



2021 Lenten Devotional

Crosscreek Baptist Church

Beloved Community,

It was in the middle of Lent last year that COVID-19 broke out in our midst and dramatically altered the landscape of our lives and our communal faith. While we have walked very differently together in our time since then, I am thankful for the ways we have strived to remain community for one another.

I know and believe that soon we will be back together in person. But, like every road we walk, we will have been changed (for the better, I hope!) by the road we have walked this past long year. We will, hopefully, be more grateful for the times we are together, more patient when things do not go according to plan, more gentle with the light of God inside one another.

Of course, our transformation is never finished. We are being perfected at all times. And so, I'm inviting you to once again walk a road together. In these pages, you will find a road and a path that will guide you to a deeper faith.

Thank you to all of those who have taken time to write for this devotional. I know God is speaking through them. May we all have ears to hear!

Love,

Brandon

February 17 - Ash Wednesday

Scripture - Psalm 51:1-17

Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

2 Wash me completely clean of my guilt;
purify me from my sin!

3 Because I know my wrongdoings,
my sin is always right in front of me.

4 I've sinned against you—you alone.
I've committed evil in your sight.

That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,
completely correct when you issue your judgment.

5 Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,
from the moment my mother conceived me.

6 And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;
you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.

7 Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;
wash me and I will be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and celebration again;
let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.

9 Hide your face from my sins;
wipe away all my guilty deeds!

10 Create a clean heart for me, God;
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!

11 Please don't throw me out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit away from me.

12 Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,
and sinners will come back to you.

14 Deliver me from violence, God, God of my salvation,
so that my tongue can sing of your righteousness.

15 Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will proclaim your praise.

16 You don't want sacrifices.
If I gave an entirely burned offering,
you wouldn't be pleased.

17 A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.
You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.

Reflection

As we enter this season of Lent, we must remind ourselves that we all have some David in us. That is, we all have sinned. Psalm 51 is a model for each of us. We must respond to our sins in a manner like that of David. We must first acknowledge God and God's power.

Only God in His unfailing love, according to His great compassion, will He blot out our transgressions, wash away our iniquity, and cleanse us from our sins.

How does this happen? We must again be like David. We must acknowledge and confess our sins to God and ask for forgiveness that only comes from God's mercy. David wanted to be reconciled to God. In verse 10, David asks God to "create in me a pure heart". To create means to make something new. David is asking God to rid him of his old ways and give him a new pure heart. We too must ask God to give us a new pure heart.

And last, we must give God the glory. In verses 14-15, David says, "...my tongue will sing of your righteousness" and "...and my mouth will declare your praises."

Ash Wednesday is a call to be reconciled to God. It's a time to recognize our mortality and sinfulness and how Jesus conquered them both through his death and resurrection.

Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner and I ask you for forgiveness. I believe you died and rose from the dead for my sins. Amen. - Wes Jeffcoat

February 18

Scripture - Psalm 25:1-10

I offer my life to you, Lord.

My God, I trust you.

Please don't let me be put to shame!

Don't let my enemies rejoice over me!

For that matter,

don't let anyone who hopes in you

be put to shame;

instead, let those who are treacherous without excuse be put to shame.

Make your ways known to me, Lord;

teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth—teach it to me—

because you are the God who saves me.

I put my hope in you all day long.

Lord, remember your compassion and faithful love—

they are forever!

But don't remember the sins of my youth or my wrongdoing.

Remember me only according to your faithful love

for the sake of your goodness, Lord.

The Lord is good and does the right thing;

he teaches sinners which way they should go.

God guides the weak to justice,

teaching them his way.

All the Lord's paths are loving and faithful

for those who keep his covenant and laws.

Reflection

I feel like I've done a lot of waiting since the pandemic hit. Waiting to find out when we would go back to campus to work instead of working remotely. Waiting to find out how long this thing was going to last. Waiting to find out when the Crosscreek community would meet in person again. And now I'm waiting to find out when I can get a vaccination.

I really hate waiting. I'm an instant gratification kind of woman. To me, waiting seems like wasted time. Time between spells of productivity.

Maybe that's why the word "wait" in this scripture reading stood out to me. That, and it put into my brain radio the hymn, "Show Me Your Ways, O Lord." The psalmist, David, says that he waits for God "all day long." (Now my brain radio is playing "Blessed Assurance" with its chorus-ending phrase, "all the day long.")

The other verses explain what's going on during the waiting. This kind of waiting doesn't involve sitting around twiddling my thumbs, but instead is an active wait. While I'm waiting for an end to the pandemic, waiting for a "new normal," waiting for Easter, I can put my

trust in God, taking this opportunity to learn more about His ways. I am wrapped in His steadfast love.

And wait with Him. - Donna Fitch

February 19

Scripture - Daniel 9:15-25

“And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and made your name renowned even to this day—we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors. Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!”

While I was speaking, and was praying and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God on behalf of the holy mountain of my God— while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen before in a vision, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He came and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. At the beginning of your supplications a word went out, and I have come to declare it, for you are greatly beloved...”

Reflection

It's not hard to identify with Daniel and his prayer for divine intervention. He pleads with God to listen to him, help him, pay attention to him! You're so good God, so kind! I know we – your people – aren't, but ... save us anyway!

Even while we acknowledge how great God is, we continue to be selfish and willful, ungrateful. We go our own way so far and so long sometimes that self-destruction is imminent. Still we cry out for God to save us. And, because He is a good and loving God, He is merciful and forgiveness comes. But there is more to the story, isn't there?

Everything is not made right instantaneously. There is a need for restoration. We must be willing to do our part.

Regardless of where we are, individually and collectively, in our spiritual journey, I pray we will humble ourselves before Him so that we can be too can be “rebuilt.” - Karen Maercker

February 20

Scripture - Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.Selah
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.Selah
Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.Selah
I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.
Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Reflection

In the powerful 1995 film, *The Mission*, Robert De Niro plays a violent slave trader who has killed his own brother in a jealous rage. Though not a religious person, De Niro's character nevertheless turns to a local priest to help him deal with the terrible guilt of his awful deed. The priest, it turns out, is a missionary to the very tribe of natives that De Niro, the slave trader, has raided for many years. As part of his penance, the priest tells De Niro he must serve the very natives he has previously preyed upon. As an additional element of his penance, De Niro takes all his implements of war—his sword, shield, armor, and so on—ties them in a huge net bag and drags the heavy bundle through the jungle on his way to the mission.

In order to get to where the tribe lives, De Niro must climb a sheer cliff. The burden of his implements of violence nearly pulls him off the cliff several times during the climb. As he reaches the top, tribal leaders recognize him as the slave trader who has captured many men

from their group. They ask the priest why he has brought this dangerous man into their midst.

The priest tells them that De Niro is repenting of his violence and is not a threat to them. When they point to the swords, knives and armor, the priest tells them it is part of De Niro's penance—to carry the very items of death that killed his bother and terrorized the tribe.

One of the tribal leaders thinks about this for a moment and then performs an amazing act of kindness. Taking his own knife from its sheath, the tribesman cuts the rope that ties the heavy bag to De Niro's leg. The heavy burden crashes down the cliff. De Niro, realizing he has been set free by the very people he has oppressed, begins to weep uncontrollably,

The visual symbolism of the slave trader suddenly being freed from his sins is stunning. It is possible to feel vicariously the moment of release and the flood of gratitude he expresses.

The psalmist's words do much the same. He deftly describes the effects of guilt on the human soul. As we hold our failure in, it makes us weak; we feel the heavy weight of its presence.

But when we are able to experience the forgiveness of God, the burden slips away. We feel relief and release. A sense of euphoria sweeps over the psalmist as he contemplates his new state of being. "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (v.1).

Most people who are aware of their failures know the agony of guilt. But weighted down with guilt is a poor way to live. Better to admit our failure (v.5). God already knows anyway. The psalmist believes that, as we confess our sin to God, we release the hold our guilt has on us. And as we accept God's forgiveness, we discover that we have been set free in the very depths of our lives. - Jim Evans

February 21

Scripture - Genesis 9:8-17

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." 12 God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." 17 God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Reflection

The story of Noah and the flood is a Preschool Sunday School favorite. Little ones love playing with the animals



and hearing about the boat that Noah built that was big enough to hold them all. They also love the story of the dove and the olive branch that signaled the flooding was over, and they especially love the rainbow! If you have ever spent much time with a preschooler, you very well may have seen them color a rainbow. I don't know whether it's the ease of the drawing or the beauty of the colors, but rainbow coloring is a skill most of them love to express. I have used the rainbow

building activity pictured several times through the years, and 3-5 year old's can stay focused on getting it just right for longer than just about any other activity we do. Rainbows are awesome!

We don't focus at all on the loss of life in the Noah story, and thankfully, they rarely ask about that. What we do focus on is God's covenant with his creation. Not only is it

comforting to know that God has promised that He will never destroy the earth by flood again, believing that God keeps ALL the promises he makes to us is central to our faith.

God promises that he is always with us, and that he will give us rest. He promises that His grace is sufficient for all our needs, and that He will give us peace that passes all human understanding. He promises eternal life for all who believe in his only Son.

One of the promises for which I am most grateful is that of forgiveness when I fall short of what God has planned for me. Which of God's promises are most meaningful to you this Lenten season?



Prayer:

Our father, thank you for your faithfulness in keeping your promises. Help me realize your presence in every rainbow, and in every other promise kept. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit I pray. Amen. - Patsy Jeffcoat

February 22

Scripture - Job 4:1-6

“Would you mind if I said something to you?

Under the circumstances it's hard to keep quiet.

You yourself have done this plenty of times, spoken words
that clarify, encouraged those who were about to quit.

Your words have put stumbling people on their feet,
put fresh hope in people about to collapse.

But now you're the one in trouble—you're hurting!

You've been hit hard and you're reeling from the blow.

But shouldn't your devout life give you confidence now?

Shouldn't your exemplary life give you hope?

Reflection

Job is a story of a person who experiences great suffering. Throughout his suffering, Job takes his concerns right to God; he does not settle for platitudes or quips about how things will get better. He stands in front of God and deeply experiences both the mysteries of suffering and the mysteries of God. Job's friends visit him amidst his suffering and offer advice for how he should handle his suffering.

The Scripture today is the first of his friends to respond to the events that have afflicted Job - the death of all ten of his children, the death of all of his hired hands, and the loss of all of his livestock plus he is afflicted from head to toe with painful sores. His wife has already encouraged him to just curse God and be done with the whole situation. Job responds with this confounding and deep question, “We take the good days from God - why not also the bad days?” (Job 2:10). Then Job's friends enter the scene and Job looks so bad to them that they rip their clothing and dump dirt on their heads and sit in silence with him for a week. Finally, Job cries out that he wishes he had never been born and so his friends take this opportunity to chime in with their well-meaning advice.

Our Scripture today is the beginning of the first friend's response. The friend means well, but basically says, “Have faith in your devout living. And remember, eventually everything dies.”

Great. Just great. So comforting, right?? Wrong! It's like when someone says, “Remember, everything happens for a reason.” Author Kate Bowler actually wrote a whole book about what a lie that platitude is called “Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)” and currently hosts a podcast by the same name. She heard this lie from so many people after she was diagnosed in her early thirties with stage IV cancer that she dedicated time to writing and podcasting on the subject of how poorly we handle and process suffering, especially what we view as undeserved suffering.

Job's friend, Eliphaz, is offering up similar platitudes to Job to help him better understand his suffering. But what is interesting in the entire book of Job is that Job never attempts to explain his suffering. Instead, Job, as Eugene Peterson says, “enters the mystery of suffering and looks around for God.”

The friend, Eliphaz, says something that I have certainly tried to convince myself of several times during this last year of pandemic. The pep talk goes something like this. “Okay, Jill. You have encouraged a lot of people in your life. You have talked openly and honestly about your faith and infused hope into the lives of those you have encountered. And now the pandemic is here and there is lots of suffering that is going on with it, but shouldn’t your past experiences give you confidence and hope during the suffering?”

It sounds okay. Not great. But okay. I try to pump myself up and put on the smiling face and make it through the current day but if we are playing the honest game, it doesn’t work. It isn’t working. It’s a lie, a thing I am telling myself to try to cope with the suffering because I have exhausted all of the other tools I normally use. I read the words of Eliphaz and think his words sound okay but they don’t sound great. It’s almost like a guilt trip. You should feel better than you do because you are a person of faith.

But Job’s methodologies do encourage me. Job begins his suffering by ripping his robe, shaving his head, and then falling to the ground in worship. (Yep, I’ve definitely felt that sentiment during this past year.). He follows this with the question to his wife, “We take the good days from God - why not also the bad days?” (I think I’ve had days of feeling kind of meta about our situation of suffering as well.).

Job then spends the suffering experience taking his grievances directly to God. He shouts out to God. He refuses to play the victim. He becomes silent. And then Job stands awestruck as he hears from God from the eye of a violent storm. Yes, a violent storm. Not a soft whisper and soothing lullaby, but the eye of a violent storm! The conclusion Job comes to in the end is that his relationship with God is the most important issue. Job’s personal, firsthand relationship with God “with my own eyes and ears” is the most important thing to Job.

And that is our encouragement too, sisters and brothers. Explanation of suffering is not the goal during suffering. Neither is escape from suffering. (Remember Jesus told us plainly in John 16:33, “In this world, you will have trouble.”). Making the suffering better or somehow fixing the suffering is also not the goal. The one and only goal of suffering is a personal and firsthand relationship with God, to stand with the mystery of suffering and subsequently enter into the mysteries of God, so that we don’t “live on crusts of hearsay, crumbs of rumors” but on the very word of God. - Jill Hudson

February 23

Scripture - Psalm 77

- I cry out loud to God—
out loud to God so that he can hear me!
- 2 During the day when I'm in trouble I look for my Lord.
At night my hands are still outstretched and don't grow numb;
my whole being refuses to be comforted.
- 3 I remember God and I moan.
I complain, and my spirit grows tired. Selah
- 4 You've kept my eyelids from closing.
I'm so upset I can't even speak.
- 5 I think about days long past;
I remember years that seem an eternity in the past.
- 6 I meditate with my heart at night;
I complain, and my spirit keeps searching:
- 7 "Will my Lord reject me forever?
Will he never be pleased again?
- 8 Has his faithful love come to a complete end?
Is his promise over for future generations?
- 9 Has God forgotten how to be gracious?
Has he angrily stopped up his compassion?" Selah
- 10 It's my misfortune, I thought,
that the strong hand of the Most High is different now.
- 11 But I will remember the Lord's deeds;
yes, I will remember your wondrous acts from times long past.
- 12 I will meditate on all your works;
I will ponder your deeds.
- 13 God, your way is holiness!
Who is as great a god as you, God?
- 14 You are the God who works wonders;
you have demonstrated your strength among all peoples.
- 15 With your mighty arm you redeemed your people;
redeemed the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah
- 16 The waters saw you, God—
the waters saw you and reeled!
Even the deep depths shook!
- 17 The clouds poured water,
the skies cracked thunder;
your arrows were flying all around!
- 18 The crash of your thunder was in the swirling storm;
lightning lit up the whole world;
the earth shook and quaked.
- 19 Your way went straight through the sea;
your pathways went right through the mighty waters.

But your footprints left no trace!
20 You led your people like sheep
under the care of Moses and Aaron.

Reflection

Psalm 77 is a powerful account of the psalmist's initial anger at God to the transition of praising God.

In verses 1-10, the psalmist yells to God in anger and doubt. The feelings of abandonment and loss of faith are genuine and raw. How many of us have been or are so angry with God that we shut him out of our lives? How many of us really want to admit that?

Verses 11-12 are the bridge between the anger at God to praising God. The psalmist reconciles his anger and feelings of abandonment to praising God.

In verses 13-20, the psalmist sings praise and adoration to God for His blessings and miracles. He recognizes that God is powerful. He acknowledges that God intervened and redeemed the Israelites fleeing from Egypt. The psalmist praises God for his miracle by parting the waters for the Israelites during their quest for a new home. Throughout the verses of adoration and praise, the psalmist acknowledges that God is more powerful than the storms in our lives.

Let us try to remember at some point during our storms in life that God does not abandon us. He is with us. I believe attempting to continue having faith in God, which can be difficult, will remind us He loves us and will not leave us. - Ann Bowman

February 24

Scriptures

Psalm 77 (see yesterday's entry)

Proverbs 30:1-9

The words of Agur, Jakeh's son, from Massa.
The man declares: I'm tired, God;
I'm tired, God, and I'm exhausted.
Actually, I'm too stupid to be human,
a man without understanding.
I haven't learned wisdom,
nor do I have knowledge of the holy one.
Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered the wind by the handful?
Who has bound up the waters in a garment?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is this person's name and the name of this person's child—
if you know it?
All God's words are tried and true;
a shield for those who take refuge in him.
Don't add to his words,
or he will correct you and show you to be a liar.
Two things I ask of you;
don't keep them from me before I die:
Fraud and lies—
keep far from me!
Don't give me either poverty or wealth;
give me just the food I need.
Or I'll be full and deny you,
and say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or I'll be poor and steal,
and dishonor my God's name.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread."
Jesus replied, "It's written, People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God."

After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone."

Jesus replied, “Again it’s written, Don’t test the Lord your God.”

Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, “I’ll give you all these if you bow down and worship me.”

Jesus responded, “Go away, Satan, because it’s written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Reflection

While in middle and high school, it was the cool thing to “give up something for Lent.” I remember my friend and I giving up meat one year because we thought it would help us slim down heading into the summer. Spoiler Alert: it did not. During those weeks, many times we would go to a restaurant and I would go on auto pilot and order my usual meals (with meat) then when they would bring the meal to our table I would have the realization, with dread, that it was a “forbidden” meal. Needless to say, I missed the point of Lent for several years.

These scriptures help paint a beautiful picture of the path Lent should send us down. It is a time to reset our lives to ones that focuses on God, through whatever avenue needed. A devotional book I had as a kid, probably around the same time I was missing the point of Lent, had a great analogy for keeping our eyes focused on God. Have you ever watched a ballerina and wondered how they didn’t get sick after all those spins? They lock their eyes on one point. They are spinning at high speeds, but they keep their head still and focus on one point until the last possible second and then they flip their head around to refocus on the spot again. They do not lose eye contact with that spot for more than a few milliseconds.

Our focus on God should be such as theirs on their focal point. We should always focus on God, but when life demands we look away, we flip our heads back around as quickly as possible and focus back toward God and God’s blessings. When we don’t, we feel exactly like the writers of the Psalm and Proverbs verses.

Verses 1 – 9 of Psalm 77 and Proverbs 30:1-9 are the anthem of the past 11 months. “I cried out to God...and I would not be comforted.” I feel we all have been in that spot within the past year. But the writers finish by refocusing on God. They flip their head around from the dark and worry to God’s light and presence. In Psalm 77, the psalmist compares God’s power to earthquakes and thunderstorms. Which if you think about it, are they not the most powerful natural phenomenon we can experience here on Earth? (Maybe add in tornadoes and hurricanes!) Ground splitting, loud claps of power that send energy through your being - that’s the God we serve. That’s the God we must focus on to make it through Lent.

Our God is full of love, and when it seems He has not answered the cry for help and the prayer in the dark place, He could be saying, “Not yet, my beloved child.”

In the beginning of Matthew chapter 4, Jesus is being tempted in the desert after fasting for 40 days. I’ve never gone 40 days without food, but I can imagine what it could do to a human mind, body, and spirit. Jesus was hungry, he was human (as well as divine) and just

like all humans he experienced hunger – especially after going 40 days without eating. And Satan comes to test him, but Jesus has his eyes set on God and he doesn't need a Snickers Bar to do it. He says "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus's focus is like that of a ballerina, except his head never has to flip really fast to reset his focus. His focus is everlasting. He is the example for us. (Side note I noticed for the first time reading this scripture: Jesus does not and will not ever bow to anything that is not God.)

Lent is about focusing on God. It is about re-centering from the worldly ideas of our society to the overwhelming display of love that is coming at Easter time. It is the yearly reminder to take time to reset our focus to where it should always be - on the cross. - Jessica Haywood

February 25

Scripture - Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18

After these events, the Lord's word came to Abram in a vision, "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your protector. Your reward will be very great."

But Abram said, "Lord God, what can you possibly give me, since I still have no children? The head of my household is Eliezer, a man from Damascus." He continued, "Since you haven't given me any children, the head of my household will be my heir."

The Lord's word came immediately to him, "This man will not be your heir. Your heir will definitely be your very own biological child." Then he brought Abram outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them." He continued, "This is how many children you will have." Abram trusted the Lord, and the Lord recognized Abram's high moral character.

After the sun set, Abram slept deeply. A terrifying and deep darkness settled over him.

Then the Lord said to Abram, "Have no doubt that your descendants will live as immigrants in a land that isn't their own, where they will be oppressed slaves for four hundred years. But after I punish the nation they serve, they will leave it with great wealth. As for you, you will join your ancestors in peace and be buried after a good long life. The fourth generation will return here since the Amorites' wrongdoing won't have reached its peak until then."

After the sun had set and darkness had deepened, a smoking vessel with a fiery flame passed between the split-open animals. That day the Lord cut a covenant with Abram: "To your descendants I give this land, from Egypt's river to the great Euphrates,

Reflection

I love to be entertained by other people's drama. I've never missed an episode of *The Bachelor* because of it. I can't get enough of the bad decisions, the fights, the ridiculous actions. And you better believe there is drama in Genesis! And not just reality TV drama...it's family drama. There's people (yes, more than one!) trying to pass their wives off as their sisters, old people having babies, jealousy between mothers of half-siblings, the destruction of entire cities, one twin pretending to be the other, a man being tricked into marrying the wrong sister (which then turns into sister-wives), literal wrestling with God, ten brothers selling their second youngest brother into slavery, dream interpretation, and a reconciliation through famine. It is, in a word, a hot mess.

But through all that mess, God is at work.

After God reassures Abram that he will have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky (a pretty big statement to a geriatric fellow who is currently childless), God makes a covenant with Abram while he sleeps. Yes, after asking for reassurance and spending the day preparing for a covenant, Abram sleeps through the big event.

While Abram is asleep, God is doing all the work - God is unconditionally pledging that Abram's offspring will possess this land. And there is no part of the bargain Abram must uphold - his only role is to benefit. Some think that this ritual is a type of oath that involves a self-curse if not fulfilled; God will become like the dead animals if he does not keep his word. He does all the work and takes on all the burden.

And God is doing the same thing today. While I am literally asleep, God is at work. When I am a hot mess, God is at work. When I'm frustrated - feeling like I'm surrounded by others who are even more of a hot mess than I am - He is at work. When I am sick in my selfishness and sin, God is at work. When I am spiritually blind and can't see how God is using my circumstances to my benefit and His glory, He is still at work.

My friends, He is always, always, always at work. - Amy Oliver

February 26

Scripture - Genesis 16:1-6

Sarai, Abram's wife, had not been able to have children. Since she had an Egyptian servant named Hagar, Sarai said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from giving birth, so go to my servant. Maybe she will provide me with children." Abram did just as Sarai said. After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took her Egyptian servant Hagar and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant. But when she realized that she was pregnant, she no longer respected her mistress. Sarai said to Abram, "This harassment is your fault. I allowed you to embrace my servant, but when she realized she was pregnant, I lost her respect. Let the Lord decide who is right, you or me."

Abram said to Sarai, "Since she's your servant, do whatever you wish to her." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from Sarai.

Reflection

In the beginning of this story, it is easy to be sympathetic to Sarai (yet to be renamed Sarah). In a culture where her worth to society was largely based on her ability to bear children, she was growing increasingly nervous about her barrenness. She knew that Abram (whose name had also not yet been changed) had been promised to be the father of many offspring, but the particulars of that promise did not name her as the mother of many offspring. In fact, in the passage before today's reading, Abram is again promised to be a father, but Sarai is not particularly mentioned. How can she help but feel abandoned? Her husband continues to be reassured by the God who has led them this far, but where is Sarai in all those promises? As of yet in this story, she has not been mentioned as a part of the promise of offspring. It is easy, given these circumstances, to sympathize with her.

It must feel to her as if she has been left out, an afterthought in this grand drama that is unfolding. And so, she decides to ensure that she will have a role in the story. She chooses to give her servant, Hagar, to Abram, knowing that she could count any child born out of that relation as "hers" for her belonging and security in the patriarchal system. However, once Hagar becomes pregnant, tension arises between her and Sarai, leading to heinous acts of hatred from Sarai to Hagar (who had been put in this situation by Sarai!).

The patriarchal system and the pitting of two women against each other are certainly problems in this story. But there is also a universal human truth at work. When we allow our anxieties to overwhelm us, to make us think the worst about what God has in store for us, we often make decisions that make our plights worse. As difficult as it can be to believe in the "good" in the face of adversity, our maturing and patient faith asks us to "wait on the Lord" and to believe "that God is working all things to the good for those who call on God's name."

If we can stop our anxieties by remembering that we are God's beloved, that our occasional feelings of abandonment are not the same thing as God's abandonment, then we can

develop the patient kind of faith that can hold out hope that God is truly and always on our side.

The good news is that God is on our side, whether we can believe it or not. But when we can believe it, then we are more able to live and to relax into the depths of God's goodness and love. May we meet there together. - Brandon Hudson

February 27

Scripture - Mark 8:27-30

Jesus and his disciples went into the villages near Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

They told him, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets.”

He asked them, “And what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Christ.” Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Reflection

If we were asked to make a list of words that identify who/what we are, how long would our list be before we wrote down Christian? What are we saying when we identify ourselves as Christians? What is a Christian? A Christian is a follower of the ways of Jesus Christ.

In today’s passage when Peter answers Jesus by saying, “You are the Christ,” Peter is identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one. When we identify ourselves as Christians, we are saying we can be identified by our following of ways of Jesus. Following Christ means striving to be like Him. Every decision should be filtered through His words with the goal of glorifying Him in all that we do. We are not saved by what we do for Christ, but by what he has done for us. To follow Christ means we apply what we learn from His words and live as if Jesus is walking with us in person.

How is that working?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, give us the courage to follow your ways. May all that we do and say be pleasing and bring glory to you. Amen. - Wes Jeffcoat

February 28

Scripture - Romans 4:13-25

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already[a] as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 Therefore his faith[b] “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 23 Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Reflection

The idea of “The Law” has always been scary to me.

I’m not a criminal or a habitual lawbreaker (um, except for the speed limit). I understand the importance of laws for a civilized society. But I grew up watching cop shows on TV (looking at you, *Dragnet*) that, either explicitly or implicitly stressed the idea that “ignorance of the law is no excuse.” That idea terrified me—what if I broke a law and didn’t know I did? Would a policeman come get me while I slept or drag me out of the classroom in the middle of math class?

I grew up in a church with a legalistic outlook, too, which didn’t help matters. I distinctly remember one sermon where the idea was promulgated that even if you went to church and said a bad word on the way home, if you died in a car wreck before you could repent, you would go to Hell. (I wonder if that was what he actually said, or if my 11-year-old mind interpreted it that way, but the damage was done.) I thought about that concept all the way home, scared that if the car crashed, I wouldn’t know if I’d done something terrible that would send me “the other way.”

Paul’s argument in verses 14 and 15 is that faith is what determines God’s opinion of us, not blind adherence to the jots and tittles of the Law. Abraham was the Superman of faith, as

Paul reasons, believing God could make a world of descendants from a couple who were far beyond childbearing age. Not only was the promise fulfilled to them, but we are his spiritual descendants if we have faith.

Faith didn't "poof!" all Abraham's troubles away. Until he saw the baby Isaac, he hoped—he believed—that God was faithful and trustworthy, even through all his ups and downs. He "gave glory to God" even before he saw the result. Verse 13 is especially powerful. God's promise to multiply Abraham's descendants didn't come "through the law but through the righteousness of faith."

God's grace is what the promise rests on (v. 16). His grace covers me, a blanket between me and the scary little details of the law that I fear. Faith isn't always easy, but I'm comforted to know that, no matter what, the Lord, as the old song says, "Covers me there with His hand."
- Donna Fitch

March 1

Scripture - Psalm 105:1-11. 37-45

1 Give thanks to the Lord and call out to him! Tell the nations what he has done!
2 Sing to him; sing praises to him. Tell about the amazing things he has done.
3 Be proud of his holy name. You followers of the Lord, be happy!
4 Depend on the Lord for strength. Always go to him for help.
5 Remember the amazing things he has done. Remember his miracles and his fair decisions.
6 You belong to the family of his servant Abraham. You are descendants of Jacob, the people God chose.
7 The Lord is our God. He rules the whole world.
8 He will remember his agreement forever. He will always keep the promises he made to his people.
9 He will keep the agreement he made with Abraham and the promise he made to Isaac.
10 He gave it as a law to Jacob. He gave it to Israel as an agreement that will last forever!
11 He said, "I will give you the land of Canaan. It will be your very own."

37 He led his people out of Egypt. They were carrying gold and silver, and none of them stumbled or fell behind.
38 Egypt was happy to see his people go, because they were afraid of them.
39 The Lord spread out his cloud like a blanket. He used his column of fire to give his people light at night.
40 They asked for food, and he sent them quail. He also gave them plenty of bread from heaven.
41 He split the rock, and water came bubbling out. A river began flowing in the desert!
42 The Lord remembered his holy promise that he had made to his servant Abraham.
43 He brought his people out of Egypt. They came out rejoicing and singing their happy songs!
44 Then he gave his people the lands of other nations. His people got what others had worked for.
45 He did this so that his people would obey his laws and follow his teachings. Praise the Lord!

Reflection

I love the reminders in this Psalm. I often need them. Reminders to be thankful, to praise God and share what He has done, to be happy, to depend on Him for strength and go to Him for help. Admittedly, my forgetfulness is sometimes the result of an unrealistic self-reliance. When I've exhausted myself by relying on my own abilities/intellect though, I remember to seek Him, and He is faithful to keep His promises to me, His child. It's important to remember that God keeps His promises. In His time and in His way.

During this season of Lent let us be especially mindful of the "amazing things He has done." I pray we will be filled with gratitude and humility and praise for what He has done and continues to do not only around us, but most importantly, within us. - Karen Maercker

March 2

Scripture - Genesis 22: 1-19

After these events, God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!”

Abraham answered, “I’m here.”

God said, “Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up as an entirely burned offering there on one of the mountains that I will show you.” Abraham got up early in the morning, harnessed his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, together with his son Isaac. He split the wood for the entirely burned offering, set out, and went to the place God had described to him.

On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place at a distance. Abraham said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the entirely burned offering and laid it on his son Isaac. He took the fire and the knife in his hand, and the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father?”

Abraham said, “I’m here, my son.”

Isaac said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the entirely burned offering?”

Abraham said, “The lamb for the entirely burned offering? God will see to it, my son.” The two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place God had described to him. Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. But the Lord’s messenger called out to Abraham from heaven, “Abraham? Abraham?”

Abraham said, “I’m here.”

The messenger said, “Don’t stretch out your hand against the young man, and don’t do anything to him. I now know that you revere God and didn’t hold back your son, your only son, from me.” Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the dense underbrush. Abraham went over, took the ram, and offered it as an entirely burned offering instead of his son. Abraham named that place “the Lord sees.” That is the reason people today say, “On this mountain the Lord is seen.”

The Lord’s messenger called out to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I give my word as the Lord that because you did this and didn’t hold back your son, your only son, I will bless you richly and I will give you countless descendants, as many as the stars in the

sky and as the grains of sand on the seashore. They will conquer their enemies' cities. All the nations of the earth will be blessed because of your descendants, because you obeyed me." After Abraham returned to the young men, they got up and went to Beer-sheba where Abraham lived.

Reflection

There is hardly a story more troubling and more difficult to understand than God's command to Abraham to take and sacrifice Isaac, his only son. It is impossible to read this story in the context of the Old Testament canon, and not be bewildered. Why would God have Abraham take the fulfilment of a promise God himself had made, that Abraham would have an heir that would be the first of a multitude of people, more than the sands of the sea, and have Abraham kill that heir. What purpose could there be in giving such a command that casts God in such a dubious light?

Some scholars have tried to rationalize what happened to Abraham as a sort of extended peer pressure. Among Semites there was an unspoken expectation that a person only needed what they need to live. It was not good to have too much or too little. If there was too little that could mean that God was punishing you for some infraction of the law. Having too little meant God was not on your side. Jesus did not mince any words in refuting this false view of God. When he said, "Blessed are the poor," he was striking at the heart of a theology that taught if you are bad God will curse you.

But having too much was also suspect. If a person was overly blessed with riches or other good things, that person was in danger of trusting in their blessings instead of trusting God. The theology at work here said if you are good God will bless you. The wealthy who followed this view of God were often arrogant about their privileged standing with God. We listen to the words of Jesus again when he said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom." To which his disciples replied, "Who then can be saved?" In other words, if the obviously blessed are going to have trouble getting in, what hope do we fishermen have? (Matthew 19: 16-26).

For Abraham's part, what could be a greater blessing than for a 90-year-old man to get his 90-year-old wife pregnant? The blessing was obviously from God but was it too great a blessing? Human sacrifice was hardly prevalent among the people of middle east, but there were examples of it. Some Bible commentators suggest that perhaps Abraham, being overtly blessed, was feeling guilty about his good fortune. It is possible he was swayed toward sacrificing his great blessing from God. He even claimed God had commanded the sacrifice as a way of proving he was not a man of pride; that he was humble and obedient.

These verses continue to defy explanation and understanding. But this much is true. As we go through life, we will from time to time be offered a way of following God, that is supposedly ordained by God, but in practice flatly contradicts the teaching of Jesus. When these dilemmas come, either in life or in the scriptures our best move is to let Jesus and his teaching be the last word. Jesus is the final arbiter of all truth. - Jim Evans

March 3

Scripture

John 12:36-43

36 “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them. 37 Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. 38 This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

“Lord, who has believed our message,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

39 And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said,

40 “He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”

41 Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him. 42 Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.”

Reflection

Reading and meditating on this scripture has conjured up two, perhaps related, lines of thought for me. First, Mark 9: “I believe; help my unbelief” comes to mind. Faith and doubt, doubt and faith. I think that authentic Christianity requires a healthy dose of belief and unbelief, faith and doubt. We believe, but we also question. We believe, but we continue to study and pray and research areas of question and doubt. It’s what we do with our faith and doubt that defines us.

This passage in John also makes me think of the current social and political climate in our country. Are we truly seeing and believing in the light? Do we truly believe that Jesus offers grace, forgiveness, and love to everyone? Do we see and confess that we are all made in the image of God, and therefore every life should be valued and celebrated? Or, do we align ourselves with a social or political ideology and follow along with whatever leaders say for fear of being “put out of the synagogue?”

My prayer is that we all love the glory that comes from God more than we love human glory. My prayer is that we see each other as Jesus sees us, and that we show others the love of God through our actions and words. My prayer is that we be the children of light. Amen. - Patsy Jeffcoat

March 4

Scripture - The Message - Psalm 19

1-2 God's glory is on tour in the skies,
God-craft on exhibit across the horizon.
Madame Day holds classes every morning,
Professor Night lectures each evening.

3-4 Their words aren't heard,
their voices aren't recorded,
But their silence fills the earth:
unspoken truth is spoken everywhere.

4-5 God makes a huge dome
for the sun—a superdome!
The morning sun's a new husband
leaping from his honeymoon bed,
The daybreaking sun an athlete
racing to the tape.

6 That's how God's Word vaults across the skies
from sunrise to sunset,
Melting ice, scorching deserts,
warming hearts to faith.

7-9 The revelation of God is whole
and pulls our lives together.
The signposts of God are clear
and point out the right road.
The life-maps of God are right,
showing the way to joy.
The directions of God are plain
and easy on the eyes.
God's reputation is twenty-four-carat gold,
with a lifetime guarantee.
The decisions of God are accurate
down to the nth degree.

10 God's Word is better than a diamond,
better than a diamond set between emeralds.
You'll like it better than strawberries in spring,
better than red, ripe strawberries.

11-14 There's more: God's Word warns us of danger
and directs us to hidden treasure.
Otherwise how will we find our way?
Or know when we play the fool?
Clean the slate, God, so we can start the day fresh!
Keep me from stupid sins,
from thinking I can take over your work;
Then I can start this day sun-washed,
scrubbed clean of the grime of sin.

These are the words in my mouth;
these are what I chew on and pray.
Accept them when I place them
on the morning altar,
O God, my Altar-Rock,
God, Priest-of-My-Altar.

Reflection

This Psalm is full of beautiful, figurative, and delicious sounding language to describe the beauty of nature and the faithfulness of God. I thought we could do a little exercise today and create our own Psalm with beautiful, flowery language. And how are we going to do this? By writing a Mad Lib, of course!

Do you remember Mad Libs? They are these fill in the blank stories that end up being oh-so-hilarious to read because you don't know which words are going to go where. It's normally a fun time had by all involved, so I thought, why not apply this to Scripture?

Read through each of the numbered prompts below and record your answer to each one without reading how it will sound in context with the Scripture Mad Lib found below. Once you have recorded your answer to each numbered prompt, use those answers to complete your own personal Psalm full of beautiful, figurative, and delicious sounding language.

1. Your favorite place in nature (could be a park or a type of plant, etc.)
2. The first thing, person, or being you see when you open your eyes in the morning.
3. The last thing, person, or being you see before you close your eyes in the evening.
4. Your favorite positive emotional/mental state (love, hope, kindness, laughter, stillness, etc.)
5. Your favorite emotional/mental state when you are upset (anger, frustration, annoyance, blame, irritation, etc.)
6. Something you would buy for yourself if you had the extra money
7. Your favorite fruit or veggie to get in season at the farmer's market
8. The thing you are most afraid of
9. The thing you most desire
10. Your favorite name to call God

God's glory is revealed in ____ (1) ____.

I see God in ____ (2) ____ in the morning. This is God schooling me on God's love each morning.

I see God in ____ (3) ____ in the evening. This is God giving me a lecture on God's creativity each evening.

God pulls our lives together so that everything belongs.

When I experience ____ (4) ____, God is showing me the way of joy.

When I experience ____ (5) ____, God will keep me from stupid sins.

God's Word is better than ____ (6) ____.

You'll like God's Word better than the ripest ____ (7) ____.

God's Word warns us of dangers like ____ (8) ____ and directs us to hidden treasure like ____ (9) ____.

These are the words in my mouth; these are what I chew on and pray.

Accept them when I place them on the morning altar.

O God, my Altar-Rock, my ____ (10) ____.

Amen. - Jill Hudson

March 5

Scripture - Psalm 19

Heaven is declaring God's glory;
the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.
One day gushes the news to the next,
and one night informs another what needs to be known.
Of course, there's no speech, no words—
their voices can't be heard—
but their sound extends throughout the world;
their words reach the ends of the earth.
God has made a tent in heaven for the sun.
The sun is like a groom
coming out of his honeymoon suite;
like a warrior, it thrills at running its course.
It rises in one end of the sky;
its circuit is complete at the other.
Nothing escapes its heat.
The Lord's Instruction is perfect,
reviving one's very being.
The Lord's laws are faithful,
making naive people wise.
The Lord's regulations are right,
gladdening the heart.
The Lord's commands are pure,
giving light to the eyes.
Honoring the Lord is correct,
lasting forever.
The Lord's judgments are true.
All of these are righteous!
They are more desirable than gold—
than tons of pure gold!
They are sweeter than honey—
even dripping off the honeycomb!
No doubt about it:
your servant is enlightened by them;
there is great reward in keeping them.
But can anyone know
what they've accidentally done wrong?
Clear me of any unknown sin
and save your servant from willful sins.
Don't let them rule me.
Then I'll be completely blameless;
I'll be innocent of great wrongdoing.
Let the words of my mouth
and the meditations of my heart

be pleasing to you,
Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Reflection

Let us praise God!

Let us praise God for His creation! Let us praise God for the sun that brings us light. Let us praise God for the moon and stars at night. Let us praise God for the earth and its nature.

Let us praise God for His perfect Law! Let us praise God's Law for giving wisdom. Let us praise God's Law for refreshing our souls and giving joy to our hearts. Let us praise God's Law for being righteous.

Let us praise God for His forgiveness! Let us praise God for His boundaries which will lead us to a great reward. Let us praise God for He can forgive our sins.

Let us praise God with adoration and thanksgiving! - Ann Bowman

March 6

Scriptures

Psalm 19 (see yesterday's entry)

Exodus 19: 16 – 25

When morning dawned on the third day, there was thunder, lightning, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud blast of a horn. All the people in the camp shook with fear. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their place at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord had come down on it with lightning. The smoke went up like the smoke of a hot furnace, while the whole mountain shook violently. The blasts of the horn grew louder and louder. Moses would speak, and God would answer him with thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain. The Lord called Moses to come up to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. The Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people not to break through to try to see the Lord, or many of them will fall dead. Even the priests who come near to the Lord must keep themselves holy, or the Lord will break loose against them."

Moses said to the Lord, "The people aren't allowed to come up on Mount Sinai because you warned us and said, 'Set up a fence around the mountain to keep it holy.'" The Lord said to him, "Go down, and bring Aaron back up with you. But the priests and the people must not break through and come up to the Lord. Otherwise, the Lord will break loose against them." So Moses went down to the people and told them.

Mark 9: 2-8

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He said this because he didn't know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

Reflection

In Exodus 19, Moses is told by God to go up Mt. Sinai to (eventually) receive the Ten Commandments. First Moses must go up and down the mountain approximately 96 times, which is close to his age at this point in the story! Moses must have had something others did not at the time - really good hiking boots!

In our Exodus scripture today, Moses is called up the mountain. Moses goes up the mountain, and then the next sentence God tells Moses to go back down the mountain and tell everyone to not force their way to see God or they would perish. Moses replies that no one will be coming up the mountain because you have warned us. (Insert Moses's sigh of

relief thinking he has escaped going up and down, and up and down.) Then God tells him to go down and get Aaron and bring him back up. Obediently, Moses proceeds to go get his brother.

I feel like Moses in this story. Up the mountain. Down the mountain. Up again. Down again. But the whole time, I complain. Here, we see no complaint from Moses. (Except maybe when he breaks the tablets and realizes he has to go back up the mountain...) God's journey for Moses wasn't a linear one, it was full of crests and troughs.

In Mark, we visit another mountain. This mountain has less physical ups and downs but a few more spiritual ups and downs for Peter, James, and John. These chosen disciples witness the Transfiguration. They know the two men who descend and talked with Jesus, they are the faithful ones who came before. These men were God's instruments to accomplish justice giving actions and knowledge seeking words while alive. Peter was so excited that he wanted to build them each a little hut so they could stay a while. And then, just like in Exodus, a cloud appeared and thunder roared, but this time instead of Moses going up and down, Elijah and Moses vanish and God announces, "This is my Son, whom I love, listen to him!"

The journey to the cross is full of mystery and mountains. It is full of journeys resembling Alabama weather- crazy and unpredictable. The old ways have vanished, the old thinking has vanished, and Jesus remains. And we are told above all else to listen to him for "the law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul." - Jessica Haywood

March 7

Scripture - John 2:13-22

It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He found in the temple those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as those involved in exchanging currency sitting there. He made a whip from ropes and chased them all out of the temple, including the cattle and the sheep. He scattered the coins and overturned the tables of those who exchanged currency. He said to the dove sellers, "Get these things out of here! Don't make my Father's house a place of business." His disciples remembered that it is written, Passion for your house consumes me.

Then the Jewish leaders asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things? What miraculous sign will you show us?"

Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up."

The Jewish leaders replied, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?" But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Reflection

When I was in high school I used to think of this passage as proof of "Sassy Jesus." "Sassy Jesus" was great because it proved that Jesus, just like me, had a lot of feelings. And boy did I, like all high school girls, have a lot of feelings.

Now, I see that Jesus is heartbroken. He loves the temple - the place where God comes to dwell with mankind. And He hates what's happening to it.

Selling animals for sacrifice isn't really a problem in and of itself. It's a service to those who have travelled to Jerusalem, allowing them to buy animals on-site rather than having to travel with them for long distances. However, the merchants and money-changers have set-up shop in the area surrounding the temple, including the Court of the Gentiles. By conducting business in the temple complex, these individuals disrupted worship for the non-Jewish God-fearers. I can't speak to their intentions, but I can say that something that should have been a service was actually a hindrance. They obstructed the very purpose for which the temple existed.

And in the very next paragraph, He compares His body to that very place - they're both ways God came to dwell with mankind. And these people have no respect for either. All of this happens a few days before Jesus goes to the cross. Here, Jesus uses a whip to purify the temple, and in a few days, they'll use a whip to bring about the death of Jesus, which leads to our purification through his death and resurrection.

There are a lot of things that make me pause with this particular passage. Am I a merchant or money-changer convincing myself I'm helping people when I'm actually hurting? Am I the non-Jewish worshiper just doing my best amidst all the chaos and distraction? Have I grown desensitized to God's presence?

But today, my prayer is that I would be heartbroken alongside Him.

The song Hosanna by Hillsong comes to mind. The lyrics of the bridge are -

Heal my heart and make it clean
Open up my eyes to the things unseen
Show me how to love like You have loved me
Break my heart for what breaks Yours
Everything I am for Your Kingdom's cause
As I walk from Earth into eternity

May we be in such close communion with Him that we share in His heartbreak. - Amy Oliver

March 8

Scripture - Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place,
 Lord of heavenly forces!
My very being longs, even yearns,
 for the Lord's courtyards.
My heart and my body
 will rejoice out loud to the living God!
Yes, the sparrow too has found a home there;
 the swallow has found herself a nest
 where she can lay her young beside your altars,
 Lord of heavenly forces, my king, my God!
Those who live in your house are truly happy;
 they praise you constantly. Selah
Those who put their strength in you are truly happy;
 pilgrimage is in their hearts.
As they pass through the Baca Valley,
 they make it a spring of water.
 Yes, the early rain covers it with blessings.
They go from strength to strength,
 until they see the supreme God in Zion.
Lord God of heavenly forces,
 hear my prayer;
 listen closely, Jacob's God! Selah
Look at our shield, God;
 pay close attention to the face of your anointed one!
Better is a single day in your courtyards
 than a thousand days anywhere else!
I would prefer to stand outside the entrance of my God's house
 than live comfortably in the tents of the wicked!
The Lord is a sun and shield;
 God is favor and glory.
The Lord gives—doesn't withhold!—good things
 to those who walk with integrity.
Lord of heavenly forces,
 those who trust in you are truly happy!

Reflection

Søren Kierkegaard wrote that “purity of heart is to will one thing.” When I read this Psalm, I am encouraged and challenged by the psalmist's longing for God's kingdom. To truly “will one thing,” to be singular in focus, to “seek first God's kingdom,” as Jesus said, is difficult work. We are divided creatures, pulled many ways by different forces and different desires. It is easy to blame this phenomenon on our busyness, but even when we are idle our minds are prone to wander (Lord I feel it!).

The good news, is that we have a group of saints who have gone before us who have shown us that things need not always be this way. Through grace, patience, faith, and practice, we can begin to still our minds, to cleanse our lens through which we view the world and bring our will into focus. We can renew the maturing of our faith by centering and taming the “passions” that rage within us. The process to do this is both challenging, worthwhile, and never ending. And yet, when we begin this journey (or begin it again, as the case may be), we find that every hard-won step is worthwhile.

Today, let us begin simply with two steps. First, let us spend some time with the Jesus Prayer. If you’ve never prayed it before, it is practiced thusly:

Lord Jesus Christ (recite while inhaling)

Son of God (recite while exhaling)

Have Mercy on Me (recite while inhaling)

A Sinner (recite while exhaling)

Set a timer for five minutes (or if you’re just starting out two) and simply set still and recite this prayer. If your brain starts to wander, stop judging yourself and resume the prayer. Allow the mercy inherent in these words to soak over you and place you in the center of God’s will.

Second, let us be aware of our thoughts and feelings today. Of course, we should be aware of our words and actions as well, but the thoughts and feelings are at the root of words and actions. What are we thinking? What are we feeling? Then, let us ask the harder questions - Why do I feel this way? *and* Does this thought aid me in growing closer to the image of Jesus and the Way of discipleship?

Allow those thoughts and feelings that are holy to take root. Allow them to be the framework that builds your ability to “will one thing.” The other thoughts and feelings, the ones that we know do not help us grow into grace, let us acknowledge them and not deny them. And then, let us let them drift away just as they had entered. Let us keep them, by God’s grace, from taking root.

Over the course of our day, my prayer is that through these practices, we will become more centered into who God is shaping us to be. As we are molded, we too will learn to seek only the joy of being in God’s kingdom. - Brandon Hudson

March 9

Scripture - Hebrews 9:23-28

So it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be cleansed with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things had to be cleansed with better sacrifices than these. Christ didn't enter the holy place (which is a copy of the true holy place) made by human hands, but into heaven itself, so that he now appears in God's presence for us. He didn't enter to offer himself over and over again, like the high priest enters the earthly holy place every year with blood that isn't his. If that were so, then Jesus would have to suffer many times since the foundation of the world. Instead, he has now appeared once at the end of the ages to get rid of sin by sacrificing himself. People are destined to die once and then face judgment. In the same way, Christ was also offered once to take on himself the sins of many people. He will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Reflection

I take a flu shot every year. I don't do it because I enjoy the shot, or the inconvenience it causes. I wish there was a "one and done." I wish one shot would last forever.

Unfortunately, a one shot vaccination for the flu is not available. But I can still hope for that day when the pain, fever, aching, and discomfort of the flu are eliminated once and for all.

The good news is that Jesus has eliminated the pains, aches, and discomfort, and inconvenience sin causes in our lives-once and for all...forever. Prior to Jesus, individuals had to go through regular routine rituals of sacrifices for their cleansing of their sins. Jesus did not walk behind some curtain in some man-made temple; he "entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence." Unlike the priest of old who had to return over and over to repeat the sacrifice, Jesus was sacrificed once, with no need to return. Yet He will "return to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him." - Wes Jeffcoat

March 10

Scripture - Mark 11:15-19

15 Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; 16 and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 17 He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?

But you have made it a den of robbers.”

18 And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

19 And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Reflection

“‘Short cuts make long delays,’ argued Pippin.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

I was reading this scripture, looking for something I could say about it that others hadn’t written or said dozens of times before. Even though told in the almost laconic style of much of scripture, the account of Jesus cleansing the temple is highly dramatic. His actions put paid to the notion of this meek and mild—basically wimpy—man who wouldn’t harm anyone. Jesus is passionate about His mission and isn’t afraid to show it.

But amid all the drama, verse 16 appears: “and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.” Huh? That seems sort of weird. Many of the commentaries I consulted on biblegateway.com skipped over it. But given the terseness of the account, that verse must mean something.

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, New Testament explains it this way: “Jesus also put a stop to casual use of the temple by those who used it as a shortcut between the city and the Mount of Olives.”

A shortcut? What’s wrong with that? They just wanted a quicker, more convenient way to travel from one place to another.

If we look at the broader view, the passage is all about shortcuts. The commerce in the temple was a shortcut to make it easier for pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem to avoid having to bring livestock with them and to enable them to come with whatever currency they had.

But taking shortcuts is a slippery slope. Sure, you get to your destination quicker, but at what cost? A shortcut is like participating in a book club, but only reading the Cliff Notes or watching the movie. Nuance is lost and small but important clues that build on one another fall away if you take the shortcut.

Don't forget: the Christian life is a journey. The thoughtful person realizes it isn't all about "pie in the sky by-and-by," but about living every day, experiencing Christ in the small details and the large matters. I plan to consider this idea throughout Lent. How am I taking a shortcut through my spiritual life? What do I gain from taking the long way home? Will a shortcut make a long delay in my spiritual development? - Donna Fitch

March 11

Scripture - Ephesians 1:3-6

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ, God has given us every spiritual blessing in heaven. 4 In Christ, he chose us before the world was made. He chose us in love to be his holy people—people who could stand before him without any fault. 5 And before the world was made, God decided to make us his own children through Jesus Christ. This was what God wanted, and it pleased him to do it. 6 And this brings praise to God because of his wonderful grace. God gave that grace to us freely. He gave us that grace in Christ, the one he loves.

Reflection

How humbling it is to read these verses. To stop for a moment and absorb the fact that God loved me so much He “chose” to send Jesus Christ to die on the cross for me. He provided the way for me to stand before Him flawless. To give me every spiritual blessing in heaven.

I have a hard time even imagining that kind of love. So, I am humbled and thankful. Because of His grace, extended to me, I am a child of the King. Not because I have earned it, but because of His overwhelming love for me, and for you. Praise be to God! - Karen Maercker

March 12

Scripture - Ephesians 1:7-14

We have been ransomed through his Son's blood, and we have forgiveness for our failures based on his overflowing grace, which he poured over us with wisdom and understanding. God revealed his hidden design to us, which is according to his goodwill and the plan that he intended to accomplish through his Son. This is what God planned for the climax of all times: to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth. We have also received an inheritance in Christ. We were destined by the plan of God, who accomplishes everything according to his design. We are called to be an honor to God's glory because we were the first to hope in Christ. You too heard the word of truth in Christ, which is the good news of your salvation. You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit because you believed in Christ. The Holy Spirit is the down payment on our inheritance, which is applied toward our redemption as God's own people, resulting in the honor of God's glory.

Reflection

In the original Greek, Ephesians 1: 3-14 is one long sentence. English translators have broken the sentence up into several smaller sentences just to help us be able to read it. Let's just be glad this devotion is about God's grace and not Paul's grammar.

But having acknowledged the grammatical peculiarity let me add quickly that I understand why Paul wrote it the way he wrote it. This letter to the Ephesians was probably aimed at a larger and more general audience. It has been described by some as one of the most ecumenical books in the New Testament. In it, Paul lays out the heart of Gospel as he understood it.

This is where the long sentence comes in.

The themes that Paul deals with--redemption, salvation, faith, the church, worship, the Holy Spirit and God's grace are one piece for Paul. For the sake of discussion or instruction he might pull an individual topic out for illumination. But in this letter, in this opening section, it is all one whole cloth.

And so, it makes sense that it would come pouring out of him. Even in translation it is possible to feel the intensity of his words and phrases. Read it again and again. It feels like Paul is not even taking a breath. The thoughts and images run together, and it appears Paul is moving on to a new insight while the previous thought was still ringing in the text.

In my mind, this is how all of us should feel about what God has done for us in Christ. We find ourselves thinking about God's goodness and how that goodness is expressed in a grace that has no prerequisites. There is not something we have to do before God's grace is available to us. It's a gift, and the only way we can receive it is to want it. That is where faith comes in. A simple desire to have a relationship with God gradually becomes a commitment and a longing for worship. We are not people who have to go to church because God

commands it, we are the people who get to go to church where an encounter with God is practically guaranteed.

No wonder Paul had trouble finding an end to his sentence, there is no end to the grace. And after he covers it all, he is ready to circle back and go through it all again.

We have been given a gift in the availability of the scriptures to us in an affordable and accessible form. We don't have to learn Greek or Hebrew-- there are faithful ones who have already done that. We have translations, good ones, of every book in the Bible. Our simple task is to read them. And a text like Ephesians 1:3-14, needs to be read over and over again. These beautiful words and important biblical ideas are why we are here. We should love them, know them, and live them.

And if we have an opportunity, we ought to talk about them. - Jim Evans

March 13

Scripture - John 3:1-13

1 NOW there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is ‘born of the Spirit.’ 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

Reflection

Today is my Daddy’s birthday. He was born in March, on Friday the 13th, 1925. He was proud of having been born on Friday the 13th, although I never was sure exactly why! He was a good man and a man of faith. He showed his faith more in how he lived than in what he said. He studied his Bible, almost never missed an opportunity to be at church, worked hard, and would do absolutely anything he could for anybody. He didn’t talk about his faith a lot, but you knew it was there.

Two times that my dad did talk about his faith gave me comfort and peace in the situations. The first time was when he was about to go into surgery for colon cancer. He simply said, “I don’t know where I’m going, but I know the One who does.” The second time was the night he went to be with Jesus. He and I were alone in his hospital room. I had no idea what was going to happen that night, but one of the last things he said to me was, “I’m going home.” He went to his heavenly home later that night, having been “born again” many years before.

I’m not certain why Nicodemus felt the need to talk to Jesus in the cover of night. I do think I understand his confusion about what Jesus said to him. We think of birth and birthdays in physical, earthly terms that we can see and understand. Entering the Kingdom of God by being born of water and the Spirit is a bit of a head scratcher. Yet, we “speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen”. None of us saw Jesus in the flesh, or heard him teach, or witnessed the miracles he performed, like Nicodemus did. However, we see God’s presence everywhere. We see it in nature and in other people. We witness it in changed lives and in our own lives. We hear it in the voices of those we respect, admire, and

love. When we decide to follow Him and are born of the Spirit, we know the One who knows where we are going, the One who welcomes us home at the end of our journey.

Dear Lord, help us to follow you all the days of our lives. Help us to be a testimony to your grace, love, and mercy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. - Patsy Jeffcoat

March 14

Scripture (and Reflection)

Happy Pi Day!

The Message - Numbers 21: 4-9 (Scripture in italics)

Numbers 21:4-5 *They set out from Mount Hor along the Red Sea Road, a detour around the land of Edom. The people became irritable and cross as they traveled. They spoke out against God and Moses: "Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can't stomach this stuff any longer."*

*They set out in March of 2020 to socially distance from one another and do their part to stem a pandemic that was ravaging their world. The people became irritable and cross as the pandemic drug on into the summer. They spoke out against those who they felt were to blame, "Why can't you just wear your mask like your are supposed to?" Or "Why are you making such a big deal of this and trying to ruin all of our fun?" No decent social hangs were to be had. No handshakes could be trusted. And all the people said, "We can't stomach this stuff any longer."

Numbers 21:6-7 *So God sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit them and many in Israel died.*

*Then things got worse. Racial tensions heated up unlike some had ever experienced before. And a presidential race became hotly contested until it felt like they were being bit by poisonous snakes on social media and all they could feel is the hot sting of pain and emotional turmoil. The pandemic was growing as well, stronger than at first, and with what felt like no end in sight. (Side note: God did not send the racial tension or the contested presidential race or the pandemic. Just want to be clear on that.)

The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke out against God and you. Pray to God; ask him to take these snakes from us."

*The people of God realized that this suffering was long-lasting. They realized that their resiliency was being stretched like never before. The people longed for their community and normalcy and an end to the onslaught of negativity and bad news and polarization of...well...everything.

Moses prayed for the people.

*So the people prayed. They prayed. And prayed. And prayed. Often with tears. Often without the proper words to describe their plight. Often without a solution they were seeking, just relief. Relief from the pandemic. Relief from the isolation. Relief from feeling totally and completely alone. Relief from being poisoned by polarization and false dichotomies. Relief from exhaustion. Relief. Return. Renewal. The people prayed. And prayed.

Numbers 21:8 *God said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it on a flagpole: Whoever is bitten and looks at it will live."*

*Finally a glimmer of hope arrived. In the darkness of winter, the light entered the world again. A vaccine. It was here. And it would protect against the initial cause of the pandemic and stop so much of the death and isolation and pain that all had experienced for the last year.

Numbers 21:9 *So Moses made a snake of fiery copper and put it on top of a flagpole. Anyone bitten by a snake who then looked at the copper snake lived.*

*All of the prayers were not answered by the one glimmer of hope. An answer like that had already come.

John 3:14-15 *In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.*

*This real and eternal life begins now. Amidst the suffering. Amidst the pain. Amidst the loneliness. Amidst the grief. Amidst all of that, real and eternal life is active and present and available to all who look up. And so the people declared the following with all of their hearts.

John 3:16-17 *“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.*

*The people believed this with all of their hearts and minds and souls and feet and hands and words. The people were God helping the world. And so the world was put right again.
- Jill Hudson

March 15

Scripture - Psalm 107:1-16

“Give thanks to the Lord because he is good,
because his faithful love lasts forever!”
That’s what those who are redeemed by the Lord say,
the ones God redeemed from the power of their enemies,
the ones God gathered from various countries,
from east and west, north and south.

Some of the redeemed had wandered into the desert, into the wasteland.
They couldn’t find their way to a city or town.
They were hungry and thirsty;
their lives were slipping away.
So they cried out to the Lord in their distress,
and God delivered them from their desperate circumstances.
God led them straight to human habitation.
Let them thank the Lord for his faithful love
and his wondrous works for all people,
because God satisfied the one who was parched with thirst,
and he filled up the hungry with good things!

Some of the redeemed had been sitting in darkness and deep gloom;
they were prisoners suffering in chains
because they had disobeyed God’s instructions
and rejected the Most High’s plans.
So God humbled them with hard work.
They stumbled, and there was no one to help them.
So they cried out to the Lord in their distress,
and God saved them from their desperate circumstances.
God brought them out from the darkness and deep gloom;
he shattered their chains.
Let them thank the Lord for his faithful love
and his wondrous works for all people,
because God has shattered bronze doors
and split iron bars in two!

Reflection

How many times have we prayed to God for petition and intercession? How many times have we offered prayers to God for thanksgiving only? Rather how many times do we actually thank God during our prayers for providing our desires, whether they are answered or unanswered? Prayers of thanksgiving for unanswered prayers are often too challenging for me at this time in my faith journey.

Psalm 107:1-16 is a prayer of thanksgiving to God. Verses 1-3 are prayers of thanksgiving by celebrating God’s steadfast love and redemption. Verses 4-16 provide references to

stories when God intervened for his followers. One such story is God telling Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to escape slavery. They wandered in the desert for forty years. They were hungry, thirsty, and tired. They cried to God for help. God intervened and led them to their new home. Moses and the Israelites thanked God for his steadfast love and his wonderful deeds for them. Thanking God for a miserable unknown journey in a desert for forty years is an example for us to remember thank God. How many of us, including myself, can even comprehend thanking God for a forty year period of hardship?

Stay at home and social distancing the past year has taken a toll on all of us. Alabama's one year anniversary is today. So many lives have been lost. So many survivors of Covid may have long term health problems after recovering. All of us are mentally, spiritually, and physically exhausted. We don't know the future of life after Covid, but we know that we are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. God led Moses and the Israelites to a safer life. I know that someday we will cherish freedom and live more fulfilling lives after being separated from the people we love. May we all remember God's redeeming and steadfast love for us by giving us an opportunity to re-evaluate our values and our spiritual journey with him.

To this we say, "Thanks be to God". - Ann Bowman

March 16

Scripture

Psalm 107:1-16 (see yesterday's entry)

Numbers 20:1-13

In the first month, the entire Israelite community entered the Zin desert and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died and was buried there. Now there was no water for the community, and they assembled against Moses and Aaron. Then the people confronted Moses and said to him, "If only we too had died when our brothers perished in the Lord's presence! Why have you brought the Lord's assembly into this desert to kill us and our animals here? Why have you led us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place without grain, figs, vines, or pomegranates? And there's no water to drink!"

Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the meeting tent and they fell on their faces. Then the Lord's glory appeared to them. The Lord spoke to Moses: "You and Aaron your brother, take the staff and assemble the community. In their presence, tell the rock to provide water. You will produce water from the rock for them and allow the community and their animals to drink."

Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence, as the Lord had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. He said to them, "Listen, you rebels! Should we produce water from the rock for you?" Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice. Out flooded water so that the community and their animals could drink.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you didn't trust me to show my holiness before the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly into the land that I am giving them." These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites confronted the Lord with controversy and he showed his holiness to them.

1 Corinthians 10:6-13

These things were examples for us, so we won't crave evil things like they did. Don't worship false gods like some of them did, as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink and they got up to play. Let's not practice sexual immorality, like some of them did, and twenty-three thousand died in one day. Let's not test Christ, like some of them did, and were killed by the snakes. Let's not grumble, like some of them did, and were killed by the destroyer. These things happened to them as an example and were written as a warning for us to whom the end of time has come. So those who think they are standing need to watch out or else they may fall. No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it.

Reflection

In ninth grade I had the best Sunday School teacher I have ever had. At the end of class, he would say in his most commanding voice "God is good!" and we would have to respond,

“All the time!” He would then flip the statement “All the time!” and our response, “God is good!” He would require us to say it with a certain level of enthusiasm before he would let us leave. I remember him saying something along the lines of “Even if you don’t feel it at that moment, sometimes you need to convince yourself of this fact in life.” So, for that reason he wanted us to say it as heartily as we could muster.

One Sunday, he did a lesson on what would eventually become my senior quote, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful, he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted God will provide a way for you to endure it and rise above it.” 1 Corinthians 10: 13

I liked how this verse sounded then but in more mature years, I have realized that it is speaking more specifically to those struggling with playing with snakes.... I’m just joking! It is talking to those who struggled with issues that the Israelites seem to struggle with. Grumbling against God, idolatry, and sexual immorality are explicitly listed. Those three values are engrained in our twenty-first century societal values.

At times, those values were prevalent in the Israelite camps. The Israelites complained ALL THE TIME that God and/or Moses should have just left them in Israel because they would’ve at least had food. (A lot of the complaining is about food and water. Which, in that regard, I would probably fit right in among the Israelites.) The Israelites seem to forget all the oceans God has parted for them and they only care about the here and now. And right now, they want water.

Moses convenes with God and is given instruction to speak to the rock and water would flow from it. Moses gets back around the Israelites and uses sharper words and smacks the rock twice. I imagine him going Hulk mode. “Moses Smash!”

Attitudes are catching.

God always listens to our prayers. Although our ideas of the perfect answer and God’s answer may not line up, but what will always line up is God’s love for us. God “satisfies the hungry and thirsty with good things.” God never abandoned the Israelites and he never abandons us. Even through whining, God provides.

God also provides ways for us to avoid sin. Temptation is all around us, it is in every facet of our society. Even Jesus was tempted. But “God is good, All the time” and God provides ways for us to rise above our temptation and stand taller than we ever thought possible. - Jessica Haywood

March 17

Scripture - Isaiah 60:15-22

Instead of being abandoned,
hated, and forbidden,
I will make you majestic forever,
a joy for all generations.
You will suck the milk of nations,
and nurse at royal breasts.
You will know that I am the Lord, your savior
and your redeemer, the mighty one of Jacob.
Instead of bronze I will bring gold;
instead of iron I will bring silver;
instead of wood, bronze;
and instead of stones, iron.
I will make peace your governor
and righteousness your taskmaster.
Violence will no longer resound throughout your land,
nor devastation or destruction within your borders.
You will call your walls Salvation,
and your gates Praise.
The sun will no longer be your light by day,
nor will the moon shine for illumination by night.
The Lord will be your everlasting light;
your God will be your glory.
Your sun will no longer set;
your moon will no longer wane.
The Lord will be an everlasting light for you,
and your days of mourning will be ended.
Your people will all be righteous;
they will possess the land forever.
They are the shoot that I planted,
the work of my hands, to glorify myself.
The least will become a thousand,
and the smallest a powerful people.
I am the Lord; at the right moment, I will hurry it along.

Reflection

A quote that I think of and reflect on often is from The Meaning of Marriage by Timothy Keller. It reads “He loved us, not because we were lovely to him, but to make us lovely.”

His love makes us lovely. It is his unending love and grace and mercy that transforms me, transforms all of us, into something lovely. He takes us - the small, weak, feeble, broken things that we are - and makes us into something new. Something beautiful. He’s doing it in me. He’s doing it in you. And he’s doing it in us, together.

This passage, for me, is a beautiful reminder of that. God, and God alone, is able to reverse all the failures and sorrows of Israel through the open display of his own presence forever. They will be majestic through no effort of their own. He will make them a joy when they have previously been hated. They will be cared for but not because they are worthy.

As part of his redemption plan, God has granted them beauty and majesty they don't possess on their own. Why? Because God is in the business of moving people from their cynical unbelief to a wondering adoration of Him. The work God is doing in you and in me, he does to bring us into closer relationship with Him. That we might know Him more, might love Him more, and might serve Him more faithfully.

But God does not stop there, my friends. He will bring bigger and better than they had ever dreamed - gold instead of bronze, silver instead of iron. He blows up every expectation. He brings peace and righteousness. Violence, devastation and destruction are no more when He is in control.

And most of all, the presence of God Himself will be the light for the nation. He has done this before as the pillar of fire and cloud, but this time it'll be so bright that there'll be no need for the sun and moon. And God says He'll do it all in its perfect time. It won't happen a moment too soon or too late.

The time is coming when he will fulfill all His promises, when He will complete all the work. When all things will be realized. I long for the day - some days, I long more than others. But while we wait, let us push deeper and further and more sincerely into the beautiful and new work God is doing within us. - Amy Oliver

March 18

Scripture - Psalm 51:1-12

Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!
Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!
Wash me completely clean of my guilt;
purify me from my sin!
Because I know my wrongdoings,
my sin is always right in front of me.
I've sinned against you—you alone.
I've committed evil in your sight.
That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,
completely correct when you issue your judgment.
Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,
from the moment my mother conceived me.
And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;
you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.
Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;
wash me and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and celebration again;
let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.
Hide your face from my sins;
wipe away all my guilty deeds!
Create a clean heart for me, God;
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
Please don't throw me out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit away from me.
Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.

Reflection

Psalm 51 takes place after the prophet Nathan confronts David for his part in the rape of Bathsheba and the plotted execution of Bathsheba's husband. It sees David writing from a place of complete brokenness. He writes "I know my wrongdoings" and "my sin is always right in front of me."

Of course it is! It's just been pointed out to him. Of course, what was pointed out to him was not a new thing, but the unveiling of an already existing reality. He'd been wallowing in sin, but unwilling to see it! Nathan brought it to the light, helped David to see it, and now it could be confessed.

True confession, the bringing of that which we seek to hide in darkness into the light of God's mercy, is not an act that induces guilt and shame. It is an act of deep and radical freedom.

This is one of the reasons that the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Ephesians: "...and don't participate in the unfruitful actions of darkness. Instead, you should reveal the truth about them...But everything exposed to the light is revealed by the light. Everything that is revealed by the light is the light" (Ephesians 6:11-14, Common English Bible).

May we all have the community around us that will help us see the things we are hiding in darkness. May we have the courage to admit our sins when we see them. And in that freedom, may we find God willing to take what has been brought into the light and transform it. To create in all of us clean hearts and new spirits.

Let's start today. Let's start with confession. Let us admit that God is God and we are not. Let us lift up our failures and pettiness instead of hiding it. Let us be honest with ourselves and Creator. Let us walk together into the light of Love. - Brandon Hudson

March 19

Scripture - Hebrews 4:14-5:4

Also, let's hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God's Son; because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin.

Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

Every high priest is taken from the people and put in charge of things that relate to God for their sake, in order to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. The high priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and those who are misled since he himself is prone to weakness. Because of his weakness, he must offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as for the people. No one takes this honor for themselves but takes it only when they are called by God, just like Aaron.

Reflection

The most comforting line in this passage is verse 15, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet without sin."

As a counselor, there were many times I was working with an individual who was seeking help with issues I had never experienced. I would tell them that I had not experienced that personally, and ask them to tell me what that is like. No matter how great they did with their description of their situation, I was limited in my ability to comprehend, because of my lack of personal knowledge/experience.

This past summer, I had total knee replacement. This was just a few months after Barbara Gunn had the same operation by the same doctor, and we both used the same physical therapist during recovery. I'm sure Barbara got tired of my questions, but I continued to call on her because she knew my situation. She had experienced it and knew what I was going through. I didn't have to tell her what it was like and hope she would be able to understand. She knew. I was fortunate to have Barbara to call on. She was a great resource and a great comforter.

According to this passage, Jesus was "tempted in every way." We don't have to explain what our situations are like, He already knows and understands. So let us be like the words in verse 16, "Let us 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." - Wes Jeffcoat

March 20

Scripture - John 12:1-11

12 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." 9 When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, 11 since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Reflection

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. —Psalm 1:1-2 (KJV)

Being scornful and finding fault is so easy. I often find myself guilty of it, judging (in my head, not aloud) the deeds of others as Judas did here, casting aspersions on both their actions and motives. My personal theory is that I do it to make myself feel more important, to boost my self-esteem at the expense of others. Maybe Judas did it for the same reason. Maybe he was feeling a twinge of guilt about his coming betrayal and wanted those around him to think he was a true lover of the poor, even though he wasn't.

Mary's action, though, was a sign of her deep devotion to Jesus. The NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible points out that usually hosts only anointed the head while providing water for the feet. Normally only servants handled the guests' feet. Jesus' rebuke of Judas' criticism impresses us that what we do for Him is blessed when done with sincerity and love. The oil—usually imported from northern India—was worth about a year's wages for a laborer. But the little family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus was reunited because of Jesus. She showed her gratitude to Him with her gift.

Judas wasn't the only one in this passage who was scornful. The chief priests, ever critical of Jesus, were incensed that people were crowding around to see Him, as well as that Lazarus guy who was raised from the dead. They set their sights on killing Lazarus in addition to Jesus. How dare those Jews believe in Him? The ultimate expression of their scorn would come soon, as related in Matthew 27:37: Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

A Prayer: Lord, may we expunge scorn from our hearts and minds. May we love Jesus as Mary did, giving to Him sacrificially and sincerely. May we find our purpose, joy and self-esteem in You. Amen. - Donna Fitch

March 21

Scripture - Psalm 51

1 Look on me with a heart of mercy, O God, according to Your generous love. According to Your great compassion, wipe out every consequence of my shameful crimes.
2 Thoroughly wash me, inside and out, of all my crooked deeds. Cleanse me from my sins.
3 For I am fully aware of all I have done wrong, and my guilt is there, staring me in the face.
4 It was against You, only You, that I sinned, for I have done what You say is wrong, right before Your eyes. So when You speak, You are in the right. When You judge, Your judgments are pure and true.
5 For I was guilty from the day I was born, a sinner from the time my mother became pregnant with me.
6 But still, You long to enthrone truth throughout my being; in unseen places deep within me, You show me wisdom.
7 Cleanse me of my wickedness with hyssop, and I will be clean. If You wash me, I will be whiter than snow.
8 Help me hear joy and happiness as my accompaniment, so my bones, which You have broken, will dance in delight instead.
9 Cover Your face so You will not see my sins, and erase my guilt from the record.
10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; restore within me a sense of being brand new.
11 Do not throw me far away from Your presence, and do not remove Your Holy Spirit from me.
12 Give back to me the deep delight of being saved by You; let Your willing Spirit sustain me.
13 If You do, I promise to teach rebels Your ways and help sinners find their way back to You.
14 Free me from the guilt of murder, of shedding a man's blood, O God who saves me. Now my tongue, which was used to destroy, will be used to sing with deep delight of how right and just You are.
15 O Lord, pry open my lips that this mouth will sing joyfully of Your greatness.
16 I would surrender my dearest possessions or destroy all that I prize to prove my regret, but You don't take pleasure in sacrifices or burnt offerings.
17 What sacrifice I can offer You is my broken spirit because a broken spirit, O God, a heart that honestly regrets the past, You won't detest.
18 Be good to Zion; grant her Your favor. Make Jerusalem's walls steady and strong.
19 Then there will be sacrifices made, burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings, With right motives that will delight You. And costly young bulls will be offered up to Your altar, only the best.

Reflection

David, a man "after God's own heart," a King no less, doesn't just stumble upon temptation (Bathsheba) and wisely back away. No. He runs full speed toward it and embraces it with passionate arrogance. And now, in his brokenness, filled with guilt and shame, he pleads with God to cleanse him and restore within him the "deep delight of being saved", to restore his joy.

We desperately need the forgiveness we receive from God when we sin, however that's not the end of the story. It's just not that simple. David knew that too. For him to go forward and serve God, he also desperately needed to be cleansed and restored. The guilt of his actions and the shame of his selfish decisions, was eating him alive. So he pleads with God.

For a minute, it's easy to feel a little sanctimonious when you read the story of David and his dealings with Bathsheba and Uria. It's like David, an overachiever if ever there was one, left no "sin" stone unturned. But that "holier than thou" minute passes quickly. Because we know in our hearts that we too are willful, arrogant, selfish. We know that we too desperately need God's mercy.

So, let us find comfort in knowing we serve a forgiving, compassionate God. Humble ourselves before Him and renew our desire to please Him.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God; restore within me a sense of being brand new." - Karen Maercker

March 22

Scripture - Psalm 119:9-16

How can young people keep their paths pure?
By guarding them according to what you've said.
I have sought you with all my heart.
Don't let me stray from any of your commandments!
I keep your word close, in my heart,
so that I won't sin against you.
You, Lord, are to be blessed!
Teach me your statutes.
I will declare out loud
all the rules you have spoken.
I rejoice in the content of your laws
as if I were rejoicing over great wealth.
I will think about your precepts
and examine all your paths.
I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget what you have said.

Reflection

Psalm 119 is well known as the longest chapter in the Bible. The poem is actually an extended, and extensive, meditation on the meaning of the law. Given the sterile connotations often associated with “law” and “legalism,” it is hard to appreciate the lyrical beauty of these reflections. One thing is for certain, the writer of this psalm does not view the law as either sterile or void of vitality.

We help ourselves somewhat if we remember that “law” in this psalm, and its corresponding “your word,” have reference to Torah—the Law of Moses. Torah is more than just legislative matters, case law, injunctions, and statutes, though it includes all of that. Torah is best understood as “instruction.” This is what the psalmist celebrates throughout this long poem. Torah is life-giving. Torah, when internalized, creates a meaningful life. Torah frees us from foolishness by instilling wisdom. Torah does not do its work through legislative coercion. Torah does its work by changing the essential character of those who reflect on its meaning.

This principle is amply illustrated in the section of the psalm we consider here. The psalmist does not hold back his emotions: “I will not forget your word!” (v. 16). This is a passionate relationship with truth—and with the hope of personal, as well as community maturity.

There is an important point to understand in all this—though not so much in what the psalmist says about the law, though his words are important and instructive. Equally important is his model of commitment to the law. The example the psalmist offers us, of how to love the law and pursue truth, is an excellent model for spiritual formation.

We will not make much headway in any endeavor without commitment. The artist who masters the piano or some other musical instrument cannot do so without regular attention to the instrument. The athlete who seeks to compete at some high level cannot afford to miss a day of training and conditioning. The writer who would compose a masterpiece must sit with the words every day if the work is to be finished.

Similar comparisons could be made to other endeavors. If a married couple expects their relationship to survive and thrive over a number of years, they must be intentional about communication, conflict management, and nurturing affection. Parents who want to see their children grow into fully functioning adults must commit the time needed to train and guide them.

The psalmist shows us the importance of the wisdom of the passionate pursuit. Whether it is God's truth or a chance to perform at Carnegie Hall, it is disciplined and intentional attention to the task that brings about the desired result. In the case of the law, the result is wisdom and the doorway to a meaningful relationship with God. - Jim Evans

March 23

Scripture - Isaiah 44:1-8

- 1 BUT now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!
2 Thus says the LORD who made you,
 who formed you in the womb and will help you:
 Do not fear, O Jacob my servant,
 Jeshurun whom I have chosen.
3 For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
 and streams on the dry ground;
 I will pour my spirit upon your descendants,
 and my blessing on your offspring.
4 They shall spring up like a green tamarisk,
 like willows by flowing streams.
5 This one will say, "I am the LORD's,"
 another will be called by the name of Jacob,
 yet another will write on the hand, "The LORD's,"
 and adopt the name of Israel.
6 Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,
 and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
 I am the first and I am the last;
 besides me there is no god.
7 Who is like me? Let them proclaim it,
 let them declare and set it forth before me.
 Who has announced from of old the things to come?
 Let them tell us what is yet to be.
8 Do not fear, or be afraid;
 have I not told you from of old and declared it?
 You are my witnesses!
 Is there any god besides me?
 There is no other rock; I know not one.

Reflection

My Bible labels this passage "God's Blessing on Israel", and what a blessing it is.

Verse 3 takes me back to my childhood, growing up on our family farm in south Alabama. Summers were hot and mostly dry, and crops depended on having enough, but not too much, sunshine and rain. I remember my dad walking outside each morning during planting, growing, and harvesting seasons to gauge the weather. Would today be the day the thirsty land would receive rain? He tried not to worry us, but when the rain would come, you could not only see the crops perk up and look happier, the relief on my dad's face and in his shoulders was palpable. All the farmers would gather at the local "chocolate cocola" store (gas station that sold soft drinks and snacks) on rainy days to celebrate and share stories. The joy of God's provision is to be shared.

God's spirit is poured out on all of us, just as water on thirsty land, just as he promised his blessings would be poured out on Israel's offspring. As the young poet, Amanda Gorman, says in her poem "The Hill We Climb":

"For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it."

May we see and feel God's light poured out on all of us. Let us live the words in verse 8: "Do not fear, or be afraid", and let us bear witness to the love and light of our God. Let us be brave enough to see and be the light. Amen. - Patsy Jeffcoat

March 24

Scripture - The Message - Haggai 2:1-9

1-3 On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the Word of God came through the prophet Haggai: “Tell Governor Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and High Priest Joshua son of Jehozadak and all the people: ‘Is there anyone here who saw the Temple the way it used to be, all glorious? And what do you see now? Not much, right?’

4-5 “‘So get to work, Zerubbabel!’—God is speaking.

“‘Get to work, Joshua son of Jehozadak—high priest!’

“‘Get to work, all you people!’—God is speaking.

“‘Yes, get to work! For I am with you.’ The God-of-the-Angel-Armies is speaking! ‘Put into action the word I covenanted with you when you left Egypt. I’m living and breathing among you right now. Don’t be timid. Don’t hold back.’

6-7 “‘This is what God-of-the-Angel-Armies said: ‘Before you know it, I will shake up sky and earth, ocean and fields. And I’ll shake down all the godless nations. They’ll bring bushels of wealth and I will fill this Temple with splendor.’ God-of-the-Angel-Armies says so.

8 ‘I own the silver,
I own the gold.’

Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies.

9 “‘This Temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish: a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness.’ Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies.”

Reflection

Haggai is kind of a strange prophet. He doesn’t have long monologues or speeches. He isn’t bringing a deep theological message. And his mission doesn’t last very long - only three and a half months. His task was to rebuild God’s Temple. That’s it. It’s just unusual, but still important for us to pay attention to because he is still a prophet!

I’ve often said and I have heard many of you say as well that the church is not a building, but the people that create a community. But Haggai is a prophet tasked with rebuilding a building, not regathering a people.

If we are honest, we probably didn’t think much about our church building before the pandemic. We took it for granted. We didn’t need to think about the church building as the church because it was there every week (or every twice a week if you came on Wednesdays as well!).

But things change, don't they? Now we've been worshipping outside of the church building for almost a year and I think our thoughts about it are changing, maybe even maturing. Do you have more empathy now for the people of God when they were without a place to worship? I do.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to run a camera one Sunday morning, and I was surprised at how I felt when I walked back into the church building after so long being away. I missed the building, the actual building. I mean of course I miss all of you way more, but I do indeed miss our building. Even though we sometimes have forest friends who visit indoors or have furniture that would be better at home in a past decade or can feel like more things need to be fixed than are working, I still miss our building. The light that floods through the sanctuary windows during Sunday morning worship, the Godly Play room full of our sacred stories, and the warmth of the fireside room whether a fire is lit in the fireplace or not. I miss it. And I'm sure that you do too.

Be encouraged, church family, by the words from Haggai. "This [church] is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish: a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness." Be prayerful about how God is calling you to impact our church building. Soon we will hear these words. "Get to work, all you people!"—God is speaking. 'Yes, get to work! For I am with you.' The God-of-the-Angel-Armies is speaking! 'Put into action the word I covenanted with you when you left... I'm living and breathing among you right now. Don't be timid. Don't hold back.'" - Jill Hudson

March 25

Scripture - Philippians 2:1-11

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

Though he was in the form of God,
 he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
But he emptied himself
 by taking the form of a slave
 and by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
 even death on a cross.
Therefore, God highly honored him
 and gave him a name above all names,
so that at the name of Jesus everyone
 in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow
 and every tongue confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Reflection

Paul is quite concise in his letter to the Philippians. In Chapter 2 Verses 1-11, Paul's writings were direct in communicating that followers of Christ are to be of like-minds, love each other, and being one in spirit and purpose. He reminds the Philippians of Jesus' humility in his ministry. Paul tells them that selfish, vain, and inequality are unacceptable as Christians.

Paul continues to tell them that Jesus, the Son of God, took on the role of being a human humble and obedient servant to God. Not only that, he humbled himself and was killed on a cross being obedient to God. As a Christian, we are to bow to him and follow his teachings

As I read Verses 1-5, and then summarized them in the first paragraph, I felt very humbled and anxious as I paraphrased them on my laptop.

Lent is a time of self-reflection, which is not easy for anyone - at least it should not be. Verses 1-5 are statements of who are called to be as Christians. Just for today, read the verses (or the first paragraph of this devotional) in front of a mirror. Look at yourself in the mirror. Reflect on the actions you can take to continue progress with your Christian journey. - Ann Bowman

March 26

Scripture

Philippians 2:12-18

Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes. Do everything without grumbling and arguing so that you may be blameless and pure, innocent children of God surrounded by people who are crooked and corrupt. Among these people you shine like stars in the world because you hold on to the word of life. This will allow me to say on the day of Christ that I haven't run for nothing or worked for nothing. But even if I am poured out like a drink offering upon the altar of service for your faith, I am glad. I'm glad with all of you. You should be glad about this in the same way. Be glad with me!

Reflection

I worked at Passport Camps for three summers during college. Each morning the staff would meet and have a time of devotion together. This was the first time I had heard of Lectio Divina. It was my favorite Passport staff devotion type because we would be able to lay on the floor with our eyes closed and just think.

Lectio Divina is Latin for Divine Reading. It is a way of reading the same set of scriptures several times and letting it speak to you in a different way each time. It is a slow meditative practice. One thing I like to do to make a "spicy" version of Lectio Divina, is to read a different translation of the same scripture each time.

I want to walk us through a Lectio Divina of Philippians 2:12-18. Before you begin, you will need paper and something to write with.

First, get in a comfortable position and focus on your breathing. When you feel relaxed proceed to the next step.

Next, Read the scripture. During this initial reading just allow the words to wash over you.

When you are ready, read the scripture again. This time focus on a word or phrase that sticks out to you.

Lastly, read the scripture, one last time and prayerfully journal on your paper. This could be a prayer written down, a doodle, or just a record of your thoughts during the reading.

God, give me ways to always rejoice. Help me to remember your promises of love when I feel the need to grumble about my life. Amen - Jessica Haywood

March 27

Scripture

Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

Jesus and his disciples were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, with Jesus in the lead. The disciples were amazed while the others following behind were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside again, he told them what was about to happen to him. “Look!” he said. “We’re going up to Jerusalem. The Human One will be handed over to the chief priests and the legal experts. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. They will ridicule him, spit on him, torture him, and kill him. After three days, he will rise up.”

Jesus and his followers came into Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho, together with his disciples and a sizable crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus’ son, was sitting beside the road. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was there, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!” Many scolded him, telling him to be quiet, but he shouted even louder, “Son of David, show me mercy!”

Jesus stopped and said, “Call him forward.”

They called the blind man, “Be encouraged! Get up! He’s calling you.”

Throwing his coat to the side, he jumped up and came to Jesus.

Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?”

The blind man said, “Teacher, I want to see.”

Jesus said, “Go, your faith has healed you.” At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus on the way.

Reflection

Each summer while I was in college I worked at a Christian children’s camp. Churches would bring their kids for one week at a time and my first summer, my first week, I had a little girl named Wynnonah in my small group. Wynnonah is blind. And hilarious.

She knew she was adopted and told me she didn’t really know what that meant other than she didn’t “match her parents or siblings.” I asked what her favorite shows were and she quickly told me “I don’t watch TV...because I’m blind. Remember? I literally don’t watch anything. Ever.” She made me laugh all week. Everywhere we went we held hands - it was easier for her to navigate a campus she wasn’t familiar with that way. And every single time she loved to make fun of me for my sweaty hands.

Every story of a blind person in the bible makes me think of Wynnonah.

When they tell the blind man, Bartimaeus, to get up because Jesus is calling him, he threw off his cloak and sprang up. It’s not hard for me to picture little Wynnonah doing the same.

It didn't matter that she was blind, she had a lot of energy and was all over the place. When Jesus asks what he can do for him, I can't help but hear the answer, "Let me recover my sight" in the sassy, sweet eight-year-old voice of Wynnonah. Because, duh, they both want to be able to see.

There are lots of things Bartimaeus gets right that we later see the disciples get wrong. Even though Bartimaeus is physically blind, his faith is active. He sees and understands who Jesus is ("Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"), he persists despite hindrances (he cried out all the more after being rebuked), and he expects an interaction with Jesus will transform him. And in the end, Jesus says his faith has made him well.

And Bartimaeus, with his newly gifted eyesight, follows Jesus on the way.

Wynnonah taught me more about faith and trust than I could have ever dreamed of teaching her that week. Lessons that I carry with me to this day. And God has been using Bartimaeus for thousands of years to bring His people into closer relationship with Him.

May we come to Him as honestly as Wynnonah with the faith of Bartimaeus - trusting that He will heal us where we're broken. And may we, newly made, follow Him on the way. -
Amy Oliver

March 28

Scripture - Mark 11:1-11

When Jesus and his followers approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave two disciples a task, saying to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘Its master needs it, and he will send it back right away.’”

They went and found a colt tied to a gate outside on the street, and they untied it. Some people standing around said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them just what Jesus said, and they left them alone. They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes upon it, and he sat on it. Many people spread out their clothes on the road while others spread branches cut from the fields. Those in front of him and those following were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!” Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the Twelve.

Reflection

Today is Palm Sunday, our entry into Holy Week and our remembrance of Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. And don’t misunderstand, Jesus intends to *make an entrance* into Jerusalem.

The natural outcome of his ministry among the people of the fringes, his empowerment of the ordinary and rejection of the powerful, has led him into conflict with the political and religious powers. Often that conflict has come from the powers themselves, they have sought him out and tried to trap him. Now, Jesus is bringing the conflict to them in the city of God.

He sets himself up as a king, but not the kind of king people are expecting. He rides in on a “colt,” though John clarifies that he rides in on a donkey. He chooses to come as one riding not on a war steed, but on a beast of burden. He also creates an atmosphere of anticipation, letting and encouraging the people who are there to proclaim him the “one” who is coming to reign.

Of course, Jesus is the One coming to reign, not just then, but forever. It’s just that the way he is coming to reign is so foreign to our understanding and desire for a conquering king, that we must work over and over again to let him reign in the way he wants. He wants to ride into our hearts and our midst and overturn systems of corruption and division. He wants to do it through vulnerability and sacrifice, not warmongering and power. He wanted to show the world a new way, and he still wants to do the same for us!

This week, as we prepare to head to the cross again, may our eyes be opened again to the new ways that Jesus wants to lead us. And by God’s grace, may we have the strength to follow. - Brandon Hudson

March 29

Scripture - Hebrews 9:11-15

But Christ has appeared as the high priest of the good things that have happened. He passed through the greater and more perfect meeting tent, which isn't made by human hands (that is, it's not a part of this world). He entered the holy of holies once for all by his own blood, not by the blood of goats or calves, securing our deliverance for all time. If the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkled ashes of cows made spiritually contaminated people holy and clean, how much more will the blood of Jesus wash our consciences clean from dead works in order to serve the living God? He offered himself to God through the eternal Spirit as a sacrifice without any flaw.

This is why he's the mediator of a new covenant (which is a will): so that those who are called might receive the promise of the eternal inheritance on the basis of his death. His death occurred to set them free from the offenses committed under the first covenant.

Reflection

Have you ever gone out to eat, and following your meal, you find out that someone has already paid for your meal? What a nice gesture of kindness and love. Even though you were able to pay for the meal yourself, the fact that someone had already done so gives you a good feeling inside.

Now imagine this: There comes a situation where you need a very expensive surgery to live. However, you don't have the resources needed to pay for the surgery. You are hopeless, you will die. Friends and neighbors will come by and try to help, but they too lack the resources needed to save you. Then someone came and was able to save you and does so freely. This is the power of the blood of Jesus.

Verse 14 of this passage says, "offered himself, unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so we may serve the living God." This act, this sacrifice that frees us from our spiritual deaths is done out of love for us. How do we ever repay such a wonderful gift? As stated in verse 14, "that we may serve a loving God." How are we serving our living God? - Wes Jeffcoat

March 30

Scripture - John 12:20-36

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. 27 “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” 30 Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people[a] to myself.” 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. 34 The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” 35 Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Reflection

The shadows are long,
Pointing to the cross,
Pointing to the hour, the long hour, the hour of blood and sweat and agony.
The hour of our redemption.

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies—
God forbid it, Lord!
Get behind me, Satan!

Those who love their life lose it. Those who hate their life keep it. Eternally.
The shadows are long,
Glory blazes through,
Glory blazes through, a voice of light, brilliant light perplexing and dazzling even the closest followers.

The light of the Father.
Father, glorify your name—
This is my Son, the Beloved,
With whom I am well pleased.
They will respect my son...
This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

The shadows are long,
The light shines through,
The light shines through for a little longer, a little longer for the children of light.
We are the children of light.

Walk while you have the light...
If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light...
Those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.
While you have the light, believe in the light.
The shadows are long,
But we are children of light,
Children of light through the Grain who died and bore much fruit,
Lifted up as we shall be.
He bore the fruit in us,
His believers, his followers, his children
Who walk
in the glorious light.
Amen. - Donna Fitch

March 31

Scripture - Hebrews 12:1-3

1 We have all these great people around us as examples. Their lives tell us what faith means. So we, too, should run the race that is before us and never quit. We should remove from our lives anything that would slow us down and the sin that so often makes us fall.

2 We must never stop looking to Jesus. He is the leader of our faith, and he is the one who makes our faith complete. He suffered death on a cross. But he accepted the shame of the cross as if it were nothing because of the joy he could see waiting for him. And now he is sitting at the right side of God's throne.

3 Think about Jesus. He patiently endured the angry insults that sinful people were shouting at him. Think about him so that you won't get discouraged and stop trying.

Reflection

Who doesn't need encouragement? I know I do! There is so much in this chaotic world that works hard to rob me of my joy and peace. To convince me it is all just hopeless.

While writing for this devotional series I have thought several times of the words found in Ecclesiastes, "there's nothing new under the sun." Evil isn't new. Sin isn't new. Chaos isn't new. You know what else isn't new? Faithful followers to encourage us.

My mother has always been at the top of my list of examples of great faith. She loved Jesus and she encouraged her family to as well. One day she just randomly commented to my children "you can't go wrong with Jesus" and that statement stuck! It is repeated often with love and humor and agreement by even her great grandsons now. She knew exactly where her strength came from, who it came from, and she wanted us to be clear on that too.

So when it seems too hard to be faithful, too hard to rid our lives of what trips us up, too hard to make the right choices, I pray we will think about those who ran this race before us. Those determined and committed faithful followers. Despite hardships, despite stumbles, they pressed on. And so should we.

Most of all I pray we remember Jesus. Remember what He endured for each one of us. Remember the depth of His love for us. Remember His teachings. And be thankful and encouraged. Amen. - Karen Maercker

April 1

Scripture - 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me." Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes.

Reflection

Today is Maundy Thursday. Traditionally, this is the day Christians celebrate Jesus washing the disciples' feet and giving the elements of a meal a deep theological meaning. Bread becomes the body of Christ; the cup of wine becomes the blood of Jesus. All of this taking place on the eve of Good Friday when Jesus faced the cross.

Why do we continue to observe these religious practices? Well, for one thing, Jesus commanded us to do so. That is where the word maundy comes from. It is derived from a Latin word meaning "to command." In fact, there are several commands given that night before Jesus' death. In addition to telling his disciples to "do this in remembrance of me," he also commanded his followers to "love one another." But being commanded is not the only reason we remember and celebrate that Thursday night.

Christians of all traditions have reflected on the Lord's Supper as an important moment in our understanding of who Jesus was and why he came to us. Identifying the bread as his body, and the wine as his blood, Jesus is clearly pointing to his humanity as key to his redemptive act on the cross.

Some early Christian believers had a problem with this idea. They had trouble believing that God incarnate, God in the flesh, could suffer. They proposed that Jesus as God only "appeared" to suffer and die. But this is not where most Christians ended up in their beliefs. It was not a divine figure, powerful and impervious to pain, who was hoisted up on the cruel cross. It was the human Jesus, vulnerable as all humans are, who was lifted on the cross. And it was as a human that he suffered and died on our behalf.

We must be careful here. It was not how much he suffered that is important, but that he suffered. All the writers of the Gospel are careful not to dwell too long on the gruesome nature of dying on a cross. In very brief terms they tell us simply "he was crucified."

Along with this is sometimes an over emphasis on the blood of Jesus. We have hymns in our hymn book that focus on how much blood Jesus shed. There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins. But as with the suffering on the cross, it is not how much blood Jesus shed for us, but that he did shed his blood for our redemption. Crucifixion was not an overly bloody form of execution. Most victims died not from bleeding to death but of asphyxiation.

In ancient Hebrew thought, blood meant life. To say that “Jesus shed his blood for us,” is just another way of saying he gave his life for us. That is where our attention should be this Maundy Thursday. Not on how much Jesus suffered, but that he gave himself freely. Not on how much blood was shed, but that as a human being Jesus gave his life for our healing and hope.

With all that in mind, let us break bread together on our knees. - Jim Evans

April 2

Scripture - Hebrews 10:16-25

16 “This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,”

17 he also adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

19 Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another “, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Reflection

Good Friday is the day the church pauses to meditate on the death of Jesus. One of today's focal passages is John 18:1-19:42, which is a moving account of the trial, arrest, crucifixion, and burial of Jesus. If you have not read this passage during Lent, I encourage you to do so. Feel it, meditate on it, and let it sink into your soul. The sacrifice our Lord made for us is exceedingly powerful and important for us to reimagine, especially on this Holy day.

Thankfully, as we relive Christ's crucifixion, we are able to keep in our heart the knowledge of His resurrection on the third day. This passage from Hebrews speaks to us about the new covenant with God made possible by Jesus, and the promise of forgiveness, purity, and cleanliness.

I am especially drawn to and encouraged by verses 23-25, beginning with “Let us HOLD FAST...”. You see, my grandmother, Flora Victoria McLeod Nichols, was a descendent of the MacLeod Clan of Scotland, whose motto is, “Hold Fast.” Now, some might call our family trait of holding fast, stubbornness, or worse. I prefer to think of it as loyalty and determination to not give up on things that are important to us.

Either way, this passage in Hebrews paints a beautiful picture of hope, faithfulness, love, and encouragement for us all. What better to ‘hold fast’ to than the promises of our Lord? The images here of Christ opening God's sanctuary to human beings encourages us to find new ways of service, and new ways of sharing God's love and grace beyond our beloved sanctuary walls.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. - Patsy Jeffcoat

April 3

Scripture - The Message - 1 Peter 4:1-2, 7-11

1-2 Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like him. Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way. Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want.

7-11 Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help. That way, God's bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and he'll get all the credit as the One mighty in everything—encores to the end of time. Oh, yes!

Reflection

I'm not sure what else there is to say about this passage. Maybe just read it again. It's just so fantastic. This is the Word of the Lord, Crosscreek. Thanks be to God!

I really believe that God is working within us, Crosscreek, to do something amazing with our congregation - to reach out to those in our community who do not have and have never known the love of a church family. I teach students every day that have never stepped foot into a church building. I would say that most of my students have never known the love and acceptance and care of a church family. Crosscreek, we have work to do. And it is right in our neighborhood, in our community. We have love to share with those who feel like they will never belong because they are on the list of those who have not been openly welcomed into churches or would not belong because they are divorced, single, married, widowed, young, old, middle-aged, male, female, non-binary, gay, straight, bi-sexual, black, white, Latino, Asian, creative, musical, average, intelligent, poor, middle-class, wealthy, tattooed, pierced, recovering from addiction, addicted, differently-abled, republican, democratic, independent, liberal, conservative, homeless, underweight, overweight, fit, introverted, extroverted, atheistic, agnostic and on and on and on. I think we all know better - that they do belong, that they are welcome, that they do have worth and value and import to God and to the Kingdom and to us. We just have to find ways to openly and explicitly let them know. And that is where I think God is going to use us in a powerful way very soon.

Let's go back to the Scripture one more time. "Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help." Stay wide-awake in prayer, Crosscreek. We've got lots of love to share with the world and we know that love changes everything. - Jill Hudson

April 4

Scripture - John 20:1-18

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

Reflection

Mary Magdalene was the very first person to go to Jesus' tomb. She realized that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb. She ran to the disciples to tell them the news. The disciples ran to the tomb to see for themselves. Mary Magdalene stayed at the tomb weeping after the disciples left. Then two angels in white appeared where Jesus' body had been. It was then

when Jesus appeared and spoke to her. At first she mistook him as the gardener, but then screamed when she realized that he was Jesus. Jesus told her not to hold him, because he needed to return to his Father. He then instructed Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples what she saw and heard.

All of us have experienced grief after the death of someone we love. I think Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene helps her with her painful grief, especially when she could not find his body. Believing in Jesus' resurrection is part of our Christian journey. What did you think when you first heard the Easter story of Jesus rising on the third day? Did you question the miracle then or even now?

May this day of Easter remind us we are so loved by God that He gave us His Son for a short time on Earth. His Son's death gave us the miracle of resurrection, which gives us eternal life in Heaven. Let us remember that first Easter morning when we experience grief.

Let us celebrate and remember the miracle of eternal life and love today and everyday.

Christ the Lord is Risen Today!
Alleluia! - Ann Bowman