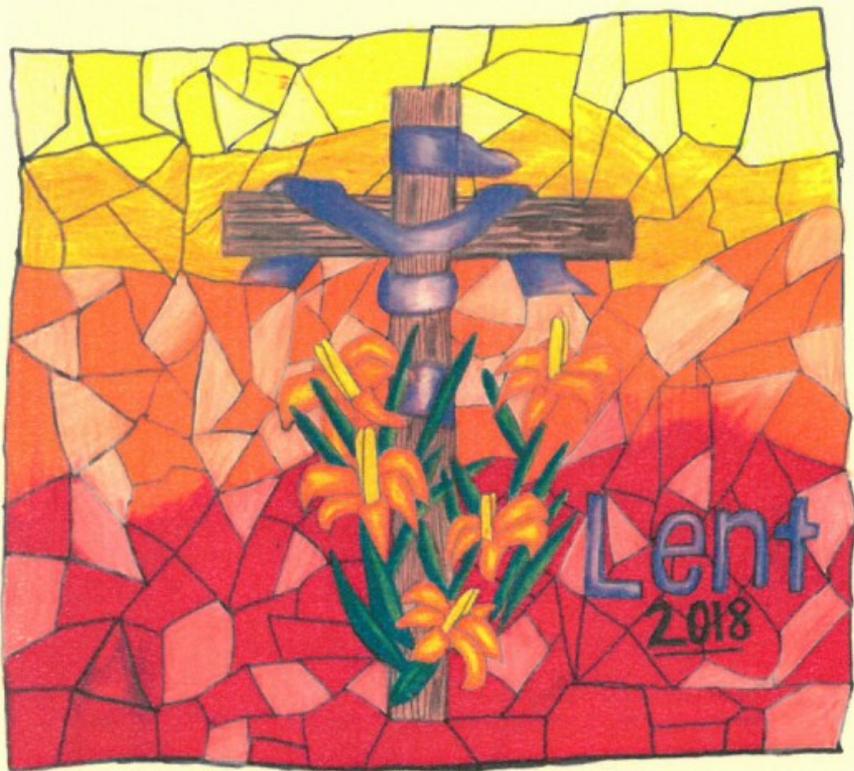


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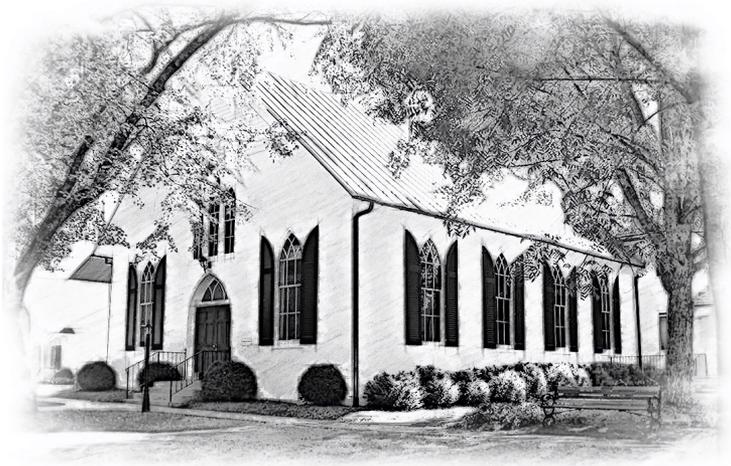


"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Mark 8:34

Olivet Presbyterian

2018 Lenten Devotional Booklet



*Daily Scripture readings with reflections
and prayers prepared by members
of the Olivet Community*

cover art by Sammy Derrico

Table of Contents

Wednesday, February 14.....5

Thursday, February 15.....6

Friday, February 16.....7

Saturday, February 17.....8

Sunday, February 18.....9

Monday, February 19.....10

Tuesday, February 20.....12

Wednesday, February 21.....14

Thursday, February 22.....15

Friday, February 23.....16

Saturday, February 24.....16

Sunday, February 25.....18

Monday, February 26.....19

Tuesday, February 27.....20

Wednesday, February 28.....21

Thursday, March 1.....22

Friday, March 2.....24

Saturday, March 3, 2018.....24

Sunday, March 4.....25

Monday, March 5th.....27

Tuesday, March 6.....28

Wednesday, March 7.....29

Thursday, March 8.....30

Friday, March 9..... 31

Saturday, March 10..... 32

Sunday, March 11..... 33

Monday, March 12..... 34

Tuesday, March 13..... 35

Wednesday, March 14..... 37

Thursday, March 15..... 38

Friday, March 16..... 40

Saturday, March 17..... 41

Sunday, March 18..... 43

Monday, March 19..... 45

Tuesday, March 20..... 46

Wednesday, March 21..... 47

Thursday, March 22..... 48

Friday, March 23..... 49

Saturday, March 24..... 51

Sunday, March 25..... 52

Monday, March 26..... 54

Tuesday, March 27, 2018..... 55

Wednesday, March 28..... 56

Thursday, March 29..... 58

Friday, March 30..... 61

Saturday, March 31..... 63

Sunday, April 1..... 64

Wednesday, February 14

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isa. 58:1-12; Ps. 51:1-17;

2 Cor. 5:20b—6:10; Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Albert Connette

Lent is a 40 day season of preparation for a renewal of our faith and life in Christ at Easter. Traditionally it is observed by taking up spiritual practices like fasting, prayer, Scripture reading, and reflection.

Sue Monk Kidd tells a story that corrects our often mistaken viewpoint of such spiritual disciplines. During a retreat at a monastery she noticed a monk sitting perfectly still beneath a tree. There was such a reverence and tranquil sturdiness in him that she later sought him out and said, “I saw you today sitting so still beneath the tree. How is it that you can wait so patiently in the moment? I can't seem to get used to the idea of doing nothing.”

He broke into a wonderful grin. “Well, there's the problem right there, young lady. You've bought into the cultural myth that when you're praying or meditating you're doing nothing.”

Then he took his hands and placed them on her shoulders, peered into her eyes and said, “I hope you'll hear what I'm about to tell you all the way down to your toes. When you're waiting, you're not doing nothing. You're doing the most important something there is. You're allowing your soul to grow up. If you can't be still and wait, you can't become what God created you to be.”

Even Jesus needed to spend quiet time with God during his life and ministry; and not only as he began his public ministry with 40 days of Lenten-like fasting and prayer. The gospel writers describe his continual movement between time with God and time with people. And it was not merely a need for renewal and refreshment that led him off on early morning prayer retreats. Mark tells us that after the first day of his public ministry Jesus sought out a “deserted place” to pray. But the word he used was not describing an alpine meadow, a shoreline at sunrise, or a forested cathedral but rather a “wilderness place” where the spirits lurk and temptation stalks.

There in that lonely place his disciples found Jesus and excitedly told him of the crowd that had gathered and was waiting for him back in Capernaum. “Two paths led out of that deserted place,” preacher Tom Long writes. “One path led back to Capernaum and a life of comfortable popularity. The other path led on to Golgotha and a costly sacrifice. One path led to a place where all were crying ‘Hosanna.’ The other path led to a place where all would cry, ‘Crucify him!’”

How surprised and disappointed his disciples must have been when Jesus told them that they were not going back to Capernaum but would be moving on to proclaim the good news in other places “because that is what he had come out to do.” It was like he placed his hands on their shoulders, peered into their eyes and said, “I hope you'll hear what I'm about to tell you all the way down to your toes. When you're waiting, you're not doing nothing. You're doing the most important something there is. You're allowing your soul to grow up. If you can't be still and wait, you can't become what God created you to be.”

Prayer (from Psalm 51)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Thursday, February 15

Hab. 3:1–10, 16–18; Phil. 3:12–21; John 17:1–8

Lydia Eisenberg

I have had the privilege of riding many rollercoasters throughout my life. I find them thrilling, terrifying, and terrific. I think the best part about them is that every time I have ever been on a roller coaster, the second before that first plunge, I think to myself, “What if this entire contraption breaks beneath me?” This is the best part because my worries and fears have never been proven true. That split second of worry is replaced with

appreciation for the ride and overall spectacle. There is something about facing a fear that makes the aftermath all that much more worth it. When I get off the ride, I always feel a sense of awe over the sheer power that the rollercoaster is capable of.

In more serious situations that command fear, I think often of a quote. Fear of the lord is wisdom. It is a common misconception that being afraid of something makes that person weak. To have the knowledge of something and the intuition to know that the very thing should be feared is true understanding. What a person does with this fear is what defines them. They can either let it inhabit and overwhelm them or they can look it in the eye and confront it. In Hab 3:1-10 16-18, Habakkuk writes that his “heart pounded” and that “decay crept into his bones” yet he patiently waited for the day of calamity. He turned worry into worship of the lord all while remaining calm through this fear. By recognizing that the Lord is powerful in his wrath, Habakkuk is able to truly understand and appreciate the immensity that is our God.

Prayer

Dear Lord,

I have heard of your fame. I stand in awe of your deeds. Repeat them in our day; in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy. Help me to acknowledge fear and overcome it.

Friday, February 16

Ezek. 18:1-4, 25–32; Phil. 4:1-9; John 17:9-19

John Simpson

“Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit.” Ezekiel 18:31.

How does that work? How is that even possible?

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ.” Philippians 4:6-7.

“Every situation” - “with thanksgiving”? What? This passage transcends all understanding.

“For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.” John 17:19.

The cross. It all comes down to the cross. That’s how our offenses are extinguished. That’s how one gets a new heart and a new spirit. That’s where the peace that transcends all understanding comes from. That’s how we are sanctified in the eyes of our Creator.

When I believe that Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment and pay the price I owe the Creator for my offenses; when I accept that I am so lost and prone to sin and self-centeredness that nothing but the death of God’s only Son can save me; and, that God loves and treasures me so much that he was glad to pay so dearly; then, my offenses are wiped away, I get a new heart and a new spirit, and I know that God loves and treasures me so much that even in the midst of suffering and loss I know he is with me and will protect me. Without the cross, none of it makes much sense. With the cross, it all makes perfect, although radical, sense.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to keep Your radical, infinite and unmerited grace and love through the cross at the center of our lives so that we might experience the peace that transcends all understanding. Amen.

Saturday, February 17

Ezek 39:21-29; Phil 4:10-20; John 17:20-26;

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 18:1-7

Roni Jennings

Are you doing this for them? For God? Are you sure?

Is it possible you are doing this for yourself- to feel important, righteous, better than others?

Are you humble, or are you humbled?

I had to read these passages a few times before I found a thread linking the scriptures. In the Old Testament passages God chastises us for treachery, iniquity, and prideful behavior. The prayers we lift

up, the gifts we give, the aid we offer need to come from our hearts and from our love of God. If, instead, we act out of a sense of obligation to God, or to feel good about ourselves, or to be more righteous than others, we need to know that God sees our heart and knows our true intent.

God wants us to live fully in his love of us. God wants to shine through us. In the New Testament passages we read of Jesus praying on our behalf that we would become one with him and God, to know the love and glory of God. We read of Paul thanking the Philippians for their concern for him, but stating that he draws his strength- and so his contentment whatever his circumstances- from God. Finally, Jesus teaches us that we must not tempt others to sin, but be as children- open, trusting, guileless, loving- to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Our faith, and our acts of faith, must come from a love of God. Good works or intentions without humility before God are not for God, but for ourselves.

Prayer

As you humbled yourself to live amongst us, so help us to be humble in our manner of living. Open us to your will and to your love that we may, without selfishness, look after each other as you look after us.

Sunday, February 18

First Sunday in Lent

Gen. 9:8–17; Ps. 25:1–10; 1 Peter 3:18–22; Mark 1:9–15

Kristi Nelson

Most people who know me know I'm not fond of winter. I spend as much time as possible on the couch under an electric blanket, grumbling about the lack of sunshine. I don't like to go outside. It's cold. It's dark. The trees are bare, and there are no flowers. It seems like all the color of the world has faded.

I don't think it's a coincidence that Lent falls during the last couple of months of winter. It's a spiritually cold time, bleak and harsh, as we open our eyes to our sin, our distance from God, and we intentionally practice repentance.

But God created winter, so there must be a point to it, right? Maybe winter is meant to be a time of regrouping, of looking out on a snowscape with a mug of hot chocolate, of turning inward. A time where we are not distracted by the new flowers of spring, the picnics and beach trips of summer, or the riotous colors of fall. Winter can be a time of quiet, of rest, where things slow down, and there's a little more space to think.

Our scriptures for today describe a winter in Jesus' life. A time where He went away, alone, to be tested by Satan and sustained by angels. It would've been a harsh time, a time of introspection, and finally a time of choice and acceptance of His mission.

And the scriptures tell of God's promise, that His love is neverending. That even in a time of winter, spring is just around the corner. That even in a time of Lent, Easter is coming.

So maybe it's time that I stop grumbling about winter. Whether spiritual or physical, this season exists for a purpose, to give me time and space to contemplate who I am, where my path is leading. Maybe I should stop wishing so hard for spring, and learn to live in the cold and the quiet of winter. God knows we need winter to rest, as we need Lent to focus spiritually, so that we can grow again.

Prayer

Oh Captain, my Captain, help us to live fully in winter and in Lent. Help us to understand the purpose of this season, to move through it at Your pace, not our own. Help us to embrace the inwardness of Lent, even as we look ahead to Easter.

Monday, February 19

Gen. 37:1–11; 1 Cor. 1:1–19; Mark 1:1–13

Jonathan Baker

These passages have at least three things in common: A beloved child, an incredulous prophecy, and an impending but temporary exile that will require a persevering faith. Joseph's "most favored child" status was an impediment to his family's apprehension of Joseph's prophesies: He would be their salvation from famine and annihilation. (Joseph's self-inflated ways didn't help matters either). The brothers didn't like Joseph or his

prophecies so they sold him into slavery. Joseph spent years in prison but emerged as a person of influence in Pharaoh's government. With his prophetic gifts Joseph anticipated and planned for a terrible famine. The pain of the brother's betrayal and the many hardships he faced was not erased in the end, rather, the pain was displaced by a far greater good.

Similarly, after John baptizes Jesus, God's pronouncement of Jesus' "most favored child" status was also an impediment to his contemporaries' comprehending what the incarnate God would do (hint: it wasn't the overthrow of their Roman occupiers). Everyone reached their own conclusions about who Jesus was and consistently rejected or doubted or simply didn't understand what Jesus was prophesying. Jesus too was sent into the wilderness to suffer absolute isolation and abandonment. The pain of Jesus' protracted execution and the horror of God's total abandonment was not erased in the end but rather it was displaced by a far greater outcome.

Finally, Paul places us as the beloved children of God, and he, in effect, prophesies that if we can maintain faith in the things the world deems foolish, we will have the saving power of God.

There is one other common thing to notice: a disdainful rejection, if not outright hatred of the message and the messenger. The messages are just too hard to believe; they do not comport with our notions of how things are or ought to be. Our Faith, with its concomitant hopes, is not what this world suggests is realistic. In the world we can always find a ready chorus of cynical derision to crush any seeds of faith. Why is the world's wisdom at odds with what God calls us to accept? Well, how could it *not* be? What is the world's wisdom, but a prideful, self-referential rubric of a reality based only on what we can "apprehend" with our limited senses? How can God, the being who *spoke the universe into existence*, fit into such a small space? How is it *not* a leap of faith to say that IF there is a God there would be an irrefutable argument for him? Says who? Says the world that does not know him because it cannot let go of its tether to itself. "*There can be nothing that we cannot know!*" seems to be Humanity's petulant cry – a cry echoing at the moment in Paradise when we chose to

“know” rather than love. What if God, knowing us as he created us, knew there was no irrefutable argument that we’d accept, so instead, God sent us an irrefutable person?

The World does not naturally encourage us in our faith, but oddly the world strengthens our thirst for faith. The world reminds us we do not belong to it - we are pilgrims longing for something else. We see in these passages, God quenching thirst and longing, though he takes his time in doing so, as he remains a “God of waiting.”

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to know myself as your beloved child. Comfort us as we wait for your goodness. Quiet the jeering world for us. Bring our hearts and minds to stillness so we can hear you in the midst of our days. If we find only silence, nurture our faith. Open our eyes to the beauty in creation and the pain in its fallenness. Fill our day with your tasks, deliver us from our own. Give us wisdom to distinguish these things.

Tuesday, February 20

Gen. 37:12–24; 1 Cor. 1:20–31; Mark 1:14–28

Louise Bibb

1 Corinthians 1:27-28 says "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong; He chose the lowly things of this world..." As one who is foolish, weak, and lowly, I find that a pleasure to read! The reversal of what one might expect is often very appealing. I love that "God made foolish the wisdom of the world." (1 Cor. 1:20.)

In today's Genesis passage, God made foolish the wisdom of Joseph's brothers. Here, they plot his murder. But we know that later on, in one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible, they will be tearfully reunited with Joseph, as he rescues them from a famine.

Today's passage from Mark is one of those strange, raw encounters between Jesus and an evil spirit. I think that the modern person, or, at least, we "mainline Protestants," can have a problem

with such passages. I know my eyes tend to glaze over at the mention of evil spirits! A member of the Friday book study group answers the question, "where do you think evil comes from?" with a tap on the forehead. To many of us, it seems almost like a cop-out to suggest that the source of evil might be a supernatural being rather than the flawed human heart. "The Devil made me do it," said Flip Wilson in his 1970's comedy routines.

I acknowledge, though, that I probably need to be more open-minded about the possible existence of evil spirits. Sometimes, on the news, we learn of an action so depraved, so totally removed from any possible benefit to the perpetrator, that a supernatural force as its origin begins to seem conceivable.

Whenever Jesus is confronted by an evil spirit, the spirit invariably recognizes who he is. In today's passage, an "evil spirit" calls Jesus "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:23-24.) Other examples are Matt. 8:28-29: "two demon-possessed men" call Jesus "Son of God;" Mark 3:11: "evil spirits" call him "Son of God;" and Mark 5:2, 5: an "evil spirit" calls him "Son of the Most High God."

Humans almost never realize who Jesus is, "The world, through its wisdom did not know Him" (1 Cor. 1:21.) So, when God "made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:20,) did he grant this most precious insight to evil spirits instead? What a hurtful thought! A better explanation might be, if we can concede the existence of evil spirits, that, being supernatural, they possess a primal ability to recognize the "God" part of Jesus, and, since Jesus presents the great threat to their existence, they are especially attuned to his presence.

One last problem with the evil spirit passages: The evil spirit says who Jesus is, and he invariably tells it to be quiet. Now, I have always found this to be an annoying habit of Jesus! Here, our only hope of redemption is supposed to rest on our recognition that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Messiah; and yet he shuts up anyone who will identify him as such! Surely, when it comes to understanding who Jesus is, we need all the help we can get! I do concede that it is appropriate for Jesus not to allow an evil spirit to define Him, if identifying him would entail that. But He shuts up human beings, as well, such as Peter and the

other disciples in Matt. 16:20. (Maybe someone else has that passage, and I can read their thoughts on it!)

Prayer

Dear Lord, Thank You for valuing the foolish, unsophisticated, lowly creatures that we know ourselves to be. Thank You for defining Your Son for us in the manner of Your choosing. Thank You for making foolish the wisdom of the world. Amen.

Wednesday, February 21

Gen. 37:25–36; 1 Cor. 2:1–13; Mark 1:29–45

Ed and Jan Lovell

³⁵ “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”

A recurring theme in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is Jesus going off on his own for a time of solitude and prayer. Continually Jesus withdrew from people, daily life activities, and the demands of his ministry to be alone with the Father and pray. The priority of Jesus’ solitude and silence is everywhere in the Gospels. It’s how he began his ministry. It’s how he made important decisions. It’s how he dealt with troubling emotions like grief. It’s how he dealt with the constant demands of his ministry and cared for his soul. It’s how he taught his disciples. It’s how he prepared for important ministry events. It’s how he prepared for his death on the cross. Jesus’ solitude is how he went deeper in his love-relationship with God.

The Pub Theology group that meets at the Manse is currently discussing the art and practice of prayer. At the last meeting we used insights from theologian Rich Rohr to guide our discussion. According to Rohr, one way we can learn to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit is through practices that invoke God’s presence. These practices come in the form of solitude. Turn off electronic devices, listen to music, take a walk in the woods; in other words get away from distractions. We were challenged to simply start by being silent. The challenge: for thirty minutes, enjoy solitude. Close your eyes, not to sleep, but to draw in God’s breath. With Jesus as our

inspiration listen and let yourself feel during this Lenten season and see if your relationship with God deepens as a result.

Prayer

Gracious Father, cultivate in me a yearning to be silent and to listen for your voice. Let me develop the practice of silence and solitude that I might surrender to your desires for me. Amen.

Thursday, February 22

Exod. 7:25-8:19; 2 Cor. 3:7-18; Mark 10:17-31

Connor Evans

As I sat in my dorm and reflected on this day's passages, I found one part in particular that really spoke to me. Like many people my age, I struggle with my own identity, wondering who I want to be and how I want to attain such an objective. When considering such questions, it is easy to lose sight of who you really are in an effort to be the person you think you should be. Perhaps such considerations are less relevant to those who have survived these transitional times, but I don't think it is a stretch to say that we all have times in which we feel disconnected from the person who we know we should be.

In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul describes Christians as God's buildings with foundations of his own design. While a foundation is certainly one of the least visible parts of a building, anyone with any knowledge of construction would know that it is one of the most important. While it will not be the characterizing trait of a structure, the foundation provides support and structure for the more unique and beautiful parts of a building.

Moving up from the foundation, there are many factors that contribute to the exterior of this proverbial building. Friends, family, and others can shape us in many ways, and sometimes, we can lose sight of what is important. That is when we turn to our structure, our support, our foundation. We are not alone to bear the weight, and if we were, we would certainly fail. It is through the strength provided by faith in the foundation of God that we are able to stand tall.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for being our foundation. For the support that you provide every day, especially in times when we are weak ourselves. Help us to be that support for others, and show us how we can provide stability for those in need in our families and our communities. Show us how to stand tall as a symbol of your glory and the sacrifice of your son in whose name we ask these things. Amen.

Friday, February 23

Gen. 40:1–23; 1 Cor. 3:16–23; Mark 2:13–22

Kyle Bollmeier

Even during our times of personal challenge and tribulation, we are called to find a way to persevere and continue to serve God in good faith. This is what Joseph chose to do because he was a holy man. There are always opportunities - even as there were for Joseph when he was treated unjustly. He kept his heart open and his hope alive - as we should invariably endeavor to do. We should not allow our hearts to close and fail to look for ways to serve, even when we are not in a good place. Despite being thrown into a dungeon after being falsely accused, Joseph continued to be a good and holy man. Even through his own undeserved affliction, he did not lose his empathy for others including the two servants as he stepped forward to interpret their dreams.

Prayer

God help us to not lose sight of opportunities to serve you, even during the time of our own challenges, knowing your blessings and gifts to us continue to provide us courage and faith. Thank you for your ceaseless love and devotion, even though we often fail by trusting and following the foolishness we find in the world.

Saturday, February 24

Gen. 41:1-13; 1 Cor. 4:1-7; Mark 2:23-3:6

Karen Riordan

This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has

revealed. I Corinthians 4:4

Is there someone in your life who challenges your faith? A coworker, a neighbor, an old college friend? Perhaps it is someone in your family. Jesus can relate. In Mark 3:1-8, we find Jesus in the synagogue with the Pharisees. It is the Sabbath and there is a sick man whose hand needs to be healed. The Pharisees were constantly watching Jesus, hoping to “catch him” violating the Jewish law. (In this case, the law prohibiting working on the Sabbath, and healing a man would fall into this category.) Jesus responds to his accusers by saying, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” Under the watchful eyes of the Pharisees, the sick man extends his hand to Jesus. And he is healed.

We should strive to be like Jesus, standing up for what we know is right. We should also strive to be like the man who was healed, extending our hand to Jesus. This man, though he was likely afraid of breaking the law, took a risk by reaching out to Jesus. There will be times in our lives when others will look for ways to challenge us, to find faults, loopholes, and discrepancies in the Bible, and to call us hypocrites. There will be times when we face those who seem to enjoy proving our beliefs are wrong.

Imagine yourself reaching out to Jesus. I am reminded of this each week when I am standing on my mat at yoga. The instructor says, “Reach for your toes, your heels, the floor.” I have to chuckle inside when she says this because I am so, so far from reaching the floor. Yet each class, the teacher tells us to do so. She also says, “Focus your eyes where you want them to go, imagine that you are touching the floor...because someday you will.” So I do, each time, trying to get a little closer.

With God’s help, let’s keep reaching. We can be living examples to skeptics, extending our hands to others and speaking up about what we believe. Our actions can speak for us when we have trouble finding the words. Unlike the certainties of science, the mysteries of God cannot always be proven. Stand firm, be willing to take a stand and extend a hand.

Prayer

Dear God, I find that it can be hard to speak up about my faith. Sometimes it is easier to be quiet when challenged by people — especially by those who are closest to me. Please stand by me and give me the strength to act. Please show me how to respond humbly when I am having trouble finding the words. Please help me to image a perfect world, the wisdom to know that it is not, and the stamina to keep reaching for it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sunday, February 25

Second Sunday in Lent

Gen. 17:1–7, 15–16; Ps. 22:23–31;

Rom. 4:13–25; Mark 8:31–38

Jim Taylor

So many verses, and finally, Mark hits me smack in the face... Jesus is speaking to those who are closest to him, that he would be rejected, despised, and finally killed, but would rise after three days. Speaking plainly. Laying it all out...and Peter takes him to the side and rebukes him. Peter, of all people!

Jesus speaks to him, in front of his peers and says: “Get thee behind me Satan. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns!”

That hit me hard. God has, for millennia, been telling us what He expects. How we are to show true fidelity to Him. It's in how we love and treat our fellow man. Every Prophet has told us, especially Micah: “Do Justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.” Or as our King tells us, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Yet we still don't listen. We still go along our own way...

Prayer

Lord God, open our minds and hearts to more than just giving a bit of our money, a bit of our time, and a bit of our mind to our neighbors. Help us to become more usable by seeking out opportunities to share your love with all around us, whether they belong to our little circle, or not.

Monday, February 26

Gen. 41:46-58; 1 Cor. 4:8-21; Mark 3:7-19a

Beth White

My ninth grade students recently completed a literary study of the Tao Te Ching to accompany their research on ancient China as part of our Global Studies curriculum. Despite the fact that the philosophical poems in the Tao are 2500 years old and come from the other side of the globe, my students were fascinated to discover in them truths about their own lives and our modern world. I asked each student to memorize and recite one poem from the Tao, and here is how the poem I selected to recite myself begins:

Why is the sea king of a hundred streams?

Because it lies below them.

Therefore it is the king of a hundred streams.

**If the sage would guide the people, he must serve
with humility.**

If he would lead them, he must follow behind.

Today's scripture selections tell of three biblical figures who led faithfully from behind. All of them came from humble experiences and yet were recognized for their wisdom and generosity toward others. Joseph, a slave who rose to the position of Pharaoh's right-hand man, used his power and wisdom to save from famine not only the Egyptian people but also people from lands near and far. Joseph acknowledged his indebtedness to God for his success: **"God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering"** (Gen. 41:52). Paul, an apostle who suffered physically, emotionally, and financially in his mission to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Corinth and other Gentile cities, led the churches he planted through his personal letters and his faithful apprentices. He sought to inspire in them a spirit of gratitude and mission: **"Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful"** (1 Cor. 4:2). Jesus himself, born in a stable to parents of humble means, in this story from Mark gained followers through his miracles of healing and his ability to defeat evil spirits. He saw great need in the world and **"appointed twelve - designating them apostles - that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out**

demons” (Mark 3:14). God exalts those that lead from behind and live out God’s truth for the sake of others.

Another version of the Tao Te Ching, this one published by the recently deceased Ursula Le Guin, ends with this: ***Wise souls don’t hoard;***

***The more they do for others the more they have,
The more they give the richer they are.***

Joseph, Paul, and Jesus led by putting others before themselves. They were indeed wise souls.

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for the models of humble leadership you give us in your Word. We live in a world where ambition and achievement, brashness and sparkle get all too much attention. We become distracted, Lord, and need to ground ourselves in the truth that comes from the stories of wise believers. Please help us to turn away from powers that seek to falsely elevate us or themselves and toward the truth - your truth - that brings us joy through introspection and giving to others. Amen.

Tuesday, February 27

Gen. 42:1–17; 1 Cor. 5:1–8; Mark 3:19b–35

Blair Engle

Instead of exacting revenge when hurt or betrayed, is it possible for reconciliation and restoration by extending forgiveness? In our Genesis reading today that's the question Joseph will need to decide. If you haven't read the Joseph story in Genesis (Ch: 37-50), it would be worth your time to read one of the great biblical narratives of love, loss, and redemption. In the specific reading for today, Genesis 42: 1-17 Joseph, now second in command to Pharaoh, must decide how he will respond to his brothers who are experiencing a severe famine in the land and come looking to buy grain. Yes, the same brothers, who earlier in the story, out of jealousy, sold Joseph into slavery....Yikes!!!

We've all had experiences in our lives where we've had to make hard choices when hurt or betrayed. A number of years ago, although it feels like yesterday, I was fired from my

responsibilities by my business partners from a building partnership that a small group owned. My feelings of hurt and betrayal were enormous, not only because I believed I was doing a great job, but also because my partners were good friends. After much angst, and lots of prayer, I came to believe that staying positive and offering to contribute positively when needed would be best for me in lieu of being negative and sarcastic. Especially in light of the fact that I was still a part owner in the building and would have to interact with my partners for a long time. In Joseph's situation he was faced with the decision of how to respond to his brothers. The ones who sold him into slavery now needed him for their very survival. Since we know the end of the story we know that instead of revenge Joseph overcame his deserved anger and hurt to save his biological family from possible starvation by extending the gift of forgiveness.

During this time of Lent may we take a moment to reflect on past hurts and prayerfully consider where God may be longing to use us to bring about reconciliation and restoration by extending forgiveness. In my experience I discovered that by interacting positively and enthusiastically with my partners time has healed, at least for me, the enormous hurt I had felt from the incident.

Prayer

Lord of all creation, because of the new and awesome life you've given us through Jesus Christ, today I will remember that forgiveness is a giver and resentment is a taker. Because I deserve it, I will forgive old hurts. I will see forgiveness as a gift from you to myself.

Wednesday, February 28

Gen. 42:18-28; 1 Cor. 5:9-6:11; Mark 4:1-20

Susan Tatem

All of the scripture readings for this day of Lent refer to our sinful nature. We are all sinners in need of Jesus Christ. We need his mercy and his grace. Today we live in a permissive and promiscuous society where Christians find it easy to tolerate some immoral behaviors while condemning other behaviors. We are not to participate in sin or condone it in any way, nor are we to be

selective about what we excuse or condemn. Jesus expects us to have high standards.

The Bible consistently tells us not to criticize people by gossiping or making rash judgments. However we are to judge and deal with sin that can hurt others. We are called to love each other and to help each other recognize and repent from our sins.

Prayer

“My heart has been wounded by many sins,” St. Ambrose used to pray before he celebrated Mass, “my mind and tongue carelessly left unguarded. Lord of kindness and power, in my lowliness and need I am turning to you, the fountain of mercy; I am hurrying to you to be healed; I am taking refuge under your protection. I am longing to meet you, not as my Judge but as my Savior. Lord, I am not ashamed to show you my wounds. Only you know how many and how serious my sins are, and though they could make me fear for my salvation, I am putting my hope in your mercies, which are beyond count. Look on me with mercy, then, Lord Jesus Christ, eternal King, God and man, crucified for our sake. I am putting my trust in you, the fountain that will never stop flowing with merciful love: hear me and forgive my sins and weaknesses.”

Thursday, March 1

Gen. 42:29–38; 1 Cor. 6:12–20; Mark 4:21–34

Ben Baker

This season, at one level, is about the practice of denying ourselves something that we really want. Lent, though, is hardly the only time of the year that we practice the discipline of self control. As children of God, we are called to a life where we must constantly sacrifice our own selfish desires in order to achieve something greater.

Unfortunately, as sinners, we are unable to measure up to this task. Since we are not strong enough on our own, we must rely on the strength that comes from our identity in Christ. In the scripture readings for today, I am reminded of three aspects of that identity that inspire me to better hold to my promises this Lent and to better follow God.

First, Jesus tells us that we are *owned*. We are God's creation living within His creation. Our every breath is a gift and our every joy is at His pleasure. When Jesus sacrificed himself at the cross, He bought us for a price. For us, as members of the Church, this is doubly true. Jesus says that members of the Church are members of Christ Himself. We have an obligation to act rightly because the actions that we take with our bodies are not ours alone, but also Christ's whose marriage to the Church brings us together in one flesh.

Second, Jesus promises that we are *free*. Despite His infinite power, despite the unthinkable price He paid for our absolvment from sin, God does not force us to walk with Him. This remarkable gift of freedom should not be taken lightly. Because we were given a choice, then let us *choose*. Let us actively say each day that we are choosing God, that we are choosing to abide by our promises, that we are choosing to act in a way that honors Him. To do any less is to either forsake God's gift of freedom or to forsake Jesus' gift of redemption.

Third, and to me the most compelling, Jesus tells us that we are *valuable*. We should choose to follow God each day if not because we feel obligated to our creator or because we feel grateful for our free will, then because Jesus tells us that we are loved and that through following His commands, we have the capacity to do actual good. Living the way Christ teaches is not an idle exercise meant to keep us busy or in line. In God's eyes, we are not constant liabilities of sin, we are vessels with the potential to bring him joy and to spread light upon the world. He calls us lamps, shining, to be put on a stand for all the world to see. Act rightly because our actions are significant, because our actions can bring about concrete goodness.

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for all the gifts you have given us, especially the gift of our identity through you. We know that we are not strong enough on our own to do all that is required, but that through you we can do all things. Forgive us when we fall short of your hopes. Help us today to live our lives to the great potential that you gave each of us. Help us today to remember your sacrifice. In your

name we pray, Amen.

Friday, March 2

Gen. 43:1–15; 1 Cor. 7:1–9; Mark 4:35–41

Patrick McKenzie

Lent has always been a time when we turn our attention to all that has been done for us by Jesus Christ. The penitence of Lent is thanks for the gifts we have been given. It is a journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter, which feeds our faith for the rest of the year.

My personal journey with Christ carried me thru difficult times and reminds me to be thankful & grateful. It also reminds me to give back. We see God’s plan not only thru miracles, but thru the actions and examples of those all around us.

My gift from God has been my family, especially my wife. I have felt God acting thru them—nurturing and carrying me forward in their unique ways. Suffering loss of loved ones, career challenges and disease have been overcome with a lot of help, prayer and faith.

Prayer

Heavenly father please allow us to accept your gifts and to share them with those in need. Thank you for sharing our journey.

Please continue to nurture our faith and guide us with your grace.

Amen

Saturday, March 3, 2018

Genesis 43: 16-34; 1 Corinthians 7: 10-24; Mark 5: 1-20

Kim Hammond

We have a new puppy! How quickly we forgot what having a new puppy is all about. Day by day she is learning the house rules, but we did not start with the expectation that she should heel, sit and stay on her first outing. We had to start where she is right now...chewing, playing, eating and potty-ing! For now she stays in a gated play area or her crate when we can’t watch her. Eventually she will enjoy the freedom of the whole house.

Each person starts as a “puppy” in their faith journey. Are you

in a position where you are surrounded by puppies or mature dogs? It is important that we are able to witness to people at the stage they are in their lives and where we are in our lives. As Paul describes in his letter to the Corinthians, ²¹*Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so.* ²²*For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave.* ²³*You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.* ²⁴*Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.* (NIV)

We were once relegated to live as slaves to a sinful world. Christ changed that with the sacrifice of His life and living without God is no longer inevitable, we can escape that “gated playpen” of sin. Where God has placed us right now is important and we should take advantage of that to use our sphere of influence to live as a witness of God's word.

Prayer

Please be by our side Lord as we live our lives day by day. Help us to take advantage of those learning opportunities where we can grow in obedience to you and show others Your way.

Sunday, March 4

Third Sunday in Lent

Exod. 20:1–17; Ps. 19; 1 Cor. 1:18–25; John 2:13–22

Mark Lorenzoni

Today's reading from John, for me, is one of the most significant human moments in all of the Gospel accounts of Jesus's journey on this earth. No other story makes me feel more connected to the incarnate Jesus.

Since my first days of being drawn to and inspired by the writings of the New Testament, way back in college, this passage has been one of my favorites, as it brings out the humanness of our Lord and savior. After reading how he actually, out of lack of a better term, “goes off” on those disrespecting the house of God, I can remember my first reaction being: “Wow! He really gave it to

them. That's kind of cool!"

In a weird way, in Jesus's heated moment, I feel myself being drawn closer to him.

Much of this connectiveness stems from my own lifelong, personal struggle with holding it together when I'm witness to some sort of injustice. My sometimes less than patient approach to unfairness, to mistreatment of others or, like in the case with Jesus, to a lack of respect and reverence, is often regrettable. My short fuse is infamous to those who know me well as, sadly, unlike Jesus's solo performance, it's been witnessed on many occasions during my personal journey. But just that one single four verse sliver of a passage is enough to bring me closer to Jesus and, in doing so, motivates me to have more self-restraint.

A few years ago, while in Boston for the marathon, my son Adrian and I took in a Red Sox game at Fenway on the Sunday before the race. As we were walking back to the hotel after the game, we saw a crowd had gathered on the sidewalk up ahead. As we drew closer, we saw several people laughing as they pointed and stared at a homeless man, passed out on the sidewalk. Propped against his body was a sign, that someone had crafted, with the words "Please give me money so I can get more drunk" neatly penned on it. A young woman was kneeling next to the disheveled man, not helping him, but rather posing, with a big grin on her face, for her boyfriend, who was only a few feet away taking photos with his I-phone. This pathetic scene of disrespect sent me into a rage, as I shouted "Stop that! Leave him alone! What are you going to do with those photos?". Here they were, using this poor man's misfortune, to make fun of him...totally at his expense. I was outraged as I tried to grab the phone from the guy. My intent was to destroy the phone by hurling it into the busy street for a car to run over. Adrian had to pull me away from the scene as he kept whispering to me "Don't lose your cool, Dad. Let's keep going. Those people aren't worth getting yourself in trouble." He was right. I had lost my cool and only God knows what would have happened if my calm son had not been there to intervene.

And, as I reflect on today's reading, I realize that, in my lifelong struggle to practice Jesus's teachings, even when I'm

stumbling and being weak, like I was that day on Boylston street in Boston when I lost my temper, I still feel connected to him.

And, in a strange, curious way, I find myself wondering what would Jesus have done in that situation. Hmm...

Prayer

Heavenly father please give me the strength to follow in your footsteps, especially when I'm at my weakest.

Monday, March 5th

Genesis 44:18-34; 1 Corinthians 7:25-31; Mark 5:21-43

Aric van Brocklin

The passage in Genesis finds us about midway through the familiar story of Joseph and his “family trouble” centering around his relationship with his father and jealous brothers, a story with more twists and turns than that of Cain and Abel, but similar, nevertheless. God is working through circumstances within the lives of all to make known His power and glory while bringing all to repentance amidst their guilt and sin.

1 Corinthians finds us in the section of Paul’s letter described as “Marriage” with the verse beginning “Now about virgins”. I have read elsewhere that during the 1st Century AD, “to Corinthianize” an individual or group meant to teach or practice sexual immorality. Within the city there were temples with thousands of prostitutes--perhaps like trying to start a church in present day Las Vegas? Paul references sexual immorality because of the culture he is attempting to influence and counter, a situation many of us find increasingly problematic in 2018.

Mark’s reading finds us with Jesus preaching by the sea in Capernum, accompanied by His disciples. Jesus is approached by Jairus who says his daughter is dying and asks for His healing presence at their home, and on the way there, Jesus also heals a woman with a chronic illness before healing the daughter of Jairus. These healing acts seem magical in a way, but then the Creator of the Universe likely has many inventive ways to heal us, if we just ask. “Call Him up and tell Him what you want!”

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, may we expect nothing, while being thankful for Your grace.

May we blame no one, while You examine our hearts.

May we do the righteous thing, seeking Your guidance in prayer.

In Jesus name, Amen.

Tuesday, March 6

Gen. 45:1–15; 1 Cor. 7:32–40; Mark 6:1–13

Charlotte Matthews

At the heart of this section of Mark's Gospel is the question *What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?*

Indeed, what are these extraordinary, observable miracles? This past November, I set out for a jog in a private neighborhood posted with no trespassing signs. With little time and in need of some deep breathing, I ignored the signs, parked, and ran. I passed exquisite pastures with horses grazing, felt the warm sun, felt peace. I ran for a little over an hour and when I neared my car there was, tucked under the windshield wiper, something yellow. I firmed my resolve and told myself it was well worth the ticket, this run. Well, that yellow object turned out to be an unblemished heart-shaped sycamore leaf. Extra ordinary.

Fast forward to two weeks ago, the 20th anniversary of my mother's death. Albert and I were on a hike far up in the woods. I meandered and he stopped occasionally to scope out a bird. It was a sublime day and I was thinking of my mother, her stoicism and her intelligence, how she would recite Homer to herself in an amplified whisper when the going got tough. I was lost in my memories of her when Albert calmly announced, *There's a Barred Owl*. Not eight feet from us perched on a branch: this dignified, striking being. And she stayed there for us to behold for well over a minute. My mother revered owls. She was much like one.

What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?

Prayer

Dear God,

Thank you for how you show yourself to us in the least expected of

times and places. Help us be vigilant, to be on the lookout for the resplendent signs you offer. Let us see you in all your glory in this Lenten time. Amen

Wednesday, March 7

Genesis 45:16-28; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 6:13-29

Doris Vander Meulen

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children (Genesis 50:20-21).

Genesis 45:14-22 is the last act of one of the most intriguing narratives in the Bible. It's the culmination of a story that takes eight long chapters to tell. It's a "down and dirty" account of how God's plan is played out in the midst of a family's dysfunction: parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, egotism, retaliation, guilt, and despair.

Jacob had a special liking for Joseph because he was the son of Jacob's favorite wife. Jacob's other sons resented that partiality and were irked when Joseph told them of his dreams that suggested that he would reign over them. His brothers put Joseph in a cistern to die, thought better of that, and sold him to a caravan of Ishmaelites who were traveling by. Showing their father Joseph's bloody coat, they told him that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Meanwhile the Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials. Joseph did his work faithfully and was soon put in charge of Potiphar's entire household. But when Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of sexual assault he was sent to prison. After a couple of years Pharaoh had Joseph interpret two of his own dreams about an upcoming famine, released him, and made him responsible for collecting and storing food for the entire land of Egypt.

Meanwhile back in Canaan Jacob and his eleven other sons were suffering from the intense famine. When Jacob sent ten of the sons to Egypt to buy grain they appeared before Joseph but didn't recognize him. They might well have thought he was toying with

them, showing them kindness but then accusing them of theft. Finally, with weeping and hugs, he revealed himself. He told them his story but didn't dwell on the desperate times he had endured: years of betrayal, separation from family, slavery, false accusations, and imprisonment. Instead he emphasized how God had converted each situation into something of value, and he focused on God's plan that led to the "great deliverance" of his saving many lives from starvation and the restoring of family relationships.

What is amazing about this story is not Joseph's technicolor dreamcoat but that we can see God's care and plan in Joseph's life and still fail to comprehend that God provides the same protection and guidance in our own. God can and does work through seemingly hopeless situations to bring good. The most profound way in which he has done so is also the grimmest: to rescue us from our damned sin, Jesus willingly came and died.

Prayer

(God Moves in a Mysterious Way, by William Cowper):

God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform;
he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.

You fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so much dread are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.

His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain:
God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.

Lord, help us to see your plan for us, to trust you when our sight is obscured by the brokenness of life, and to give thanks for your love for us that we contemplate during Lent. Amen.

Thursday, March 8

Gen. 46:1–7, 28–34; 1 Cor. 9:1–15; Mark 6:30–46

Ny-Jhee Jones

In Mark 6: 36-37, Jesus' disciples attempted to dismiss the large crowd and came to Jesus stating, "This is a remote place and it is very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." However Jesus responded by saying, "You give them something to eat." Growing up, my family didn't have much but the love we shared and my parents always preached to me, before I could even speak, to "give first and you shall receive." As I got older I realized how important spreading your blessings can be, and the effect you can have on someone else's life. At the end of the day, we were all put on this Earth for one purpose; to help those in need. You never know when you may find yourself down on your luck, but God will see that you make it through.

Friday, March 9

Gen. 47:1–26; 1 Cor. 9:16–27; Mark 6:47–56

Jessicah Collins

A friend, a minister who is the mother of young children, states that there is nothing more profound than Ash Wednesday when she places ashes on her children's foreheads. "Dust you are and to dust you will return."

We, whether children or aged, are dust. Ashes. Carbon molecules. The concept seems harsh and grim. Just picture the black ashes smeared on delicate skin. We are reminded how the sin of this world separates us from God. Lent is a reflective, pensive season, giving us time to remember our own fallibility. But we know that the story does not end in Lent on Good Friday. There is the promise and the joy of Easter. Because of Jesus's life and Jesus's death, we are not merely earthly ashes but heavenly children. What joy! We are free from the limitations, challenges and mortality of this world because Jesus has taken the sin and given redemption.

In this time of Lent, we prepare for Easter. The scripture lessons for today speak of times of desperation. In Genesis, the Egyptians suffered through a horrible famine and ultimately gave their money, livestock and land for food, becoming slaves to Pharaoh. In Mark, the disciples were engulfed by storm and fear

when Jesus came walking on the water and said, “Do not be afraid.” Later, crowds flocked to Jesus to beg for cure from illness and ailment. Lent is a time when we remember that we are all desperate, hungry, afraid and ailing. But there is joy in knowing that there is something more. There is more than ashes. There is Jesus’s presence in Easter. Jesus sets us free. Free to serve. Free to love. Free from the burdens of dust so that we can joyfully live as children of God.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, in this time of Lent, bear our earthly burdens and fill our desperate lives, so that in the joy of Easter we may find your presence and therein the freedom from sin to love and serve.

Saturday, March 10

Genesis 47:27-48:7; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Mark 7:1-23

Becky Allison

The Gospel scripture for today is Mark 7:1-23, which is the focus of my reflection. In this passage, the Pharisees and other religious teachers attempt to chastise Jesus because his disciples eat without first washing their hands in accordance with the ritual from Jewish law. Jesus quoted from Isaiah 29:13 to the Pharisees:

*“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain; Their teachings are merely human rules.”*

I’ve always been very troubled by religious hypocrisy, and there have been plenty of examples of that in the news recently. My first reaction to the passage was to “call out” some of the most blatant examples, but it didn’t take long for me to realize that the point of the reflection is to look inward for sins and behaviors that separate me from God, rather than blaming others.

My Life Application Study Bible explains this scripture beautifully: “Jesus scolded them [the Pharisees] for keeping the law and the traditions in order to look holy instead of to honor God.” I’m wondering if this is a trap that we all fall into at times?

Perhaps we think our faith is covered because we go to church regularly, give generously and volunteer our time for church-related activities and good causes. We think we've checked all of the "right" boxes. When our faith becomes a matter of habit rather than a matter of feeling, a matter of head rather than heart, or a matter of a list rather than intense focus, however, we become lost and separated from God. I've found that this has happened to me at times in my life. Sometimes I have become so busy and stressed even doing "good works" that I lose track of where the love came from to inspire me to help others in the first place. During this Lenten season, I am re-committing myself to honor God with my heart, rather than merely giving lip service. You can, too.

Prayer

Dear God, I confess that I haven't always put you first in my life and that at times my faith becomes a matter of habit rather than a matter of heart. Please help me to hold you close in my heart so that when people look at me, they see your love for all shining through. Thank you for sacrificing your only son Jesus to save me from my sins and to bring me closer to you. Amen

Sunday, March 11

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Num. 21:4–9; Ps. 107:1–3, 17–22; Eph. 2:1–10; John 3:14–21

Gary Hatter

For churches with Latin liturgical traditions (e.g. Roman Catholic, Anglican), today is "Laetare Sunday" – *laetare* being the Latin verb "to rejoice" in its singular imperative form. Why rejoice? Traditionally, folks likely rejoiced at this being the halfway point of the Lenten journey: if we've given something up, the end is in sight for that deprivation; if we've taken up something new, we know we can sustain it. Our Scriptures suggest another kind of midpoint, an in-between-ness characteristic of humankind.

Led by God out of slavery in Egypt, Numbers recalls that "the people became impatient... (and) spoke against God and against Moses," resulting first in a punishment of poisonous snakes that prompts repentance, then a symbol of God's healing power.

The Psalmist reminds us: “Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever.” The proof follows: “Some were sick through their sinful ways... then they cried out to the LORD... and He saved them from their distress.”

The people of the church at Ephesus “were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived,” then reassured that “by grace you have been saved through faith.”

John declares, “God so loved the world that he gave His only Son... that the world might be saved through Him.” Reminded that “the light has come into the world,” how can we help but rejoice?!

Prayer

Dear God, thank You for Your unfathomable love. When we feel snake-bit amid our countless blessings, heal and renew us with gratitude for the saving grace we find in Christ Jesus. Whatever our ‘wilderness wanderings,’ kindle in us that light that leaves no in-between-ness, no shadows of darkness, so we rejoice in sharing Your love with all of our neighbors. Amen

Monday, March 12

Gen. 49:1-28; 1 Cor. 10:14-11:1; Mark 7:24-37

Audrey Lorenzoni

Growing up, my father always taught us to treat others the way you would want to be treated. Seems pretty simple and straightforward, right? I find myself not always following this golden rule and catching myself in moments where I could be kinder and more understanding. While reading the 1 Corinthians passage, I started to reflect on God’s presence in our lives this year. After what happened on August 12th in Charlottesville, instead of being a broken community, it seems like it is quite the opposite. People in our town seem to be more united and more peaceful towards people that are “different” from themselves. People shared stories and asked more questions about other’s backgrounds. I found people caring more for others, not to get ahead in the game of life but just because. God seems to be working through us to be imitators of Christ without us even knowing it. This was a truly beautiful thing that came out of our crisis, our Charlottesville

community judging others less and caring for others more. I especially saw this on the night of the candlelight vigil just a few days later. Walking peacefully alongside thousands of strangers and my family and friends, retracing the steps through the University grounds that the white supremacists had walked, was truly one of the most moving experiences in my life! People of all backgrounds and all ages, coming together under candlelight, made me realize that God is always with us.

Prayer

Dear Lord, creator of the heavens and the earth. Thank you for all the wonderful and quiet ways you work through us to be more open and understanding toward people in our community. Please help us to treat others the way we would want to be treated, especially through times of struggle. We are so grateful for your sending your son to us so we have someone we can work towards imitating. Amen

Tuesday, March 13

Genesis 49:29-50:14; 1 Corinthians 11:2-34; Mark 8:1-10

Margaret Wagner

God gave us every book in the Bible for a reason. We don't always study and look at them all together, but they are woven together to illustrate for us His promise and His instruction for our lives. All three of today's scriptures, from both the Old and New Testaments, lead us to His perfect LOVE.

In Genesis 49:29-50:14, Jacob's dying wish is to be buried with his father, Isaac and grandfather, Abraham in Canaan. Jacob loves God and he loves his family. With this request, he wants the future generations of his family (of all 12 tribes of Israel) to understand and witness his reverence to his forefathers and to God Almighty. Because of their love for Jacob, his family complied and made the long journey to God's Promised Land.

In Mark 8:1-10, our compassionate and all-knowing Christ understands the peoples' needs and attends to them without being asked. His sovereignty is real. We can count on Him for provision in all circumstances. A covenant of love, promised without our

asking.

1 Corinthians 11:2-34 too, illustrates God's sovereignty as Head. He is the authority. No matter what we are to each other, we all look to Him as Head. He has provided the way to receive His love and to give it, to share it freely. Through His life, salvation is given to each of us equally.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones tells this story:

"One morning when Bradley came down to breakfast he put on his mother's plate a little piece of paper neatly folded. His mother opened it. She could hardly believe it, but this is what Bradley had written:

Mother owes Bradley:

For running errands.....	\$0.25
For being good.....	\$0.10
For taking music lessons.....	\$0.15
Extras.....	\$0.05
Total.....	\$0.55

His mother smiled, but she did not say anything, and when lunchtime came, she placed the bill on Bradley's plate with fifty-five cents. Bradley's eyes fairly danced when he saw the money and thought his business ability had been quickly rewarded; but with the money there was another little bill which read like this:

Bradley owes Mother:

For being good.....	\$0.00
For nursing him through his long illness with Scarlet Fever.....	\$0.00
For clothes, shoes, gloves, and playthings.	\$0.00
For all his meals and his beautiful room...	\$0.00
Total that Bradley owes Mother.....	\$0.00

Tears came into Bradley's eyes, and he put his arms around his mother's neck, put his little hand with the fifty-five cents in hers, and said, 'Take the money all back, Mamma, and let me love you and do things for nothing.' "

OUR BILL IS PAID IN FULL! THIS IS LOVE.

Prayer

Precious Heavenly Father, thank you for your love. Thank you for

*your promise of life eternal through Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
How great Thou art. Amen.*

Wednesday, March 14

Gen. 50:15–26; 1 Cor. 12:1–11; Mark 8:11–26

Dot Etchison

As I read through the scriptures this morning, I was thinking about what they had in common and what they meant to me that I could share with all of you who are reading this homily. Perhaps it would be: the gifts that we receive from our Heavenly Father. First we meet up with Joseph--a memory of my Sunday School days. I always liked him and his coat. We were told that it was a "coat of many colors", and I was disappointed years later to discover that my Bible called it "a coat with sleeves" but anyway it was a special coat and Joseph's brothers did not like it and resented Joseph terribly. They sold him to some traders who took him to Egypt, but it turned out fine. God was there for him.

The Joseph story reminded me of my coat story. My Dad was NOT a shopper, but when I was 15 years old (now 88) he was on a business trip and saw in the window of the big hotel where he was staying an evening coat with sparkles. He bought it for me, and I was ecstatic. I had no brothers or sisters; so I did not get sold off to Egypt, but my best friend who lived next door was not happy with my coat and told me it was tacky. I was heartbroken but not for long. I had a wonderful time wearing it to a Christmas dance. I have always remembered the love that went into my Dad's buying me that gift unaided by my mother. It was his way of giving me happiness just like Jacob did for Joseph and God does for us in many ways all throughout lives. He often does it through others.

When we read on in Corinthians 12 we learn of the varieties of gifts which our Lord has for us, and then in Mark 8 we find Jesus explaining to the disciples that if they need bread, he will provide, but they must open their minds, eyes, ears to know. We close with the blind man who is given sight by Jesus. He has the world before him.

Prayer

Dear Father, I ask you to bless these words that have filled my heart as I

*read these scriptures. May they be part of a blessing for someone else.
Thank you, God.*

Thursday, March 15

Exod. 1:6-22; 1 Cor. 12:12-26; Mark 8:27-9:1

Molly Servine

“(12) For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (13) For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit... (26) If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

I absolutely love this passage because for me it conjures up images of a completely unified community under Christ. It seems so easy, especially in today’s climate, to focus on the things that make us different; whether it be our politics, background, age, job, or anything that sets us apart. This section instead shows us that uniqueness is meant to be celebrated. Each and every one of us have a specific purpose God has created in us. And that specificity would be useless if it was not coupled and contrasted with that of our neighbor. This passage shows us that we are strongest as Christians when we accept, love, and work together with the people around us.

One of the many merits of a community through Christ and the Holy Spirit is the support we receive from our brothers and sisters. This passage reminds us to weather both the good times and bad times with the other members of the body. I think of the amazing friendship I’ve found at college when reading this verse because every day is filled with both joys and challenges. A strong friendship requires love and support. This makes me think of a day when my best friend and roommate walked into our room after her grandfather’s funeral. She looked at me and then burst into tears. We lay on her bed and cried together as she told me about her grief and how hard it was to witness the grief of her friends and family that knew and loved her grandfather. These verses remind us that we are not supposed to deal with hardships alone. Jesus purposely

gave us the other members of the body to help us overcome struggles.

All being a part of the same body of Christ can be very difficult when it means you help shoulder the pain and sadness of those a

around you, but this also infinitely multiplies the joy. There is nothing I love more than coming home to the girls I live with and hearing good news. It is so easy to be joyful and share their happiness. The happy times we share are made more valuable by knowing that we have helped each other struggle through the hard times and will continue to do so for the rest of our lives.

This passage makes me think of some of my favorite writing by the seventeenth century poet, John Donne. In Meditation 17 he states:

The church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author [God], and is one volume; ... No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Prayer

Dear Lord, please let us remember that the differences we see in all of your children are beautiful and purposeful. Thank you for creating a world full of such wonderful diversity. Help us to come together and combine our specific strengths to better glorify You. Thank you for providing us with a support system for handling hardship and sharing joy. Let us strive to better glorify you in both this season of Lent where we remember the ultimate sacrifice of your son as well as year round. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Friday, March 16

Exod. 2: 1-12; 1 Cor. 12:27-13:3; Mark 9: 2-13

Faye Warner

As I read the verses from both the Old and New Testament, my thoughts were focused on the story of the birth of baby Moses and how God directed and protected all of his needs. I also saw the hand of God at work in the description of the body of Christ and how we are to be equipped with Spiritual Gifts to carry out a function of His plan for all eternity. The last verse tells of the Transfiguration of Christ in preparation for what is to come. As I thought about these scriptures, I was reminded that my Devotional for last year was about the sufficiency of our GOD and how God will supply all our needs according to his plan. I had a sudden moment of truth today as I realized that I had not connected the real message God wants us to know here, that there must be a clear response from every believer. That each of us must know how we came to receive the peace and joy of discovering what was missing from our lives and to be able to tell others and bring them to want to come to Jesus. So, what follows may be helpful, clear and a complete response for some who want to enjoy the peace and joy and purpose of the Christian life now and for the Great Plan for all eternity.

I especially like this insightful and well expressed observation written by A. Maslow and also meaningful to another Christian writer, Dennis De Haan. He says what we ALL need comes from five basic needs –physical needs, safety needs, belonging needs, esteem needs and the need for self-actualization. Here is what the Bible says about each of these needs.

Physical needs. He who feeds the sparrows and clothes the lilies of the fields will provide for our basic needs if we seek first His kingdom and his righteousness. (Matt.6:25-33)

Safety needs. God is a source of everlasting strength (Is.26:3, 4) and He seals us with His Spirit (Eph.1:13,14).

Belonging needs. Trusting Christ, we are fully accepted by God (Eph.1:6), and we become part of His body, the church (Eph.5:30).

Esteem needs. Our self-worth is rooted in God having created

us in His Image (Gen1:26, ICor.11:7) and in His refashioning us in the image of Christ (Rom.8:29)

Self-actualization. God gives us a spiritual gift or gifts to help us carry out a function in His plan so that what we do will last for all eternity (Eph.4:7: Rom. 12:6-10).

Our sin blocks the fulfillment of our deepest longings. But Jesus died on the cross as our Substitute to pay sin's penalty. Now God can accept us and empower us to become all that He intended us to be. Our part, is to receive Christ by faith and commit our life to Him. This is an act of the will, expressed through a simple prayer something like this:

Lord Jesus, I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died for me on the cross to pay the penalty for all my sins and that You rose from the grave. Be merciful to me and save me. I receive you as my Savior, my only hope for salvation. Amen

“For whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13). So, now, we can join the countless numbers of people who have discovered that Jesus truly meets their deepest needs. God is as close to us as our heart beat and He loves us so much that “whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

Prayer

Thanks be to God in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Saturday, March 17

Exod. 2:23-3:15; 1 Cor. 13:1-13; Mark 9:14-29

John Ferguson

The passage from Exodus describes Moses and his encounter with the burning bush. While tending a flock of sheep he notices a bush on fire but not being consumed by the flames. He is intrigued and moves closer to better see the strange sight. When he gets nearby, he hears God calling his name from within the flames and is commanded to take off his sandals as he is standing on holy ground. At this, Moses realizes that this is not just a common bush on fire, but the presence of the Almighty God speaking to him in a

profound way. He was then afraid to look at God and hid his face from the burning bush. God spoke to him, commanding him to go back to Egypt to free the Israelites from slavery. This unique encounter of a shepherd with a burning bush changed the course of history. Despite his fears, Moses was obedient to God's command and led the Israelites out of captivity.

For a long time my reading of this passage has been with detached intrigue that God should speak to a single figure in remote Old Testament history in such an unusual way. "That's a Moses type of encounter". I then read this poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

"Earth's crammed with Heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes —
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."

Perhaps the burning bush experience is not unique to Moses but we too can experience God's presence, if we have eyes to see. The flame of God's presence burns in all sorts of unexpected places. God speaks to us in such varied ways: through scripture, through the magnificence of his creation, through an encounter with a stranger, through a phrase in an article we read. When we have eyes to see, an openness and attention, we are more likely to see the Almighty in the burning bush and hear his voice. It's with this attention that we see Heaven in the Ordinary, Christ in the 'least of these', the wounded traveler with the eyes of the Good Samaritan.

This openness and attention to God is beautifully expressed in this hymn:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Sin and the cares of this world can blind us to God. If we are open to Him, the glint of God's eye can flame our darkened dungeon with His light and free our imprisoned spirit to serve and follow him. Let us wake up, open our eyes to this light, to see Heaven in the Ordinary and each common bush 'afire with God'.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the many ways, some unexpected, that you speak to us. By your Holy Spirit, make our hearts attentive to the flame of your presence 'in every common bush' that we might truly see your light which frees us to follow you. Amen.

Sunday, March 18

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Jer. 31:31–34; Ps. 51:1–12 or Ps. 119:9–16;

Heb. 5:5–10; John 12:20–33

Kelly Kaufman

We hear the words of this Psalm often. Its words are popular in prayers of confession and throughout the liturgical year. But I find the Psalm heading before the psalm even begins the most important part. Many bibles indicate that this is a “Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him just after he had been with Bathsheba”. David had sinned. David had done wrong in eyes of the Lord, David had done wrong by Bathsheba and her husband; and he could not hide from it. The prophet Nathan came to him and pointed out his wrong doing. These days this is hard to do. We live in a world that tries to be understanding and inclusive and so it is hard to help our fellow Christian be accountable. However, I don't think this psalm is about our job as Christians to make other Christians accountable for their sin. It is about our own accountability to our own sin. It is a reminder to each of us that we must look inside our own hearts and find the ways that we have turned away from God.

I have been in Children's Ministry for almost twenty years and I have encouraged parents to worship with their children on Sunday mornings. Little did I know how hard that actually is to do; then I had my own children. It is not always easy bringing Calvin to worship on Sunday mornings, but we go. And you will notice

that we do a lot of talking. When we come to the prayer of confession I whisper in Calvin's ear, "here is where we say I'm sorry to God". One particular morning I whispered, "I'm sorry I raised my voice this morning" and Calvin whispered, "I'm sorry I wasn't listening this morning". We don't always whisper our personal confessions. Sometimes we just whisper, "I'm sorry God".

When we say "I'm sorry" each Sunday I am actually reminded of a popular show on PBS Kids. For the last five years we have enjoyed "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" a show that is based on the work of Fred Rogers (a Presbyterian pastor by the way). The show teaches children social emotional skills through songs and jingles. One jingle goes like this, "saying I'm sorry is the first step,

then how can I help"? My eyes were open. It isn't just about saying we are sorry it is taking the next step and asking, "How can I change this?" "How can I turn way ways around"?

As I reread this familiar Psalm I am singing this little jingle in my head. David is approaching God, humble with eyes wide open that he has done wrong. And he puts his confession out there. He says, "I'm sorry God" but he goes one step further, he asks for help with the next step. "Create in me a clean heart and put a faithful and right spirit in me". David doesn't just say, "I'm sorry" he says, I want to change my ways...HELP ME!

In this Lenten season let's not just say, "I'm sorry God" but let us be like David and earnestly ask for help to turn our sinful ways around.

Prayer

Forgiving and Loving God, Thank you for your gracious spirit. Thank you for hearing us when we say, "I'm sorry"; no matter why we need forgiveness. And when we find the words to ask for forgiveness help us to move towards the next step, seeking your help to turn our ways around. Create in all of us a clean heart and put a faithful and right spirit in each of us. Amen

Monday, March 19

Exod. 4:10–20 (21–26) 27–31; 1 Cor. 14:1–19; Mark 9:30–41

Bill Petri

Exodus 4:10. Moses said to the Lord, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” ¹¹ *The Lord said to him, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?* ¹² *Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”*

This verse makes me think about not only what to say, but to seek opportunities to speak. [Isaiah 62:6](#) teaches about being in the moment: *On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; All day and all night they will never keep silent.*

The Lord has a hand in each person that I encounter, a moment that is precious and fleeting. Like the watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem, I need to be mindful when opportunities to speak arise. I have not always acted this way. My ignoring this fact was first made evident to me several years ago in the Arlington Hospital cafeteria. I was there getting breakfast after spending the night in my father’s hospital room. I was tired and distracted and asked the server what they had to eat for breakfast and she responded with “Good Morning”. I asked again, and got “Good Morning” again as the reply. At the time I was more than a little bit irritated that she was reminding me of my lack of good manners. Upon reflection I realized I had missed an opportunity to relate to her person-to-person. I strive to do better now, but any one who knows me is well aware that I often fail. It is reassuring that I, like Moses, don’t have to be eloquent, but that the Lord will tell me what to say. Often this is no more than making eye contact with a server at Burger King and saying good morning, but occasionally can be an opportunity for a more profound conversation about the Lord who created us both.

Prayer

Lord please make me aware of the opportunities that you give me

to speak to others, and teach me to what to say.

Tuesday, March 20

Exod. 5:1-6:1; 1 Cor. 14:20–33a, 39–40; Mark 9:42–50

Cindy Cass

Every Christian knows of Moses' struggles to get Pharaoh to let his people go. The Exodus passage relates his plea for Pharaoh to let the Israelites have a respite for the purpose of a 3-day journey into the wilderness to offer a feast and sacrifice to their God. Infamously, Pharaoh is unrelenting.

In the Mark passage, Jesus relates his most radical words regarding sin. Jesus tells his disciples of his unyielding condemnation of sin—"if your eye, hand or foot cause you to sin, cut them out!" Even if not taken literally, Jesus's words are so startling that one is tempted to wonder how this can possibly be the New Testament Jesus of love, forgiveness, grace and peace who is saying these things? His words definitely cause one to reflect on the nature and consequences of sin.

And what does the Bible say that sin is? One answer is given in Mark by Jesus's words: to cause those who believe in him to sin. What Jesus meant by "little ones" is debatable, but certainly Pharaoh was sinning by not allowing the Israelites to worship their God.

Jesus specifically speaks of our hand, foot and eye in Mark 9. I take this to mean that what we do (hand), where we go (foot) and what we choose to see (eye) can potentially cause us to sin. Certainly we think of sin in relation to the ten commandments for most of the "do not's" are obvious sins because they hurt people. And four of the ten command us to put God first in our lives. Jesus is saying that sin is three-fold: it isolates us from God, it is self-destructive and it harms others, and for these reasons we should remove ourselves from the temptations of sin at all costs.

Jesus is warning his disciples, and us, to cut off any sources of temptation and thus the devastating consequences of sin. We all have weak areas, things that draw us into sin. But we also know that the avoidance of temptation is challenging and we need God's

help.

Here again, Jesus has taught us how to deal with this—through prayer. In the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples when they asked him how they should pray, he includes the plea to God: “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”.

Prayer

Our Father, help me to put you first in my life and avoid all things that cause suffering for myself and others. Help me to pray daily as Jesus taught: “lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil.” Help me to do this not only during Lent, but always.

Note: “Among the difficult sayings of Jesus, Mark 9:49, is one of the most enigmatic. What could Jesus have meant when he said, “Everyone will be salted with fire? this strange mixture of salt and fire has perplexed Greek scholars for a very long time.” For those interested in a discussion of this statement, see

https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/ntesources/ntartic/les/gtj-nt/fields-marksalt-gtj-85.pdf

Wednesday, March 21

Exod. 7:8–24; 2 Cor. 2:14-3:6; Mark 10:1-16

Tina and Mark Andersen

We live in an increasingly complex and distracted world with information over-load ... smart phones, (and smart everything else), 24 hour news, social media and being continually connected to all things, great and small. It’s a challenge to disengage from these negative or frivolous distractions and focus on what’s important in our spiritual lives.

One of the themes in the scripture readings for today are the potential perils of life’s distractions and importance of focusing on the voice of God. Pharoah was distracted from God’s demand to free his people by the sorcerers and wisemen, who mimicked Aaron’s miracle of turning his staff into a snake, resulting in the first of the nine plagues God sent on Egypt. Paul in 2nd Corinthians exhorts the early church that our strength comes from the Spirit within. That we are “a letter from Christ ... written not with Ink but with the Spirit of the living God, (written) not on tablets of

stone, but on tablets of the human heart.”

Jesus says in the passage from Mark, “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Perhaps this is a key to cutting through the distractions of life, and living out that which is written by Christ in our hearts, illustrated by the virtuous attributes of a child; complete trust, simple wonder, joyful and loving hearts. To the extent that we can model these simple child-like virtues and eschew the complexities of our distracting world, the richer and more meaningful our lives will be and the better we will approach Jesus’ model for those who will enter the kingdom of God.

Prayer

Dear Lord, Thank you for the gift of your Son and the competence that He gives us. Help us to quiet the distractions of this world and help us to focus on YOU that we may grow in faith and to Your service. Help us to realize that our strength and confidence comes from the Spirit of Christ within each of us.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Thursday, March 22

Exod. 7:25-8:19; 2 Cor. 3:7-18; Mark 10:17-31

Albert Connette

Today’s gospel reading tells the story of an affluent, good man who turns down Jesus’ invitation to follow him because the cost appears to be too great.

Mark tells us that Jesus loved this man, but he failed to respond to that love. One of my favorite movie scenes is in “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” when the father presents his daughter and son-in-law with his gift at their wedding reception; and it is the deed to a house! The newlyweds are stunned, but the father is beaming from ear-to-ear. He is filled with joy as he gives so sacrificially out of love.

Mark tells us that Jesus is journeying toward Calvary in love for humankind when the man approaches him. But the man fails to see that “were the whole realm of nature his, that were a present far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands his soul, his life,

his all.”

In addition to love, the young man is invited to trust in Jesus. Letting go of security in money and property for the promises of the kingdom and the riches of a closer walk with God invites him to a depth of trust that he is unwilling to embrace. Despite the reminder written on our currency, “In God We Trust,” like the young man we can mistakenly place our trust in our money and possessions for security, welfare, and worth when ultimately God alone is trustworthy.

It is interesting that Jesus specifically mentions those commandments to the young man that have to do with living in relation to others. But at the heart of his invitation to the young man to let go of his goods and follow him, is the first commandment about not allowing anything to come between us and God. Our faith in God enables us to see that all of life, and all that we have, is a gift from God. It is not ours to claim and cling to, but ours to use, share, and minister with as stewards and disciples. Viewing what we have as a gift fosters a life of gratitude, but also a life of generosity through the freedom to give away what has been given to us.

Prayer

Loving and gracious God, as we journey toward the cross of Jesus in the Lenten season, strengthen our faith and deepen our grasp of your love; that we might be free as we handle of money and material things, to trust, love, and follow you, and be generous toward those in need.

Friday, March 23

Exodus 9:13–35; 2 Cor. 4:1–12; Mark 10:32–45

Carrie Eisenberg

Exodus 9, verses 13-35

Here we find ourselves with Moses amidst the plagues that God has handed down, in particular, hail.

“This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, ¹⁴ or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials

and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.”

God is not messing around at this point! Pharaoh had been warned time and again to let the people go, but he continued in his sinful ways. As the storm is unleashed upon the land of Egypt, Pharaoh is contrite and is forced to admit that the Lord is right and he and his people are sinners. He promises to take the straight and narrow, but Moses knows he still does not fear the Lord or believe that the earth belongs to God.

This passage is harsh and unforgiving, which is contrary to the loving God that we are more familiar with in the Presbyterian tradition. Yet, the message is timeless; the earth and all its’ beauty belongs to the Lord who created it and we are here to care for it and one another in that same way. God sees all also, there is no hiding behind false promises to do good works and eventually it will catch up to us and manifest itself in our own lives.

2 Corinthians 4, 1-12

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”

I am struck by verse 12 of this section of Corinthians. I like the message that we are carrying around the death of Jesus so as to witness to *the life* of Jesus. In death there is life! We are living, breathing instruments to be used on this earth and in the time that God decides. We pray for certain things, dreams, desires, cares and concerns, but it is only in God’s good time that we hear the answers, or the whispers of what shall be.

Mark 10: 32-45

Here we find Jesus with the twelve as he is revealing how his own death will unfold:

“We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, ³⁴ who will mock him and

spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

This is astonishing news and hard for the disciples to grasp as they are trying to comprehend what lies ahead for their teacher and Lord. You can imagine how devastating this prediction of death was for them to think of their beloved teacher and what lay ahead. As disciples of Jesus, it is not a far stretch to empathize with the twelve in that as devastating as it is to lose the ones we love on this earth and relinquish them over to death. But, we can take comfort in the message again and again that in death there is life. We know that Jesus did not come to be served, but *to serve* and give his life for the many. Those who want to lead, must first follow.

Prayer

Dear all-knowing and loving God, I pray as I read these scriptures that the words penetrate my life on earth as I carry your death with me every day. I pray that no plague will veil your service to me and that I follow in your path as a kind and loving disciple.

Saturday, March 24

Exod. 10:21—11:8; 2 Cor. 4:13–18; Mark 10:46–52

Ruffin King

At times in past years when I have been assigned a day during Lent for which to write a reflection, I have struggled to find a morsel that spoke meaningfully to me from the designated texts. This year I am faced with the opposite dilemma: each passage provides a very striking account of a seminal event or statement of our faith, respectively from the Pentateuch, a Pauline Epistle, and the earliest Gospel. So first I encourage each of you to take the time to carefully read all three of these passages of Scripture, as each is powerful and compelling.

The Exodus passage recounts the ninth Plague of Darkness during Moses' struggle with Pharaoh, in which Egypt is given a taste of enslavement and Israel a foretaste of liberation, while simultaneously foreshadowing the tenth and final Passover plague. This is among the most exciting and pivotal stories in all of the Bible.

The last portion of the Second Corinthians passage says “we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” This points toward some of the things we examined during the Spiritual Practices study this past fall: ways we can enhance the possibilities for entering a more meaningful relationship with God and a deeper experience of “the life that is truly life.”

The Mark passage recounts Jesus’ healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus, ending with Jesus telling the beggar “your faith has made you well” and Bartimaeus “regaining his sight and following him on the way.” Miracles are happening around us every day if we will only take the time to stop and recognize them for what they are.

These passages individually and collectively testify powerfully to the excitement and transformative message of “the Greatest Story Ever Told.”

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your living word and its power to change our lives.

Sunday, March 25

Passion / Palm Sunday

Isa. 50:4–9a; Ps. 118:1–2, 19–29; Mark 11:1–11; 15: 1-39

Seth Lovell

Palm Sunday is a day filled with shouts of “Hosanna,” children waving palm branches, and excited anticipation for the celebration of Easter that is on the horizon. We must be careful though to not treat this day as merely a joyous occasion. The truth is, Jesus’ procession into Jerusalem was an act of political subversion.

Jesus wasn’t the only one processing into Jerusalem in the lead up to the Passover festival. During the Passover celebration in the early first century, the Roman governor, along with Roman troops would arrive as a show of force, and to maintain the peace. So on one side of the city you have Pontius Pilate entering, accompanied by cavalry and foot soldiers with the sounds of pounding hooves, marching feet and beating drums, imperial banners whipping in the

wind, swords, shields, and metal helmets glistening in the sun.

Then on the other side of the city you have Jesus, riding into town on a lowly donkey. Trailed by an army of devoted followers, dressed in peasant garb. Those on the streets who had heard about this prophet spread out their tattered and dusty cloaks, and cut down branches to line the streets, shouting with jubilation and anticipation “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” These crowds were proclaiming Jesus to be the messiah and the rightful ruler. Jesus’ procession deliberately opposed the spectacle that was taking place on the other side of the city.

The people shouting “Hosanna” wanted a king, someone to save them from Roman imperial domination. But they wanted a king in the sense of the world they knew. What the people ended up with was a pacifistic carpenter from Nazareth who preached about a kingdom where the last shall be first, where material wealth and possessions are not signs of success; a kingdom where equality and justice reign supreme, and where servanthood is lifted up as the model of citizenship. This is what led the crowd to change their chants from “Hosanna,” to “Crucify him.”

From our safe distance of thousands of years later, we shouldn’t be too critical of the fickle crowd. We ourselves are often inconsistent in our behavior and desire to truly be citizens in Christ’s Kingdom. How often do we sit in the pews praising God, giving thanks for visions of the future kingdom, only to leave here and instead live out the values of this worldly kingdom? We have been given the gift of citizenship in Christ’s eternal kingdom, but so often our lives are shaped more by the opinions and values of the people and culture around us.

Two opposing kingdoms, two opposing worlds, collide as we begin our celebration of Holy Week. This holiest of seasons reminds us that we worship a God whose ways are not our ways, a God whose Kingdom does not reflect the values and norms of the kingdoms we live in. A God who calls us to be citizens of the eternal Kingdom of Christ, which means being a servant and a disciple; it means denying yourself, picking up your cross, and following Jesus.

As we celebrate this holy processional into Jerusalem that took place close to two thousand years ago, we ask the question, what do we do with a King who came not to conquer, but to be conquered? What do we do with a King whose triumphant entry takes place atop a lowly donkey, instead of a gallant stallion? What do we do with a King, whose rule is not concerned with economic success, domestic security, or military domination, but is built on the moral and ethical demand to love your God with your whole self, and to love your neighbor?

What do we do with this King? This is the King we worship.

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Prayer

God of us all, you call us to be citizens in your eternal Kingdom, to witness to you, and to your ways. Give us the strength to follow you, the wisdom to recognize your will, and the courage to be the people you have called us to be. Amen.

Monday, March 26

Monday of Holy Week

Isa. 42: 1-9; Ps. 36: 5-11; Heb. 9: 11-15; John 12: 1-11

Lori Rocco

This is my 20th year as a high school teacher. It is at my current school where I've finally become the teacher I want to be - compassionate. As a Social Studies teacher, I appreciate the subject matter, but teaching about the Civil War or the three branches of government isn't what gets me out of bed. It's knowing that I have students who depend on me to show up for them. I love to hear what's going on in their lives. I'm ready to give out hugs or peanut butter crackers from my desk every second of the day. Instead of rushing through content, I slow down and take the time to really get to know my kids. This has been eye opening and life changing. I was shocked to learn how many of my students are really struggling with major issues: imprisoned parent, abuse, addiction, and loneliness.

My heart breaks for my kids. If I could, I'd take all of them in and try to heal them. Instead, I provide them a loving, caring, and SAFE place to express themselves. I want to help them learn how to be strong, fight for themselves and their futures, and to know they are LOVED.

Today's Bible verses spoke to me regarding my role as a teacher, mentor, and mother to all of my students. Isaiah 42:2-3 "He will not shout or raise his voice in public. He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle. He will bring justice to all who have been wronged." Psalm 36:7 "How precious is your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings."

My prayer is that my "wings" may provide shelter, protection, and security for my students as I guide and love them daily.

How can you provide shelter for someone in your life?

Prayer

God, strengthen those who feel lost, hurt, ashamed, confused, and lonely. Bless those who provide healing by spreading their wings to create shelter for those in need.

Tuesday, March 27, 2018

Tuesday of Holy Week

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1; Cor. 1:18-31; John 12:20-36

James Barkley

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing ." In so many ways this passage in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth sums up how many in his 1st Century world viewed the Gospel – this whole business about a messiah, a cross, crucifixion, resurrection, and salvation is nonsense! It just did not fit into any paradigm that people could or were willing to consider. Somewhat similarly, people today will often suggest that science has "explained away the myth of God" or that what we need is not a Savior, but to unlock our true selves. In other words, regardless of how it's packaged, most of our 21st Century western world also considers the cross and its offer of salvation as rank foolishness.

For my part, this can be hard at many levels. None us want to

look foolish; at least, I don't. None of us want to stand alone against a crowd; at least I don't. But each of these passages assures us that this whole salvation plan was God's from a time before we existed; David, Jesus, and Paul all knew exactly what it was like to be called foolish, fraudulent, abandoned, and worse; and that we should always expect that the world will look askance at our willingness to accept and embrace the "foolishness of the cross."

The message of the cross, of Jesus' mission of salvation, is sometimes hard to grasp and can be uncomfortable to explain, especially when we feel like we are standing alone. That message was not one crafted by man, however, nor was it intended to be. If we view the Gospel through the lens of man we may be tempted to consider the whole thing as foolishness. But when we remember that the message was crafted by God, what Paul wrote to the Corinthians two thousand years ago is very humbling and comforting – "the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men." Indeed.

Prayer

Dear Father, you have given us everything we need to know you and recognize what you have done through your son, Jesus, to rescue us. We too often worry that our faith may make us look foolish in the eyes of the world. Help us to bow before you with gratitude and confidence that the cross is the greatest symbol of hope ever created. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 28

Wednesday of Holy Week

Isa. 50: 4-9a; Ps. 70; Heb. 12: 1-3; John 13: 21-32

Pam Odom

The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed. Isaiah 50:4

Early morning came on a Saturday in August as it does every morning...like clockwork, so to speak. I woke up with a heavy heart so took my coffee outside and dragged a chair off the covered

porch to sit out under the big sky. Maybe the great expanse would help me breathe a little easier.

Birds made their rounds in the trees above, while one of my summertime frog friends chimed in now and then from the pond below. The rooster across the creek declared a new day. My little dog assumed his reliable position by my side.

Despite my inner turmoil, the natural world conveyed peace and harmony without any effort at all.

I leaned my head back and quietly, tearfully prayed out loud.

I need you, Lord...Heal my heavy heart this morning and fill me with your presence...I know you're there... have mercy on me...

I prayed the prayer over and over, then stopped talking so I could listen.

After some quiet time, I opened my eyes and had to reach for my glasses because I literally couldn't believe what I was seeing. The faintest rays of light began to emerge from behind a cloud, reminiscent of the sun in a child's drawing. Slowly, they stretched into long, bright yellow sunbeams and remained as clear as could be for a good five minutes. It was a beautiful sight.

Then, out of nowhere, a little dark cloud quickly moved across the sky and parked right in the middle of the light, attempting to diminish it. In a moment, as if by the deliberate stroke of a paintbrush, a hole appeared in the darkness and all the rays joined together and dramatically shot right through, creating a lighthouse-worthy beacon. Just as quickly as it arrived on the scene, the cloud moved on down the road as if it had no choice. And the rays reclaimed their glory.

I felt Christ's peace, and then clarity, wash over me. In my deep state of despair it seemed that the Lord had graced me with a sign of answered prayer we long for. This one felt like a billboard.

Dark clouds of conflict, worry and distress will appear again, even on an otherwise sunny day or season of life. But let that humid August morning be a lesson that they will not extinguish my Light or the Light of the One who will be my strength when I am

weary.

I just need to be quiet. And then listen.

Prayer

O Lord, thank you for your peace and presence that wakens me morning by morning. May I be mindful to pause, listen and receive this gift of grace on good days and bad. Amen

Thursday, March 29

Maundy Thursday

1 Cor. 11.23-26; Exod. 12.1-4; 11-14; John 13.1-15, 31-4

George Carras

The 1 Cor. 11 passage is the well-known for the institution of the Last Supper. In the New Testament (Gospels) similar accounts occur in Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:19-20. It is not mentioned by John. A gathering of disciples with Jesus at the Last Supper is reflected in many art paintings over the centuries as given in this 1896 work by Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret –



The earlier painting of Leonardo da Vinci represents the same scene from the 1490s –



The 1 Cor. 11.23-26 account begins in 11.17 and continues until 11.34. Both 11.17-22 and 11.27-34 instruct the Corinthians against unworthily partaking of the Lord's Supper. As for 1 Cor. 11.23-26 the teaching is on "remembrance", (v. 24) "This is my body, which is for you; do this *in remembrance of me*. (v. 25) In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, *in remembrance of me*." The remembrance is on the body and blood of Christ and his sacrificial death on behalf of humankind. This upper room observance instructs the apostles of new significance to the ancient observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, or Passover in Exodus 12. Jesus used this opportunity to plant into the minds of his apostles a new meaning to this ancient ritual.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is the historical background for the establishment of the Lord's Supper. Exodus 12 presents God's instruction on the Passover ritual given by Moses. God told the Israelites to prepare a special meal to be eaten the evening before their escape from Egypt with a whole roasted lamb as the main dish. The blood from the lamb was to be used to mark the Israelites' houses. That night, God would send the "angel of death"

to kill the firstborn males of the Egyptians but God would see the blood on the Israelites' houses, and he would command his angel to “pass over” — to kill no one there. This lamb and the meal of unleavened bread became the abiding symbol of Israel's deliverance from bondage.

As Jesus' disciples watched him and listened to his words at this Passover, they would have understood the historical significance of his actions. However, what they did not fully understand until after the crucifixion and resurrection was the transformation of what had been a Jewish feast of remembrance into a new symbol for remembering Jesus' atoning sacrifice. So the remembrance Jesus' disciples included - remembering the Lord, his sacrifice, his complete forgiveness for each of the disciples and us and his future coming again. These assurances of sacrifice in our place, our experience of forgiveness and his future coming are each claims we can continue to confirm as part of our inheritance in Christ based on his death and resurrection.

Washing of the feet of the disciples also occurred before the Last Supper. Feet washing was an element of hospitality normally performed by servants or slaves, and a mark of great respect if performed by the host. It is recorded in John 13:1-15, as preceding the meal, and subsequently became a feature of Holy Week liturgy and year-round monastic hospitality at various times and places, being regularly performed by the Byzantine emperors on Maundy Thursday.

Comments:

The ritual surrounding Maundy Thursday and the Lord's Supper continue to have reoccurring significance to all believers down through the ages and to the present. Therefore, our participation places us in long continuum with an experience going back to the disciples with Jesus.

Since Maundy Thursday is the Thursday before Easter, believed to be the day when Jesus celebrated his final Passover with his disciples it brings genuine relevance to us. Most notably, that Passover meal was when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples is an extraordinary display of humility. He then commanded them to do the same for each other. Christ's "mandate" is commemorated

on Maundy Thursday---"maundy" being a shortened form of *mandatum* (Latin), which means "command." It was on the Thursday of Christ's final week before being crucified and resurrected that he said these words to his disciples. This action is confirmed by Jesus since a new commandment was given on the Thursday of Christ's final week before being crucified and resurrected that he said these words to his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). Love is to be shown by service.

Observing the Lord's Supper carries personal significance because Jesus calls us to remember that he gave His body "for us." It also carries personal responsibility for us to participate with reverence, humility, compassion, understanding and proclaiming Christ's great act of love to others.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for loving us and providing a sacrifice and provision for our human condition in your own person. We express our love to you and gratitude for this generous act of sacrifice and love. We claim this with the people of God down through the ages and thus are part of a historic event of the people of God for the mission to love, sacrifice and be available to others in need. Help us to experience in our lives the passion of Christ and that Christ is risen - Christos Anesti (Χριστός ἀνέστη) – He has risen indeed - Alithos Anesti (Ἀληθῶς ἀνέστη)!

Friday, March 30

Good Friday

Isa. 52:13-53:12; Ps. 22:1-31;

Heb. 10:16-25 or Heb. 4:14-16, 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

Amy Effland

Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,^[a] Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but

we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

I began today's readings wondering what exactly is "Good" about Good Friday, the day we commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. From the early days of Christianity, Good Friday was a day of sorrow, penance, and fasting – not so good. Even with the knowledge of the end of the story, the events of the day do not seem to demand "good" as a descriptor. It is usually hard to see the "good" in the midst of suffering, loss, pain, or betrayal. But often we can look back and see how our lives are better for the opportunity that came after the loss. We realize that our suffering brought us closer to God – which is good.

Society and social media constantly try to convince us that if we do things correctly, we should have an easy, carefree life. Jesus promises life abundant with him. It is often too easy to confuse these images in our minds resulting in inappropriate feelings of frustration, bitterness, jealousy, and even betrayal by God. Consider the not-good day that our Lord is having with the humiliation, suffering, pain, and feeling betrayed by His friends and His Father! Because of Good Friday, every hardship we endure can be considered "good" because it allows us to identify with, and draw closer to, Christ...

"... we do not have a [God] who is unable to empathize..."

Good Friday shows us that with God a life of abundance does not mean a life that is easy or without worry, fear, doubt, shame, pain, disappointment, loss, or betrayal. A life of abundance is a life in which we know Jesus and we know that He can empathize with what we are going through. A life not absent of suffering, but one in which we know that good will come from our suffering. Good Friday reminds us that we have a God who loves us so much that He died for us. A God who experienced human emotion and suffering so that we can lean on Him through life's dark and difficult times knowing that he understands. We have a God who gets us – and that's pretty good!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to better understand what You mean by abundance and to reject the world's definition. Make us mindful through the difficult times in our lives that we are not alone or forsaken by You. Continually remind us that it is through pain and loss that we draw closer to You. Thank you for the "good" in Good Friday and for loving us as unimaginably as You do. Amen.

Saturday, March 31

Holy Saturday: the Great Vigil of Easter

Lamentations 3: 37-58; Romans 8: 1-11; Hebrews 4: 1-16

Tom Buchanan

In the Spring of my senior year of high school, one of my classmates was killed in an automobile accident. In these days of mass communication and shrinking distances, it is difficult to realize the impact that this death had on the small North Alabama town where I lived. There were only about 75 students in our class, and Piedmont itself was only slightly larger than the old Crozet. Small towns in those days were very self-contained; although both Birmingham and Atlanta were less than 100 miles away, they might as well have been on another continent. So Harry's sudden death consumed the attention of everyone in town.

As one measure of the shock felt by the whole community, the Senior Class was allowed to skip school on the day of the funeral. Schools never closed in those days; and to be sitting as a class (with our teachers and Principal/Superintendent) in the Baptist Church on a weekday afternoon only increased our sense of awe and unfamiliarity. I remember nothing of the funeral itself; but as soon as the service had concluded, the entire congregation stood and - pew by pew - filed past the open casket. Harry's family were the last to make this journey; and his classmates watched open-mouthed as his mother leaned into the coffin, embraced the body, and moaned and screamed his name over and over. This was my first experience of a lamentation - "a passionate outpouring of grief or sorrow"; and that day remains vivid in my memory 50-odd years later.

The Old Testament reading for today is from Lamentations, a

book of the Bible that was written after the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple in the late 6th century B.C. In the introduction to Lamentations, the authors of the New International Version write that while "Lamentations is the only Old Testament book that consists solely of laments," in Chapter 3 the writer changes his focus to emphasize the goodness of God: "I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning: *great is your faithfulness*....The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him." (Chapter 3: 19-25)

In our Reformed tradition, Holy Saturday tends to be the forgotten day of Easter; but among Roman Catholics and some other denominations, the Great Vigil of Easter remains very important. A vigil is defined as "a period of keeping awake during the time usually spent asleep, especially to keep watch or pray". So, on this day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, let us resolve to keep our personal vigil, to set aside time to ponder Christ's death, not in lamentation but in thanksgiving for God's mercy and grace. We should never forget that the agony and death of Friday and the silent tomb of Saturday are followed by the glory of Easter morning.

Prayer

"Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father; there is no shadow of turning with thee; Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not; as thou hast been thou forever wilt be....Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!" Amen.

Sunday, April 1

Easter Day

Acts 10:34–43 or Isa. 25:6–9; Ps. 118:1–2, 14–24;

1 Cor. 15:1–11 or Acts 10:34–43; John 20:1–18 or Mark 16:1–8

Dale Dealtrey

"For I handed onto you as of first importance what I in turn received: that Christ died for our sins according to the

scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve, then to more than 500 brothers and sisters ...” (I Corinthians 15:3-6)

Spring has sprung! The daffodils and tulips are pushing through winter-hard ground, forsythia are showing off their yellow blossoms, and the farmer’s market has re-opened for the season! Depending on how far north or south you are, you may be seeing more or less evidence of spring, but it is here. And though we trust that spring will come every year, it is always a glorious confirmation that we were right to trust when it actually happens. The seasons of the year provide visible proof that what we believe will happen, does happen.

Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of England during and following World War II, had the same kind of trust in the resurrection and life after death, even though he did not have the same kind of obvious proof that his trust was right. Churchill had planned his funeral, which took place in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. He included many of the great hymns of the church and used the eloquent Anglican liturgy. As he instructed, at the end of the service, a bugler positioned high in the dome of the cathedral, played “Taps,” *“Day is done, gone the sun ...”* the universal signal that the day is over. But then, immediately following “Taps,” another bugler on the other side of the dome, had been instructed to play “Reveille” – *“It’s time to get up! It’s time to get up! It’s time to get up in the morning!”* That was Churchill’s testimony, that at the end of history, the last note will not be “Taps,” it will be “Reveille.” Despite all the death, destruction, and senseless cruelty he had endured and witnessed in war, he believed that the final word in each of our lives and in our world, will be life, new life, everlasting life.

As surely as we can trust that spring and its new beginnings will come again, so also we can trust in Jesus’ resurrection and that, despite appearances sometimes to the contrary, history is heading not towards a wintry end but toward a new beginning.

Where do you need a new beginning in your life? Easter invites us to ask that question of ourselves. A friend says that Easter is a



Olivet
Presbyterian
Church

2575 Garth Road
Charlottesville, VA 22901
434-295-1367
www.olivetpresbyterian.org