you have hope (1 Peter 3:15)

## Craft, game, activity, video, song or image recommendation \*

Song: Faithful God by I Am They.

Video: Bible Project "Isaiah" overview video on YouTube or their website.

Icebreaker/Activity: If you could design your own food court, what 5 businesses would you choose?