THE THIRD PLACE: CHAPTER 5
By Rev. Chris Konker

"I remember walking last night through neighborhoods." Bella said, "It's New Year's Eve, and I have this funny experience. As a child, our family would see fireworks from the lawn, straight on ahead. Several cannons would all be in one place, the people in another, compartmentalized. That was then. Walking through these neighborhoods last night, some fireworks shot off to my right, and by the time those finished firing, I had halfway encircled them. Then, I had a long stretch of road with a vast place of homes to my left with occasional showers of fireworks at various depths and distances and heights. And then after another right turn, more of the...well, I was moving, and moving in and out of a lot of mini-celebrations...I was spiraling. We spiral through our years, through this body of work, these vocations you are speaking of, Joe."

"It sounds so static – that earlier experience of fireworks," I said. "What we want is there. We're here. The experience you had last night – it sounds more dynamic, like that had more for you."

"Well, it reminds me life is dynamic. When is it not? I'm not sure what the still point in the changing world would be, but it ain't me."

"Was it sad?" Lane asked.

"I'm only sad when people ask me about it. And I sense as a result that there's something important about my feeling a certain way about it. When in reality, for better or worse, I'm always pressing forward to the action. "What can we do?" "How do we move forward?"

Lane started to laugh. "I was talking about this very subject – that Joe is talking about tonight – with college students some time back. I wanted to talk about faith, hope, and love as things we haven't already exhausted, but as something we haven't really begun to do yet. Because so much of my journey has been with concepts, I guess I just wanted to frame these things for them. But at the heart of it was a wall. We hit a wall in what we thought we knew or understood. Faith begins there. We hit a wall in who we thought we were. Hope begins. We hit a wall in what we thought we wanted from life. Love begins right there. I think I wanted to get away from the idea that love was just something you did. Anyway, I asked them, "what brick walls have you faced?" And, just...crickets."

Bella nodded.

"Well, that's just it. However helpful it was for them, there's no denying that it is hard to act meaningfully when you don't know who you are. Or at least, to risk the thought that it's not a done deal who you are. I have always been able to plow ahead based on my most trustworthy assumptions, but that 'hope' question is sometimes a good one to ask. Maybe it makes the road ahead not more easy, but less frustrating."

I leaned forward in my seat.

"I was with a group of men one time," I said. "And I asked them to take five minutes and write 50 things they want. The most I could even get to was 25, and most of them couldn't even get that far. We had spent weeks moving through curriculum about spiritual gifts. I could never quite put my finger on what was so burdensome about that. One of the men said, "it reminds me of too many Saturday mornings at the Marriot." When I pressed further, he was describing personality tests that somebody's boss might set up. This burdensome, heavy air would just sit upon us in that group as we discussed our gifting, almost like it was some poison disguised as medicine – discover yourself! Find yourself! Nothing. So, for the last week, we sat in silence and wrote down what we wanted."

William shifted inquisitively and impatiently in his seat.
“Clearly you thought you were getting down into something juicy, foundational, and basic...but what was that?”

I nodded, having anticipated his frustration.

“Right,” I said. “So if this was an argument, and lets just pretend that as we’re going along, arguing, it turns out I don’t have a very good argument. Just pretend.”

I winked, and feigned a pleading tone and expression. William played along.

“OK.” William chuckled. “So, sooo hard to imagine, but yes. Continue.”

“Well,” I continued. “Whatever the content of what I’m trying to say, even if I don’t quite believe it myself, I’d argue it if I’m not aware that, deep down, what I really want is not to be right, but to win an argument. That’s the sort of thing I might realize later. I’ll write things like ‘steak dinner’ or ‘more money for Michael’s college fund’ or ‘respect at work’ earlier on, like at number seven through ten out of the full 50. But only once I get to, say, number 40 do I realize that this desire to win everything is a motor humming along inside me a few layers beneath everything else.”

David said the things we love at this deep level are the things worth dealing with. In other words, why futz about with spiritual gifts if at some deeper level, I haven’t wrestled with desires like, “I don’t want to know my gifts,” or “I don’t even really want to know God?”

“Or,” I said as I looked at Bella. “I don’t really want a festival, or even to make the world a better place.”

Bella laughed, and looked at Lane.

“I don’t think Joe is ever really satisfied that any of us ever actually get down to this level that he’s talking about,” she said.

David continued.

“Well, and you also don’t necessarily have to wait forever, like God will only show you next steps when you get down to this deep awareness.”

I nodded.

“Right,” I said. “It’s more like a daily thing then some arduous achievement.”

David continued.

“Because the culture around us is so obsessed with finding meaning and purpose and for me, it’s like “where’s the perfect job?” and that we can all get so precious that we can be waiting around for clarity on something when it is best to start to do something. Me alone trying to figure out what I really want, then writing down 50 things, or 75 things, isn’t really what we’re after.”

Lane interjected.

“Which is why it wasn’t the main pursuit,” she said. “But still a key ingredient.”

David nodded.

“Sure,” he said. “And this is where those variables come in, to show us the well-traveled grooves where Christians find their calling to look like the callings from God they find in the Bible.”

I raised my hands.

“Tell me then,” I asked. “Was there one of those variables that stood out most to you?”

Bella spoke first.

“I appreciated what you said about the cross. You spend your life building toward something. And at some point, your opponents take it in their hands and break it without your permission, leaving it in pieces. There are probably many examples. But consider the Alpine Groves festival as a key one. If you expect your dreams and yearnings to take shape exactly how you plan, you will never be able to persevere through what’s to come. To work as though you were embracing the cross of Christ frees you to think that perhaps even the broken things might help form some larger whole.”

Lane spoke next.

“The variable of my life stage was huge. I never thought I’d be divorced. You were describing my life stage already as a younger stage where you have a lot of ambition and energy, but as I thought about it more, I realize my being divorced made it more that way. I just wanted to be where things, people, places felt alive. I wanted that so badly, and dreaded anything less.”

William spoke next.

“Well, it would have to be God’s just life and the community that is formed out of that, which derives from that. I’ve had times I was so sick, I was nearly
hollowed out. The only authentic sense of who William is, at least the only one I’d ever want to hear, is the one that transcends William, that gets me beyond myself where I can see my neighbor. The Scriptures, the Psalms in particular, show me that all this is God’s work. Until I see God as my Creator and my Redeemer, as the Creator and Redeemer of the world, my deepest layers will remain shallow. I may find interesting things there, but I don’t know that I’m finding anything truly insightful. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in a concentration camp. He wrote a poem in which he described the question, “who am I?“ as a mocking, lonely question. But he avoided the path of cynicism and despair. He knew just what to say. “Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.” Yourself in community. Yourself with others.”

“Boom!” David said.

“Excuse me?” asked William.

“Sorry,” David said. “Boom, as in Bonhoeffer hit the brick wall of love right there. Maybe of faith and hope, too, now that I think about it, but I don’t know. But that’s the brick wall, right? The one Lane was talking about earlier? The lonely, mocking questions that linger, that you don’t know how to answer. I guess that’s the role of the Spirit, to bring comfort when I’ve felt empty, like my pursuits were empty, like life was one long rat race, that I couldn’t invent anything that could fill that empty space, but only these things could, the things we’re all talking about.”

“And this too,” I said, “that God’s not constrained by what constrains me. I remember how difficult the early years of fatherhood were for me. And you all know that better than anybody how I was tempted to...well, you know I had what I thought was a limitless vision. I wanted to wrap my arms around the whole world. But the most dangerous thing about a limitless vision isn’t that you have no limits, just that you’re blind to them. I don’t need to see everything anymore. I just need to see the things I need to see.”

BOOK REVIEW: THE SECOND MOUNTAIN
By David Brooks, Reviewed by Nancy Quinn

The new year is the perfect time to read this book. It is essentially about building community, why and how. It is full of quotes and stories of those that have, or are, climbing that second mountain. Most of us know about conquering that first mountain. You know – the one that’s about growing up, getting an education, job, possibly marriage, and hopefully, achieving some kind of success. Mainly, it’s all about I, me, myself. That’s not bad. It’s a totally necessary form of personal growth. Often, some valley appears. We all have crises in our lives. Midlife crisis really can happen at any age. It can also be a creeping malaise, an enthusiasm desert. This valley can be a place of transformation. In crisis we naturally sort out what is really important to us and seek each other out in ways that really meet ours, and others, deepest needs. The second mountain comes into view. This is a book about that second mountain, what it looks like, ways of climbing that mountain and experiencing the joy of ascending it.

Brooks explores the tension between individualism and relationships. Beginning in the 1960s, the things that bound us together in church and other social organizations became increasingly untethered. The culture of hyper-individualism was born. Unfortunately, a negative consequence of all this self-absorption can be isolation. Another factor that encourages isolation is the tremendous tech advances the twenty-first century has brought, allowing us to be in touch socially. Well, sort of. What is frequently missing are genuine connections. Instead we are staring at screens, with maybe real people on the other end. The opposite of this ego-driven self is living for relationships.

The second mountain is about responsibility to others and being committed to something. A connected individual is a healthy individual. Same for communities. Much of this book is telling stories of people with this commitment and faith, what motivates them and the stages involved. Brooks speaks of the passion, commitment, and discipline vital to relation building. At first, this reader thought he was getting off track when the book strayed off into the subject of marriage and the stages of intimacy. But then he circled around to how similar those stages are to building other relationships within the community.
Discovering a vocation is not the same as building a career. Vocation is more of a call, a reason you were put on this earth. With a vocation you are not doing what pays well or what is most convenient. Carl Jung called a vocation “an irrational factor that destines a man to emancipate himself from the herd and from its well-worn paths.” A vocation often has to do with fulfilling a need and finding your purpose in life. Reading these stories of second mountaineers, it has to do with how a neighbor’s need or some injustice was discovered, and how that became their annunciation moment – when an interest, a passion, is sparked. Once the passion is ignited, then it’s a matter of commitment and the responsibility of promises that are made, much like marriage. It’s hard not to measure yourself against these second mountaineers and not feel inadequate.

Themes of morality, character, education, and spirituality abound. He introduces us to what he calls history’s moral ecologies and how moral standards change over time, from the Greek to Hebraic to Christian traditions. Our present day standards have not always been so. Nothing is static. It reminds us that change comes not just to individuals but to societies as well. The author shares his own pilgrimage of faith. Previously he viewed religion as a good. Good, that is, for other people. His story tells what moved him to seek his own personal faith and how those around him have helped and, at times, hindered this quest. Grace and joy, two of this reviewer’s personal favorite concepts, are explored in both Christianity and Judaism.

The Second Mountain is full of quotes and stories of people who have made their lives into second mountain quests. Spirituality runs through this quest. Much of it is encouraging community rather than individualism, relationships rather than isolation. MPC comes to mind as a vehicle for doing just that. Small groups, Sunday School, dinner groups – these encourage belonging and relationships. Pumpkin Jam, the food pantry, various opportunities to serve – these are all venues for relating within our community and the broader world. New meaning is attached to efforts to build a house for a family in need, to give food to neighbors in need. The Second Mountain was a convicting, informative, and enjoyable read.

David Brooks is a Canadian born American journalist. He is a graduate of the University of Chicago with a bachelor of history degree. He is a commentator on NPR’s PBS NewsHour, and Meet The Press. He teaches at Yale University and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is the author of numerous best books: The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement; Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There; and On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense.

DEVOTION: MARK 1:1-9 – JANUARY 5TH
By Marsha Myers

In the church calendar, we are entering the season of Epiphany. The meaning of the word Epiphany is to show, make known or to reveal. The Epiphany season in our Christian tradition begins on January 6 and ends on Ash Wednesday. The tradition of Epiphany is associated with two main events: the visit of the Wise Men (who announced Jesus to the Gentile world); and the baptism of Jesus. Our season of Epiphany celebrates the revealing of Jesus as God’s Son who would forever change mankind and the world.

The recounting of the baptism of Jesus by Mark is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry on this earth. In our scripture we see that John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus as foretold by the prophet Isaiah. When I read Isaiah’s words I marvel. God promised the Messiah and told the Jewish people exactly how it would happen, but because it did not happen immediately, the people lost faith, and many had grown weary of waiting. Yet God is in the business of being true to His word and the time had come to reveal His Son to the world.

I wonder, how many times have we as Christians grown weary in waiting and almost given up? How many times do we forget what God has promised and just go on with our lives? This scripture reminds us, once again, that God always fulfills His promises no matter how long it takes. We can believe and hold on to the fact that His timing is perfect – even when we may not think so!

As we move through our verses, we see that John’s exhortation for repentance of sin and water baptism was representative of an inward act being
testified to by an outward action. If baptism was an act of sin being removed from a life, why then would Jesus, the man of no sin, need to be baptized by John? I believe here Mark wants us to grasp the true nature of Jesus – humble obedience to the will of God. Jesus chose to allow John to baptize Him, even though He had no sin. Jesus was setting an example for us to follow as He identified with our humanness. By Jesus’ act of humble obedience, the heavens were opened, God was pleased and sent His blessing.

What an amazing command and promise to us! We are asked to humble ourselves and be obedient to God - not an easy task for us in our human condition, but a requirement to receive the fullness of God’s grace. Our culture continually bombards us with the message that self-sufficiency and pride are the ways to attain happiness and blessings. Jesus, by example, shows us a different way. Over and again, He teaches that the way to know and honor God is by following the path of humble obedience. If we will listen and follow this path, we will experience the opening of heaven and the fullness of God’s presence in our lives. We will be overwhelmed with God’s love for us. We will hear His voice confirming His love and that we are His child. Then, we, like Jesus, will be ready for our ministry to begin and our lives to be used by God to change our world.

DEVOTION: MATTHEW 2:1-12 – JANUARY 12TH
By Craft Talbot

The passage of the Magi is one that is well known. The Magi, more popularly known as the three Wisemen, are recognized figures of the Christmas story. After some external research on this passage, I was fascinated to discover that the Magi are in fact only mentioned once in the Bible, and it is in this particular passage in Matthew. Searching further into the meaning of this passage, I was first struck by the title which, in the NIV version of the Bible, is called “the adoration of the baby”. How strange of a concept that these three grown men would travel far distances to worship and bring gifts to a helpless newborn. Looking deeper into who the Magi actually were, research has shown that they were foreigners who were experts in the study of the stars and were waiting for a sign to announce that Christ had arrived. It is interesting to note that during this time, many people were waiting for a sign for the coming of Christ, yet these three were the only ones who reacted. A key takeaway from this passage is that we need to strive to have faith like the Magi. Why did no one else come, even from the city of Bethlehem, to worship the new baby Jesus? God placed the star in the sky above the newborn to signify to the world that the Prince of Peace had come and, yet, only three people responded to this message. We as children of God should take this as a lesson that we should be on the ready for a sign from God, lest we miss the signs that He has for us in our lives. There were more than likely people similar to the Magi, waiting for a sign that the Christ had come, but they were clearly looking for these signs in the wrong places. A key lesson from this passage is that we need to have faith like the Magi. Upon receiving the sign of the star, they without hesitation journeyed to find the Christ. Upon discovering the Christ as a helpless newborn baby, born in a manger to Mary, they would have had a valid reason to doubt God’s sign. The Magi could have easily left and taken their gifts with them when they came upon this sight, but again they followed God without hesitation.

A final point to make about the significance of the Magi’s faith in this passage is how the Magi interacted with King Herod. Their faith in God is evident in how they did not return to Herod when they found the location of Christ. Throughout their journey they listened to God’s voice, they obeyed God’s commands, and they did not fear or worry that they were on the wrong path. Looking at this upcoming new year and new decade, we should focus on the lesson from the Magi, and that is to have faith without hesitation. We need to be ready to receive a sign from God. We need to move when He calls us to move, and remember to listen closely throughout the journey to where He is leading. He has our best interest, and His plan in mind. If we have faith like the Magi, we to will be led to the King.
DEVOTION: JOHN 2:1-11 – JANUARY 19\textsuperscript{TH}
By Crystal Freed

John 2 presents us with Jesus’ first miracle - a Wedding feast where Jesus, “Our Bridegroom,” turns Water into Wine. What was God saying to us about Himself and our relationship with Him and what are the implications for us today? Please take a moment and read John 2:1-11, then consider the following.

Wedding. Christ comes into our context. I remember being at the Louvre in Paris and just opposite the Mona Lisa, was Paolo Veronese’s massive 1563 painting of 

*The Wedding Feast at Cana.* Christ is pictured at the center of the indulgence and debauchery - the sacred amidst the secular. Veronese’s placement of Christ reminds us that Christ meets us where we are. He does not change our circumstances but uses those very circumstances to change us. The crucible of marriage transforms two into one flesh. Marriage, like many of life’s circumstances, teaches dying to self. “Dying to sin” mirrors the call of Christ as he sanctifies us and prepares us for marriage to him. Our Bridegroom came to us, met us where we were and clothed us in “fine linen, bright and pure.” Rev. 19:8.

Water. Christ used water in a jar. He also used servants, those at the bottom of social hierarchy to not only help him but also as witnesses. First, Christ always uses what is there, whatever we have to offer - some fish and some bread, a bit of mud, or here, water in a jar. What “mite” you have to offer our King in realizing his miracle? Second, Christ uses people. It strikes me that Christ never needs help but chooses to allow partnership in bringing his kingdom here on earth. It is no accident that the lowest in the world’s eye are the ones that Christ uses - smelly shepherds witnessed an extraordinary birth, unschooled and ordinary men proclaimed the Gospel, a stutterer led the Israelites out of bondage, and an orphaned girl saved her people. You can no longer allow your story to masquerade as mundane or your thorn to debilitate – we are all ordinary people playing parts in God’s extraordinary story of eschatological proportion. Bring your water.

Wine. Christ makes something new and good. The Bible describes the wine as “good”. The Greek word here is *kalos*. It speaks of a good that is attractive and inspires or motivates others to embrace what is lovely, beautiful or praiseworthy. Brothers and sisters, we share in the wine at communion and then we feast on the Word. May the lifeblood of God’s Word transform us into something good that magnetically attracts the world to Christ.

Arise, shine for your [Bridegroom] has come. Isaiah 60:1. The wedding serves as bookends to the epic Biblical narrative – Christ’s first miracle at a wedding and the “great mystery” revealed in the end. John 2:1-11; Eph. 5:32; Rev 19:8. Lord, help us to know the talents with which you have endowed each of us (our water) and may you break any egoistic attachment so you can bless us and make us something good (wine) that you can use to pour out your quickening Spirit on this sleeping world (wedding).

DEVOTION: MATTHEW 4:12-23 – JANUARY 26\textsuperscript{TH}
By Marjorie Lewis

Have you ever been afraid of the dark? Or of what hides in the dark, things you can’t see? When I was young I was afraid of the dark, especially at bedtime. To me the dark was full of scary things that go bump in the night; rats, bats, monsters, and robbers. But a small night light protected me from danger. Darkness represented evil and the light was good. Jesus shines light to a dark world.

In Galilee of the gentiles “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” Who chooses to live in darkness? These were Israelites from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali living in the land given to them by God, and also non-Jewish Gentiles. They have chosen to settle down to stay in the thick blackness, a cold lonely place filled with the fear of death. They were not able to see a way out as they walked around in the deep gloom. They were in great danger and didn’t know it. Rather than walking in the valley, they were living in the very shadow of death, the dark realm of Satan.

Spiritual darkness made them blind to the closeness of the Kingdom of Heaven. They did not
recognize the Messiah, the King of Heaven, when he walked right by. Most of our world seems to be living the same way today, rejecting God and ignoring His message. Where are you living? Who do you know that is living in fear of death? Many people I know and love live in the darkness, in the shadow of death without Jesus. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit opens all of our hearts and minds to Jesus’ message of Good News.

Suddenly a great light appeared to those living in darkness. Jesus, the light of the world comes with the Good News “the Kingdom of Heaven has come near”. Out of His love and grace, God reaches down, comes down, and provides a way from darkness into light; from death to new life. His Word is a light for our path. Just as the rising sun brings warmth, so the love of God brings us hope of eternal life. In the presence of the light in Jesus Christ, the dark is ultimately powerless.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” Jesus preached as he began his public ministry. God’s mercy is in the command “Repent”. It shines a bright light on my sinful dark nature and brings me to my knees in confession. His merciful forgiveness lifts my shame and guilt. I have the assurance of a new life with Jesus. Listen, hear Jesus calling your name, and follow him. Jesus calls us to follow him out of the darkness and to live in the light. His light shines in us and through us to a dark world. The Good News of the Kingdom is near.