

The Way of the WORD

2022 Lenten Devotional
Crosscreek Baptist Church
crosscreekbaptist.org

The Way of the Word

Introduction

I'm glad you are joining us on our Lenten journey together at Crosscreek this year. The tradition of Lent comes from an intentional period of 40 days (not counting Sundays) in which we remember Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We mark this period of time by withdrawing from certain things (fasting) and/or becoming more intentional in our spiritual walk. This Lenten devotional is designed to help us on that journey.

I'm always so thankful for the variety of voices that show up in these pages. I deeply believe that God speaks clearly through the gift of community, and this devotional guide for the season of Lent is a manifestation of that. We have wise sages of the church writing here (not naming any specific ages!), perspectives from our youth, and a reflection from our youngest writer ever (nine years old!). In these pages, you will find written reflections, pieces of art, poems, and even a flowchart! All of these pieces are designed to help you in your Lenten journey to pause and reflect on the work God is doing in your soul.

Our theme for this year's journey is The Way of the Word. This theme will pop up in these pages on occasion and serve as a recurring beat in our worship services throughout this season (you can join us in person on Sundays at 10AM for worship or tune in online on our Facebook page www.facebook.com/crosscreekbaptist or our YouTube page <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTnSCT5v-j9y-a4fF4H1iw>). We are following this theme because we believe that to be a follower of Christ, to be intentional about our discipleship, is to "walk" in a certain way. Our beliefs and the image of Jesus guide us in how we carry ourselves in the world.

During this season, may we grow more intentional in our "walk," may we grow deeper in love, compassion, and care for others as we seek the face of God each day.

Love,

Brandon Hudson
Pastor
Crosscreek Baptist Church
February 25, 2022

March 2 - Ash Wednesday

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Reflection - Brandon Hudson

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."

Every journey must begin somewhere. Every pilgrimage starts with a single step. For us, as we begin our journey together this Lenten season, this Psalm is a good place to start. Today, we embark on a path in which we are seeking to move together in the Way of the Word. This Psalm, among the most well known, is a great comfort. It buoys us in our communal life together as we read it at funerals and ponder the path we walk through the "valley of the shadow of death," remembering that we are called to "fear no evil." We clasp our white knuckled hands in a posture of fervent prayer while we recite it in the language of King James as we seek deliverance from the many things that face us, as we search out the comfort of the "rod and staff" of our Savior.

This is a Psalm that reminds us that we do not walk this journey alone. We walk it together; this is the promise of community. And we walk it together with a Shepherd who will not abandon us or forsake us, who has promised us deliverance. And yet, that opening line that we utter under our breath when we are on the verge of feeling

forsaken not only reminds us of a promise but pushes us towards a stance. Yes, *the Lord is my (our) shepherd*. And, *I (we) shall not want*.

As we begin this journey of Lent together, what wants are driving us? What wants do we need to lay down in order to faithfully follow the Shepherd we proclaim. Is it our drive to always appear right? Is it our want for more than we have been given? Is it our desire to take steps to protect ourselves from the trials of a life lived in vulnerability, taking matters into our own hands when we feel the Shepherd is not sufficient?

The Shepherd will guide us. That is a promise. But I know that we will find the journey an easier one to follow if we are honest at the beginning, if we do the work of recognizing the wants that drive us and laying them aside for the deeper longing of our souls, to be led through life by the One who is Love. May we take a moment today to lay down our wants, our desires, our burdens, our judgments, our self-righteousness, and all those things that keep us from leaning more deeply into trust. May we leave them here at the foot of the cross, with the ashes fresh on our foreheads, so that we can endeavor on this journey more faithfully together.

Thursday, March 3

Luke 15:1-7

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

Reflection - Wes Jeffcoat

I helped Patsy's dad on their farm from my preteens until after we were married. One thing that was done regularly was feeding the cows. Now the cows were in open pastures and once or twice a week we would feed them. This was not because they were starving; there was enough grass in the fields. We would use the feeding to "call up the cows." We would do this by entering the pasture and blowing the horn on the truck, and the cows would come running-to get the feed. By "calling up the cows," we were able to check on their well being, but mostly we did this to count. We would usually count more than once to make sure they were all present. If one was missing (lost), we would go looking for it. This was not an enjoyable task, but one that had to happen. I would walk through thick woods, briars, muddy bogs, crossing creeks, and who knows how many snakes I walked by, but the cow had to be found. Not once did Patsy's dad say, "It's alright, he'll find his way back." And yes, I was glad when the lost cow was found and brought back.

Jesus as our shepherd is routinely calling us, checking on us, and if we are not there, he continues to call us and is not satisfied until we are found. Then, he celebrates. In the parable, he celebrates not because the 99 stayed, but the one that was lost was found. Jesus wants all people to be saved, not lost. He welcomes all. In verse 2, the Pharisees said "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." The most important word in that verse is "welcomes". He does not just acknowledge the existence of sinners, but he invites them to become a part of his community.

If we see ourselves as the lost sheep, we find comfort in knowing that no matter how lost we may be, the shepherd is seeking us and ready to welcome us back. If we see our

self as the shepherd, we likewise should be seeking the lost (sinners) and welcome them in to our lives.

Friday, March 4

John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

Reflection - Dixie Ford

When I read stories in the Bible, especially stories in the Gospels, I like to imagine myself in the story. I wonder what I might have thought or how I might have reacted if I had been present when the story took place. I try to identify with the characters, especially, I'll admit, the "good guy"—the one who understands Jesus, the one with impressive faith, the hero.

For example, in today's Scripture, I would love to identify with the sheep! However, more often than I'd like to admit, I find myself standing with the Jewish leaders asking, How long will you keep us in suspense, Jesus? What is going on? Are your words actually true? Are you who you claim to be or not? Tell me! And if I am willing to listen closely, I hear Jesus answering me, as he answered the Jewish leaders, I have told you everything you need to know - you just don't believe it.

Jesus told the Jewish leaders that his works testify to who he is, but Jesus' works were too radical and too grace-filled for the Jewish leaders to believe. Jesus did not embody their understanding of the Messiah, and their understanding was blinding them to what was right in front of them. There actually was no suspense about who Jesus was, only blindness to the work of God.

On the days when we feel less like a biblical hero and more like an ornery Pharisee, on the days when we hear ourselves asking if Jesus is really who he claims to be, on the days when Jesus isn't behaving the way we would like for him to behave, may God give us grace to become like the sheep. May God open our eyes to God's work within and around us. May God open our ears to recognize the voice of our Lord and strengthen our hearts to believe and follow.

Saturday, March 5

John 10:31-42

The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God." Jesus answered, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods'—and the scripture cannot be annulled— can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.

He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there. Many came to him, and they were saying, "John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true." And many believed in him there.

Reflection - Donna Fitch

This incident takes place in Jerusalem during Hanukkah. Jesus is walking in the temple at Solomon's porch (John 10:22-23) and is soon surrounded by people who demand He state plainly if He is the Messiah. In verse 24, they say, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" According to the NIV Application Commentary, this sentence can also be translated as, "How long will you annoy us?" Jesus is not meeting their expectations about what the Messiah should be, what He should say or how He should act. In the verses before today's text, Jesus basically says, "I answer your questions, but you don't believe. I perform miracles and you don't believe. I'm the shepherd, but I don't recognize you as my sheep."

Today's scripture confused me at first, because I was hung up on who was being referred to as gods. I fell into the same linguistic trap as the Jews did. The issue isn't who is a god or why, but that He (Jesus) and the Father are one. Jesus turns their arguments against them, as He frequently does. But so many times they (and I) miss the whole point. I can just see Him putting his face in his palm and shaking His head.

The Jews are much more interested in things that don't matter. They want to shape Jesus into the image they want, and when He refuses, they seek to kill Him. I know I am guilty of trying to shape Jesus into the image I want rather than following Him. They want to argue words rather than deeds. "We are bombarded," according to the reading

on Sacred Space (<https://www.sacredspace.ie/scripture/john-10-31-42>), “with words, by advertisers, politicians, media and every sort of preacher. To each of these, as to myself, I say: If your works do not square with your words, then I will not believe you.”

A Prayer

Show me, Lord, where my life falls short of what I profess. I close the Bible up; show me how The Christ you talk about is living now and how I regard His image. Amen.

[prayer adapted from Sacred Space]

Sunday, March 6

Psalm 104:27-30

They all look to you to give them their food in due season.

When you give it to them, they gather it up;when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed;when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.

Reflection - Doug Bradle

I am a big James Herriot fan. If you have not read any of his books I will tell you that that they are filled with wonderful stories about his life as a veterinarian in the Yorkshire mountains in northeastern England starting in 1937. Each of his major books start with a poem by Cecil Frances Alexander:

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful, The Lord
God made them all.

I understand now that God made this beautiful world for us and us for Him. My parents were elementary school teachers and had the summers off. They took my brother and I to the Berkshire mountains in southern Massachusetts to a summer camp that their friends owned. We would go up right after school let out and stay until Labor Day every year. It was there that my love of nature and the outdoors formed. I learned so many things there: how to swim, ride horseback, hike and camp, to canoe, cook hot dogs over a campfire and even how to shoot a .22 rifle at the camp shooting range. Looking back, like the song says: I think to myself, "what a wonderful world." Although I did not realize it until much later, God was walking with me every step of the way. How blessed I was and am today.

Remember, Doug, that the Giver of my perfect provision is God Himself. Without Him I am nothing. When I turn to my own ways I am cut off from all the blessings He has for me and for all of us. It is only when I to ask for His will to be done in my life, each day that I live, that He can impart the grace, strength, peace and contentment I so desperately need. I had to be broken and spend many years with internal suffering before I was willing to give up my ways and learn how to live by His principles. Pain is the touchstone to all spiritual growth and with Him my pain is transformed in joyful living.

Monday, March 7

John 11:45-57

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.

Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?" Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

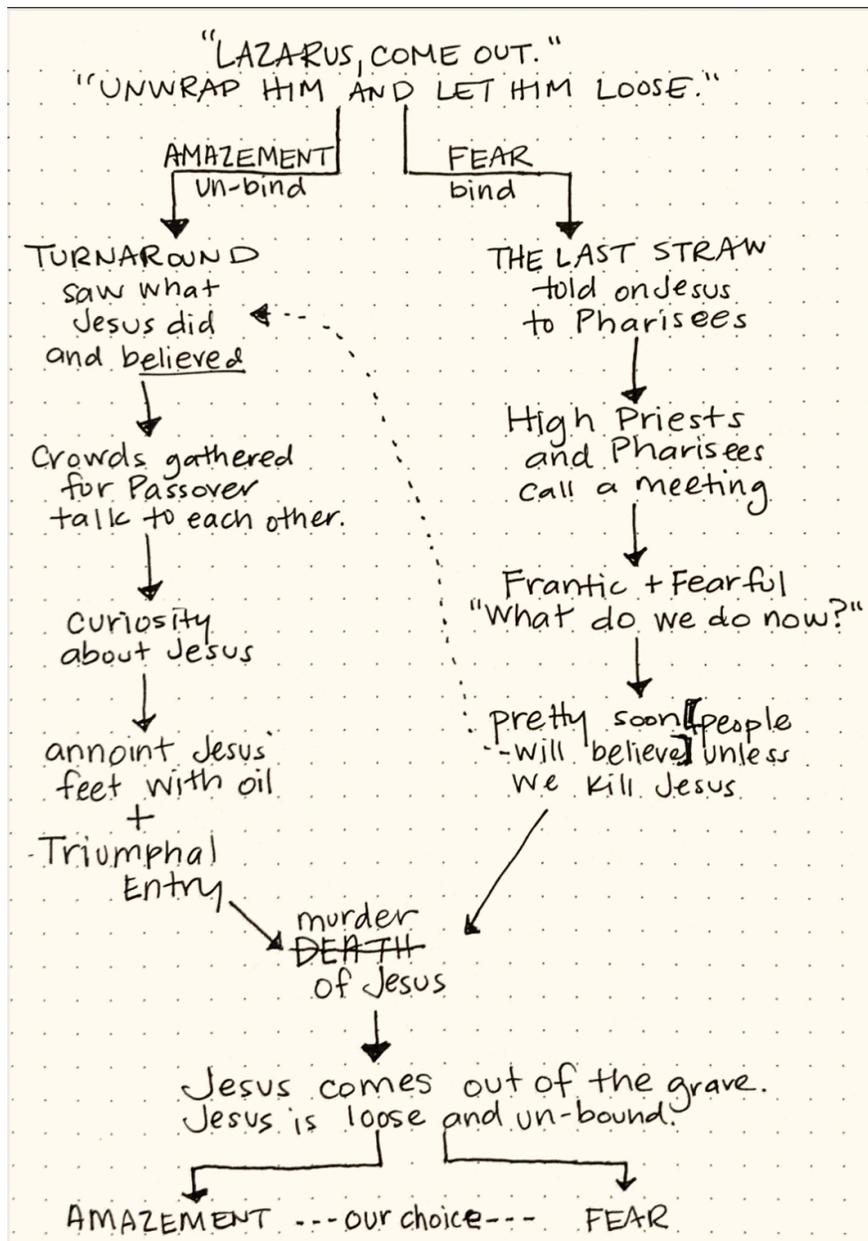
Reflection - Jill Hudson

At the 2021 CBF Women's Fall Retreat, Terri Byrd preached on the passage that is just before the one for today: the resuscitation of Lazarus. She absolutely brought down the house with her three part sermon on this family (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus) and their relationship with Jesus. It is important for us to look at the passage before ours for today because our passage for today starts with, "That was a turnaround for many of the Jews who were with Mary" (MSG). When a passage starts with "that," we need to look for what "that" is! Lazarus has just been resuscitated and Jesus has called him out from the grave, with the thrilling, "Lazarus, come out!" But what gets overlooked is the last phrase that Jesus utters in that story. The last thing he says is a command to those who were standing and watching it all happen. He says, "Unwrap him and let him loose" (MSG). At the retreat, Terri spoke about how "it is the un-binders who are great in the kingdom of God." She pointed out that Jesus could have easily untied Lazarus. I mean, He had just brought Lazarus back to life again! Surely, Jesus could have untied

Lazarus from his funeral dressings! Jesus could have done it all by Himself, but instead, he asks those who are gathered to participate in the un-binding of Lazarus.

At this point, those who are present have two options: help unbind or leave him bound. Those who help to unbind will follow a path of amazement and curiosity, while those who do not untie him will follow a path of frantic decisions made in fear. From our perspective, it doesn't seem like much of a choice, does it?

Being a mathematician and a teacher, I often think in flow charts. The following is a flow chart of where those two choices lead.



We're still at that same crossroads as those who witnessed the resuscitation of Lazarus. We have a choice: unbind or leave bound. At the retreat, Terri encouraged us, saying, "We can be the women who unbind the world." I echo her thoughts and expand them to all of us Crosscreekers. We can be the women, men, youth, children, teachers, preachers, engineers, workers, retirees, golfers, volunteers, and ministers who unbind the world.

Tuesday, March 8

John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 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.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor? (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.)

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

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. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Reflection - Kevin Washburn

Let's start by just recognizing the sequence of events in the passage. Jesus visits Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. During dinner, Mary pours perfume on Jesus's feet and spreads it around with her hair. Judas objects because he saw dollar signs rather than worship and offers some pious basis for his annoyance. Jesus responds, stating that Mary bought the perfume to use at His burial. People hear that Jesus and Lazarus are in town and they show up to see the miracle team. The chief priests, however, are not fans, and so they develop a plot to kill both Jesus and Lazarus.

Scripture does not lack drama!

Now, what concepts do we see illustrated here?

First, note the evident friendship. Jesus sits, eats, and converses with those He loves. He was there for one reason: fellowship. There is no sense of Jesus honoring these dinner companions with His presence. Jesus does not communicate any entitlement to Martha's culinary skills. He is there as a friend among friends, being refreshed physically, emotionally, and spiritually by simply being together.

Second, we see extravagant worship. Mary did not use the ancient version of Axe Body Spray on the Messiah's feet. She bought the finest perfume and brought it to the table. During the dinner, something stirred Mary to adoration and she acted. The fragrant result left no doubt to anyone nearby; Mary brought her best and gave it in worship. (Imagine being at a restaurant with friends when one of them launches into "How Great Thou Art" at the top of his/her lungs.) Mary came prepared to worship, and when she was so moved, she exalted the Lord wholeheartedly.

Third, we see motivation, and what a contrast is clear! Mary is at Jesus's feet, worshipping from a place of love for Christ. Meanwhile, Judas is at the table, complaining that Mary wasted money that could have been used in better ways—specifically, to line his own pockets. Mary's focus is on the Savior, while Judas's focus is on himself. He knows enough not to make himself the center of his protest, though. He couches it in religious speech.

Fourth, we see eagerness. Although Mary bought the perfume to use at His burial, she could not wait. She was so moved to worship right then that her act could not be put off. There, in the moment, with her best perfume at the ready, she's on the floor, lifting Him up by wiping down His feet. Jesus recognizes, accepts, and defends her beautiful act.

Fifth, we see curiosity. The crowd shows up. They heard about Lazarus. They heard about Jesus. And the opportunity to see them together was too great to allow them to stay at home. So many questions flooded their minds, and here was a chance for answers.

Finally, we see resentment. The chief priests must have mumbled, "Who does he think he is?" so many times that they justified giving Jesus the ultimate humiliation. Not only would they prove that He was not the Son of God, but they would also show Him who was really in charge.

Both the chief priests and Judas communicated a piety that was not authentic. Mary demonstrates genuine worship without saying a word.

In writing, I teach students to "show, not tell." If a writer can convey an idea through a character's actions, for example, the writing will be stronger than if the author states, "Mary was an authentic worshipper."

We all like to see ourselves as Mary in this passage. Certainly we would worship, not plot or pilfer, right? Hmm. How many times have I used the language of piety to cover

more personal opinions or desires? Honestly, some days I am more Judas than Mary. How can I, like Mary, engage in extravagant worship?

We gather weekly. We worship as a community each Sunday. We may not eat together, but we do fellowship. Are we eager to engage in extravagant worship? This week, that is a challenge I am pursuing—to be ready on Sunday (and not just on Sunday) to worship authentically, extravagantly, and without pretense. To be more Mary, less Judas.

Wednesday, March 9

John 12:12-19

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So, they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So, the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

Reflection - Patsy Jeffcoat

This passage from John 12 takes place just after Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead and Lazarus's sister Mary anoints Jesus' feet. Jesus defends Mary's choice by speaking of his coming crucifixion saying, "you won't always have me."

These verses are often called the "Triumphal Entry," where worshiping crowds come to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem as a king. He is greeted with adulation, but his arrival is not exactly what the crowds or the disciples expected. Rather than arriving on a horse suited for battle, Jesus arrives on a donkey's colt, a symbol of humility and peace. John quotes Zechariah 9:9 which foretold of the king coming on a donkey's colt, but notes that the disciples did not understand what this meant until after Jesus was glorified.

The fact that Jesus' disciples had such a basic misunderstanding of Jesus' purpose and mission at this point in his ministry is somehow comforting to me. These people lived with Jesus. He spoke with them directly. He taught them and tried to help them understand. Still, they missed so much. Like the disciples, I often don't truly understand until I am looking back on events and the evidence is clear.

As a child, I was often told that we couldn't understand it all "this side of glory," and as the old hymn says, "We'll Understand it Better By and By." I am grateful to be a part of a church that "Deep Dives" into scripture and helps each other understand God's calling in our lives now. I am thankful that we strive to understand and live out Jesus' teachings as best we can, even if we don't always get it right. I am also relieved to know that it's okay that we don't yet fully understand. As 1 Corinthians 13:12 tells us, "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully." Thanks be to God.

Thursday, March 10

John 12:20-36

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"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. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. 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?" 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. 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 - Scott Ford

In words spoken and eventually recorded by people several hundred years before electricity, references to light and darkness are frequent in scripture. Light and darkness were universally and viscerally known by humans then in ways we city dwellers can barely fathom today. When I turn off my bedroom lights at night, I can easily walk across the room without running into furniture because my neighbors' backyard is lit like a football stadium. And if my neighbors were not so evidently nyctophobic (that big, fancy word for afraid of the dark), I could probably still see enough given the numerous parking lots and street lights within a mile of my house. One phrase we hear today is "light pollution," which happens when excessive and poor use of artificial light disrupts our sleep patterns and prevents us from seeing stars in the night sky on a clear night.

Days away from civilization in 2012 on the John Muir Trail in California, I backpacked to the side of a mountain and saw the sky like I have never seen it before nor since. The stars were truly too numerous to count. Shooting stars could be seen every minute or so. And there appeared what looked like a faint green, twisted ribbon flowing across the beautifully alive night sky. Apparently the ribbon's name is Steve (seriously, google it), but I digress. My point is that we humans today don't know much about darkness. We aren't well versed in the cycles of the moon or the nighttime implications of varying weather systems, which converge or diverge to display some really, really dark nights and some not so dark nights. Think about it: if indigenous Inuit peoples (Eskimos) have 52 different names for ice, then those who live without or far away from electricity must have several more names or descriptors for the differing levels of night's darkness. So it seems clear that our lightness and darkness IQ is much lower than people who lived before electricity. We know so little. But we can learn.

Shall we be children of the light? Do we want to be children of the light? I sure hope so. And I believe that God's light can actually be found anywhere, at any time, at high noon, and at 2:00 a.m. Whether we see it or not, the light of Christ is around us, within us, within the body of Christ, within our hearts and minds, in our serving hands. The love and the light of Christ are accessible to us all, wherever we may find ourselves, in the brightest of days and darkest of nights. We do not have to walk in darkness. Amen.

Bonus: consider reading or listening to "Learning to Walk in the Dark," by Barbara Brown Taylor; the audiobook was free on my local library smartphone app.

Friday, March 11

John 12:37-50

Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. 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?”
And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said,
“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.”

Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him. 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; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.

Then Jesus cried aloud: “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.”

Reflection - Brandon Hudson

It would be difficult to have a clearer statement of the intent of Jesus than the one given here: “...for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.” Thanks be to God!

At the same time, it would be difficult to have a clearer statement of the state of human condition than the one that comes shortly before: “...for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.” When I read that statement, I have a bit harder time saying *Thanks be to God*.

But, as I see the way that grace works, I know that as true as the statement about humanity can be about the state in which our souls are often found, my own quest for vainglory is overwhelmed by the intention and work of Jesus.

In John's gospel, themes of light and darkness play a central role. There is a constant call for those who wish to follow Jesus to move from darkness into light, to cast off the shadow in which we seek to hide our brokenness and accept the Way and love of the God who came to save.

Sometimes, stepping into the light can be very hard. We can get accustomed to living in the darkness. The harshness of light can be overwhelming as we squint and go day blind for a few moments. And yet, that which is brought into the light is healed. Those sins which are named lose their power, by God's grace. The cracks in our armor that we tried to hide, when exposed to the Light, become the very means by which God's love can deeply enter our beings.

On this journey, may we step into the light together. May we be vulnerable, revealing our true selves and trusting the promise of God that we do not bring our vulnerability into the light to find judgment, but to find salvation. May we as a community be the kind of place that holds space for the brokenness in one another, knowing that our real selves, the scarred and broken messes we try to hide, are exactly the selves that belong to God and one another.

Saturday, March 12

Isaiah 6:1-10

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” And he said, “Go and say to this people:

‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’
Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.”

Reflection - Dee Dee Lyon

As a lover of music, I would tell you that “Holy, Holy, Holy” would be the first song that would come to mind when reading the scripture. But NO! Although Isaiah saw God in His Majesty, surrounded by his angels on His throne, Isaiah himself was full of guilt and felt unclean and sinful. But the Lord forgave him of his sins and guilt and called him to speak to His people. Isaiah accepted the commission, not really knowing exactly what he was supposed to tell them or what it meant at the time. Hopefully, the Lenten season will reveal to us more as we move through this mysterious passage of time. As powerful as “Holy, Holy, Holy” is, maybe the words from another

song can provide us a sense of direction as we, too, explore the calls that God places on our lives.

*God Moves in a Mysterious Way,
His Wonders to perform,
He plants his footsteps on the sea,
And rides upon the storm.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust Him for His grace,
Behind a frowning providence,
he hides a smiling face.*

“God Moves in a Mysterious Way” verses 1 and 3

Sunday, March 13

John 13:1-17

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Reflection - Allie Ford

Fun fact: feet are gross. If you have ever had the privilege of going to or chaperoning children's or youth camps, you know that cabins and dorms quickly fill with laughter, dirty laundry, and the horrendous smell of wet shoes and dirty feet.

The disciple's feet that Jesus washed were no different. Unfortunately for Jesus, the disciples were not wearing clean Nikes or fresh socks. Around 33 AD, the disciples lived in a society that required them to walk as means of transportation. "Following Jesus" quite literally meant traveling for miles across sandy, dirty roads with open-toed sandals. As Jesus took off his outer clothing and wrapped himself in a towel—in a way preparing himself to be stripped and wrapped in cloth a few days later—he demonstrated one of the greatest acts of humility and servanthood: washing his friends' dirty, dust-covered feet - even washing Judas's feet.

As shocking as his actions are for the rest of the disciples, Peter is more seriously alarmed: “You shall never wash my feet!” Jesus—the Son of God and the Messiah—cannot possibly lower himself to the ranking of a servant, and how are the disciples expected to do the same?

13 You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

Jesus’s actions are not meant to invalidate or refute his identity as Teacher and Lord. He is still the Son of God. Instead, his actions are meant to set an example for Christians. Jesus’s ministry is categorized by radical love and action. By humbling himself, Jesus is preparing to die. He is also preparing his friends and followers for a life without him, to go be fishers of people, and to be servants.

As we continue through this season of Lent, we are invited to reflect on our lives and the life of Jesus. In what ways does Jesus's life differ from ours? Are we willing to get down on our knees and wash the feet of people who have wronged or will wrong us? Are we willing to sacrifice our pride and “superiority” to love one another? We are called to live a life of mutual servanthood and to know that 1) we are servants of God, and 2) “no servant is greater than his overseer.”

Prayer: God, we admit that we are not quick to get on our knees and metaphorically wash other people’s feet. Humility and servanthood are not easy. Help us to read this passage and realize that Your Son—the man we worship and look to for all the answers—knew that serving You meant serving, loving, and forgiving others. Help us today and every day to be humbled as Your servants and be more willing to pick up our “towels” and crosses and follow You. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Monday, March 14

John 13:21-30

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Reflection - Brandon Hudson

All of us long for special insight, for a way to dabble in some insider trading on knowledge that will put us in a special light. We can join with Peter in leaning close to Jesus and asking for a little favor of explanation when the way seems cryptic.

Why do we have this drive? What keeps us from being content and doing the work simply to follow and obey and walk in the way we have been told?

In today's reading, Peter asks Jesus to clarify what he means, to give him insight into who it will be that will betray Jesus. Maybe Peter wants to know because he is afraid it is him to whom Jesus is referring. Maybe Peter wants to know because he still doesn't want to be a part of this campaign of vulnerability and suffering upon which Jesus has embarked. Maybe Peter still feels like he can change the course of this journey if only he could clearly identify when the betrayal would happen.

But that is not how this journey works. Even when it seems that Peter knows that Jesus is indicating Judas as the betrayer, he still must walk with Jesus to the garden and watch him be arrested. And, what is more, when he does try to stop it from happening by striking one of the arresting soldiers, he is reprimanded by Jesus!

I often wish that my faithfulness could be measured in my knowledge, that any insight I might gain would circumvent the necessity of picking up my cross and following the Way of Jesus. But, alas, that is not how this journey works. I'm not called to protect Jesus on his journey; I'm called to follow - wherever he leads.

My prayer for us as we continue on this journey together is that we would pursue faithfulness over insight, that we would not just walk with Jesus to the garden and then resume our old ways of violence and discrimination, but would instead follow not only in Jesus' footsteps, but in the pattern of life he shows us - a way of living that accepts betrayals and strife and even seeming defeat as part of the journey of faithfulness. May we recline next to Jesus not to garner insight into who to hate or how to protect the one who eschews protection, but to gain perspective, to draw close enough to see the world the way that He does. Then, our journey will be faithful, ready to forgive instead of strike, even when it costs us everything. It may be night in our souls and in our circumstances, but together, let us walk with the Light.

Tuesday, March 15

John 13:31-38

When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!

Reflection - Wes Jeffcoat

This passage follows Jesus prediction of his betrayal by Judas. In this passage we often focus on Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial before the rooster crows three times, which deserves some attention. However, we sometimes might miss what is between those two stories. This passage begins after Judas goes out and it is night, a dark time. Even though Jesus is aware of Judas' plan to betray him, Jesus treats him as an equal to the other disciples who are there with him. He does likewise to Peter, who he knows will deny ever knowing him.

At this time one might expect Jesus to speak about how evil Judas is and the circumstances of his evil or how unreliable Peter will become. Yet, Jesus speaks of being glorified and glorifying God. He continues to instruct and prepare his disciples for what is to come. Even when Jesus is in this "dark" space, he is still full of love and gentleness when he refers to his disciples as "my children," who he loves and not as the enemy that has and will turn against him.

In verse 34, Jesus gives a new command, "love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another." It is easy for me to love some people, but Jesus wants us to love as he loved us. When we look at who and how Jesus loved we see a Jesus who would stoop down as a lowly servant and wash the feet of others, even the one who would betray him. We see Jesus doing great heroic acts with great risk, even to the point of giving his life. He calls us to love like him, from things that are simple and mundane to self giving acts and everything in between—at all times. Jesus declares that "all people will know you are my disciples if you love one another." This is how we glorify God.

In this passage Jesus demonstrates what love looks like when he washes the feet of Judas who will betray him and of Peter who will deny knowing him. Jesus demonstrates that his love for us is not based on merit, cannot be earned, and he commands us to love likewise. Jesus made it clear that there is only one thing needed for everyone to know that we are followers of Christ, and that is to love one another as Jesus loved us.

Wednesday, March 16

John 14:1-17

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

Reflection - Sawyer Channell

Editors Note: Sawyer Channell is our youngest Lenten Devotional writer ever. How amazing that he opened himself up (at nine years old) to be used by God in this way! May we allow, on this day, a little child to lead us.

Do not fear, for you believe in God. Look around you; see your brothers, sisters, and friends. God holds a place for every single one of them; he also holds a place for you! Once you know Jesus, you know the Lord, for Jesus is the Way to heaven. Therefore, you know how to enter heaven.

Thursday, March 17

John 15:1-7

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Reflection - Katherine Bamberg

In this story Jesus shares such a beautiful metaphor about how we should live with Christ. Jesus is this beautiful vine. In order to continue to be fruitful and provide gifts, God prunes away his dead branches. We, as followers of Jesus, have our own branch and create our own vines. God is our gardener that waters and cares for us from the time we are little seeds. But as time moves on we must be pruned. God removes all the dead branches that don’t belong in our life any longer. They are the ones starting to grow thorns and weeds that stop our vine from becoming this beautiful plant the Gardener wants us to be.

In order to provide fruit, we must stay connected to our main vine. In order to live abundantly in Christ we must stay connected to Jesus. Our gifts will become rotten if the branch doesn’t get the nutrients it needs for its fruit. If we don’t remain in Jesus and Jesus in us, our branch will break off and burn. It is no longer part of our vine and now we have to grow a new branch in place. As hard as it may be, reading our bibles, doing

a devotional, and going to church all help us keep our branches healthy. Worship music, podcasts, and a good Christian community to surround yourself with, it all keeps you rooted in Jesus. Whenever we actively pursue Jesus, we always remain in him. As long as we do so, our vines will extend and stay healthy for a very long time.

Friday, March 18

John 17:1-5

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."

Reflection - Doug Bradle

I have to delve into the Holy Trinity to get a picture of Jesus' words. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit existed from all eternity into all eternity. The Father sent the Son and the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit, different aspects and functions within one Godhead. Some call this relationship the Tri-Unity, three parts of one unified whole. I think it is interesting that Jesus tells His disciples that it is to their advantage that He goes away (John 6:9-11) and that the Helper (the Holy Spirit) will not come until He has returned to the Father. He says that the Spirit will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. And for those whom the Father has given to the Son, the Spirit will speak to them as Jesus spoke to His disciples, teaching, guiding, disciplining, comforting and revealing the love that the Father and Son have for those who love and follow Him. These wonderful ones have the gift of eternal life and the on-going task of helping others. God, the Son, had to leave because He was limited in time and space as He dwelt in a human body. He could only be in one place at one time. In His spiritual body He counsels His followers through the Spirit who is unlimited and present everywhere. The Spirit only speaks with the authority that is given Him through the Son. And since He dwells within the Believer's heart, it means that Jesus Himself is always with us. If we let Him, He will always lead us into His purposes for us and the joy of His presence will fill our bodies and minds. What a beautiful picture this is: Emmanuel...God with us!

We know our Savior because the Father has drawn us to Him. Jesus has accomplished all that the Father had given Him to do...to glorify the Father through His work, to convict the world of sin and judgment and to impart eternal life to those who would believe. Our Savior knew that His hour had come to suffer and die for the Gospel and to live forever with the Father. While we were yet sinners. Jesus died for us that we would have everlasting life with Him in the Kingdom of God. Amen.

Saturday, March 19

John 18:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

Reflection - Jill Hudson

May the painting on the following page guide us as we think of this scripture. May it help us to ponder the depth of this story and be transformed by remembering Jesus' willingness to journey into the garden, even as he knew what awaited him there.



Sunday, March 20

Isaiah 55:1-19

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
 listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
 a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
 and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
 for he has glorified you.
Seek the Lord while he may be found,
 call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
 and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
 and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
 nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are my ways higher than your ways
 and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Reflection - Kevin Washburn

Here is the Washburn Succinct Summary™ of this passage: No matter your situation, come! No matter your labor, listen! No matter your plans, call and return! No matter your thoughts, relax!

We are invited to hear the words of God, to respond to the truth, and to rest in the understanding they construct.

Background? Doesn't matter. He has made us beautiful.

Lies we've believed? Irrelevant. He offers the Truth.

Schemes we have? Unimportant. He gives abundantly.

Worry and despair? Unneeded. He has a higher purpose.

The singer/songwriter Jewel reminds us to "No longer lend your strength to that which you wish to be free from." Your history, your past erroneous beliefs, your misguided plans are no reason for regret or concern. No longer lend your strength, your time, or your energy to them. Instead, rest today in the joy of God's abundance. His grace is greater than our need!

Monday, March 21

Psalm 27:1-14

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh –
my adversaries and foes – They shall stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.
One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.
Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hid your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!
If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.
Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.
I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

Reflection - Patsy Jeffcoat

Wes and I have this thing we do when we are in tense situations. One of us looks at the other and says, “no matter what.” Then, the one spoken to repeats it back. Sometimes the situation we are in is trivial, like an Auburn sporting event. Other times we say it in more meaningful, potentially life-altering situations. Whenever we say it, we are telling each other that even though things don’t look good right now, everything will be okay because we are in it together. We will love each other and be there for each other “no matter what” the outcome is.

I could label this Psalm of David the “no matter what” psalm. The Lord is our light, our salvation, our protector. He hears us and has mercy on us. Verse 10 says that even if our father and mother left us all alone, the Lord would take us up. He will teach us and lead us on a level path. Our hope is in the Lord.

Just as we don't always get the outcome we wish for when Wes and I say “no matter what” to each other, we don't always get the answer we want from God when we cry out to him. Even so, we can have faith that God is there for us. We can have faith that God hears and that he will give us comfort and he will walk with us. We can have hope because God is our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, March 22

Isaiah 45:14-19

Thus says the Lord:

The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia,

and the Sabeans, tall of stature,

shall come over to you and be yours,

they shall follow you;

they shall come over in chains and bow down to you.

They will make supplication to you, saying,

“God is with you alone, and there is no other;

there is no god besides him.”

Truly, you are a God who hides himself,

O God of Israel, the Savior.

All of them are put to shame and confounded,

the makers of idols go in confusion together.

But Israel is saved by the Lord

with everlasting salvation;

you shall not be put to shame or confounded

to all eternity.

For thus says the Lord,

who created the heavens

(he is God!),

who formed the earth and made it

(he established it;

he did not create it a chaos,

he formed it to be inhabited!):

I am the Lord, and there is no other.

I did not speak in secret,

in a land of darkness;

I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,

“Seek me in chaos.”

I the Lord speak the truth,

I declare what is right.

Reflection - Scott Ford

The Word of the Lord revealed to Isaiah proclaims in verse eighteen, “I am the Lord, and there is no other” (NRSV). If only our vision and grasp of the One True Lord could be held more clearly.

Polytheism. Henotheism. Radical Monotheism. In a seminary class on “the thought of H. Richard Niebuhr,” my classmates and I encountered these concepts in a way I hadn’t before. Polytheism, many little-g gods, got it. Monotheism, one big-G God, yep. Henotheism? That’s responding to one of the little-g gods as if it were the big-G God. And unfortunately, we do it all the time. Who? Us? Surely not, right? Nope. We’re guilty. A lot. How? It’s simple: in an overabundance of alcohol, in recreational drugs, in a significant other, in our addictive smartphones, in a hobby, in glorious distractions, in a sports team, in a political party, an ideology, online streaming services, in a little-g god way of life, in a way of being superior, in unhealthy ways of numbing the pain, in our methods of escape. We may not make giant piñatas of our cell phones and burn them during parades to our little-g gods, but we worship them, nonetheless. We worship that which is unworthy of our worship. We miss the point. We waste time. We run and hide. Why?

Monotheism is an idea, a great idea. Monotheism is an ideal, an aspiration. But we don’t live there. We can’t. We can’t reside on the high mountain’s peak. No, radical monotheism is fleeting. The best we can hope for is to catch little glimpses of God in our everyday lives – in the cry of an infant, the grief-filled tears of a loved one, a smile, one friend selflessly helping another, or better yet, a stranger selflessly helping another. We go through the motions, filling our days with rituals, habits, and practices. We seek God’s order. We may even seek an order that provides space for creative chaos, and we may find God there. We read, pray, worship, sing. And we catch glimpses, glimpses of God. We live and embody moments of radical monotheism, radical there-is-One-True-God sightings. We speak the truth in love. We extend an olive branch in love. We forgive in love. We fall in love. We care, we give, we go, we show up... in love. In the love of Jesus Christ who lived and walked among us, we can catch glimpses of who God is and who God created us to be. Have you seen a glimpse lately? Are you watching? Are you seeking?

Wednesday, March 23

John 14:9b-12

Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

Reflection - Dee Dee Lyon

Several years ago the church that we attended was dissolved for various reasons and the property was sold. I was devastated, primarily because I was an original member of that church. But we could still do the work of the Father and of Jesus with our energy and our money until we could find another home church. We did this with our brothers and sisters from Cahaba Valley who still wanted to work together. Even without our formal church, we set out to be the church. For years we went to Family Court Detention, and we still donate to several agencies that help the poor, several that started in Cahaba Valley, but some that did not, such as Greater Birmingham Ministries, which is part of my faith and love for the marginalized. Regardless of the disappointments we may face, we can only hope that our actions show some evidence of Jesus and the Father in our lives. May we allow these lyrics to set the tone for us as we open ourselves to following where God leads and doing God's work while we are here.

*Breathe on me, Breath of God, Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love and do what Thou wouldst do.
"Breathe on me, Breath of God" verse 1*

Thursday, March 24

John 14:13-17

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

Reflection - Katherine Bamberg

One thing I never hear from Christians is how hard it is to be a dreamer. The heartache from your left ventricle to the depth of your soul, knowing you want everything this life has to offer you. Ever since I was a toddler I knew I could not be contained to a life inside a box. I have this thing inside me I like to call hope, where the spark has never gone out. I am so lucky that God allowed the Spirit of Truth to rest in us. I fully believe that I will achieve everything to which God calls me. I want to experience the world, every part of it. I want my life to be worth living, all for the King that makes every single thing worth absolutely everything. I crave the stars Jesus has waiting for me and I'm just waiting for that "go" from the Spirit to know when to start running.

When I was a little girl it was no surprise that I looked up to my daddy. The man of all things, the one who could cook our favorite foods in the kitchen, or make jokes that would make mom roll her eyes, but most of all he's an artist. God chose to share a special job with him. He can create weird creatures and beautiful landscapes. After talking to Alan for 10 minutes (if his mood is right) it's not a huge stretch to guess that he's the one that helped foster high, hard to reach, close to impossible dreams in me. But as long as I can remember his personal dreams have been on hold. I love my dad to death but even at eight years old, I couldn't possibly understand why you would choose to spend your life doing things you don't utterly love. I could not bear thinking of my life being anything less than extraordinary. God is right there to take the huge jumps with us, but also knows when to not let us go. It took me so long to realize our dreams don't always line up with the magnificent journey God has for us.

As my fellow dreamers know, the worst thing we can ever experience is being told "no" by God. The only thing that could stop our determination is literally the will of God. The Holy Spirit rests inside us so we are guided in asking for the right dreams. Our hopes and desires are meant to glorify God. And if we listen hard enough, and be patient adequately, the Holy Spirit will guide us right to where our dreams line up with

God's will perfectly. Our hearts will forever be captivated by the Spirit that we allow to dwell in our soul.

Friday, March 25

John 14:18-21

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Reflection - Wes Jeffcoat

Being alone can create fear, even when we are in places we would normally consider safe. I remember a time when I was teaching we got word that a group of students were planning to vandalize the school. I was asked to stay overnight and be a lookout. During the day the school is full of people and sounds and I never had a moment of fear. However, during the night, when I was alone in the darkness in the very same school building, fear would creep into my thoughts. I would hear noises, (or at least I thought I heard noises), a car would drive by, or wind would blow limbs against the building. All these things happen throughout the day and I thought nothing of them, but this night I was alone and those sounds were amplified - fear. I challenge any of you to come to church any night you want from 10-11 pm alone and just sit - fear.

In this passage as Jesus is preparing the disciples for his leaving he says, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” Orphan comes from the Greek word *orphanous*, meaning fatherless children. It derives from the root term meaning to be alone, deprived. In ancient biblical cultures, orphans were one of the most vulnerable people. Jesus knew with the prospect of him going away, his disciples were fearful of being abandoned (alone). Jesus promised “to come to you,” through the Holy Spirit. Verse 21 says, “Those who loves me will be loved by my father, and I too will love them and reveal myself to them.” God’s promises, “I will never leave you, never forsake you,” are found in multiple books in both the New and Old Testaments. How reassuring it is knowing that Jesus will never leave us and is always with us, even in our loneliest and most fearful times. And all we have to do to ensure this is to be one of those who have chosen to love him.

Saturday, March 26

John 14:23-29

Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

Reflection - Dixie Ford

“If you had to use just one word to describe the state of your own soul today, what would that word be?”¹ This was the question Emily P. Freeman asked on her podcast as I drove to work after dropping the kids off at school. As soft music played in the background, and Emily gave a moment of silence to ponder the question, I sought to find a word to describe the state of my soul at that moment. It took me a minute, but I finally, and reluctantly, admitted the state of my soul in that moment: afraid.

This revelation caught me off guard. I’m not afraid! I am strong, I am on top of things, I am capable, I am tough...right?

The truth is, underneath the pretense of holding all things together and working hard to be brave, our souls sometimes feel afraid. There are just too many unknowns in life, and unknowns are frightening.

Jesus reminds us in today’s Scripture that he has a gift for souls that are afraid: peace. And not just any peace—his peace. Looking into the eyes of his disciples who were headed into terrifying days, Jesus spoke these words, “My peace I give to you...Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

¹ Emily P. Freeman, “Acknowledge Your Soul,” December 18, 2018, in *The Next Right Thing*, podcast, 10:43, <https://emilypfreeman.com/podcast/64/>.

Today, may all whose souls are afraid hear Jesus' words of peace. May we believe his promise that he doesn't give as the world gives. Jesus gives peace that lasts—peace that passes all understanding, peace that holds our shaking hand and walks us through the murkiness of the future, peace that calms our hearts and silences our fears, peace that gives rest to our weary souls.

Sunday, March 27

Psalm 17:1-7

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
From you let my vindication come;
let your eyes see the right.

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.
As for what others do, by the word of your lips
I have avoided the ways of the violent.
My steps have held fast to your paths;
my feet have not slipped.

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.
Wondrously show your steadfast love,
O savior of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.

Reflection - Donna Fitch

David, in this scripture, is pleading for God to vindicate him against his enemies because he is blameless. Asbury Bible Commentary says that “pleas for deliverance are the most numerous single song type, dominating the first two books of the Psalter (forty-two percent of the opening seventy-two psalms).” In the ancient Near East, according to NRSV Cultural Background Study Bible, people commonly experienced legal difficulties. The personal library of a family in Babylon was found to have texts describing not only the theft of farming equipment but a prayer “that the god Nabu might judge his case fairly and give a favorable outcome.” People in that day were familiar with the concept of vindication.

A couple of items to note about this scripture:

1 – David is confident God will vindicate him. He makes his case to God, whom he acknowledges knows that he has done no wrong in this situation. He is bold and doesn't use false modesty. I'm not sure I could ever be that bold in a prayer, confident enough to say that I prayed “from lips free of deceit.” In dealing with Saul in 1 Samuel 24:15, David says, “May the Lord therefore be judge, and give sentence between me and you. May he see to it, and plead my cause, and vindicate me against you.”

2 – David doesn't suggest any punishment for those who transgressed against him but trusts that God will "see the right." He hasn't taken matters into his own hands: "I have avoided the ways of the violent." I am tempted when I feel I've been wronged to deal with it myself—usually in a passive-aggressive way--rather than leaving it to God.

A Little Prayer

Lord, help me to pray as David did, confidently and boldly, leaving you to vindicate me against my enemies rather than taking matters into my own hands. Amen.

Monday, March 28

John 15:8-11

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

Reflection - Doug Bradle

What I hear when I read this scripture is that if I abide in Jesus' love for me I will be enabled to keep the Father's commandments, and if I keep His commandments, then I will abide in His love. For most of my life after salvation, I somehow thought that keeping God's commandments was an act of self-will. If I just followed the rules and gave the appearance of being a solid Christian, all would be well. However, the pretense did not work. All was not well inside of me even though I wore a pretty convincing mask. I kept asking myself what was missing. It was as if God was in the next motel room...I could hear Him speaking, but I could not make out what He was saying. It was utterly frustrating.

In the last few years, I have come to understand that before I attempt to take the speck from my brother's eye I had better take the plank out of mine! I must see clearly before I can help anyone. So even after I was saved (and I know I was saved), I had no one to show me how to remove the plank. The good news is that God led me to a group of people who showed me how to get rid of the plank and discovered how delightful life is without that doggone plank following me around! What I had failed to see were my own shortcomings, how I hurt other people and how I constantly demanded that the world be the way I wanted it. When I confessed to my Father, to myself and to a very close friend the nature of my wrongs, only then was I in a position to receive God's full grace. Of myself, I cannot keep the commandments nor abide in my Savior's love. It is only through His Spirit in me that I can partake in that love and only in the strength He imparts to me that I can keep His commandments.

Tuesday, March 29

John 15:12-17

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Reflection - Jill Hudson

May the painting on the following page guide us as we think of the ways we can love one another. May we allow this image to guide us through the scripture and open us up to the movement of the Spirit!

L O V E

smile

serve

call

laugh

be present hug love

be present

hug

love

O T I E R

care

small

pray

Wednesday, March 30

John 15:18-21

“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.”

Reflection - Kevin Washburn

We are familiar with the clash of values wreaking havoc in our culture. We track changes in the Supreme Court as if we are keeping score at a basketball game. We know the “red states” and the “blue states” and hope the few purple ones will come over to our side, especially on election night. We know that pro-this supporters will be yelling at the pro-that supporters more often than not. We get bent out of shape easily, and we live in a culture where it’s seen as strength to scream about how we’re being smothered. The other side is the enemy, they must be defeated, or we will surely be oppressed.

Faith in Christ shifts our values. It asks us to love our neighbors rather than trample them for our own advancement, to give to the poor rather than accumulating so much stuff that you have to rent a separate place to keep it all, to seek to tame the fire that is your tongue rather than speak your mind.

Unfortunately, people are not skilled at disagreeing without hating. When we live according to the values of our faith, we may encounter questioning, disrespect, and even hatred and all that comes with it. Why? Because those who respond in this way do not know God.

Recognizing this, which is what this passage makes clear, should fill us with compassion, not our own reactive hatred. I do not know anyone who has been picketed or shouted into faith; the tools of disdain do not extend the boundaries of the Kingdom.

I heard an interesting point made on a podcast recently. The interviewee reminded listeners that Princess Diana and Mother Theresa died in the same week. Most of us want to be like Princess Diana; we want the fame, the fortune, and the influence she embodied. We want celebrity even though it will be available to very few of us. In contrast, living more like Mother Theresa is available to all of us. We should be striving to live like saints, not celebrities.

Through Christ's love expressed in our own lives, we may make friends of those who hate us.

Thursday, March 31

John 15:22-27

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfill the word that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.'

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

Reflection - Patsy Jeffcoat

This passage is part of John's account of Jesus' 'farewell discourse' to the disciples before crucifixion. The people that hate him have witnessed his ministry among them. He has talked to them, and they have seen his works. So, they have no excuse for the sin of persecuting and rejecting him. They can't plead ignorance. God has sent his Son to offer mercy to them, and since they rejected the Son, they must also hate the Father. It is a sad, painful, and damning realization that they hated without cause.

On the other side of the gloom though, comes the glimmer of light. Jesus speaks words of comfort and encouragement to his disciples by telling them that the Spirit of truth is coming. Even as they are facing abandonment, they will not be left alone. The Spirit will be with them to help them testify to all they have seen and heard as they were with Jesus from the beginning.

Here we are 2000 years later, celebrating Lent by remembering all that Jesus faced leading up to crucifixion, and feeling the weight of all that entails. However, like the disciples, we too can be comforted and encouraged by these words. The Holy Spirit is with us and can be trusted as we testify to the good news of Jesus and his promises. Easter is coming. Resurrection is coming. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are with us. Thanks be to God.

Friday, April 1

John 16:1-4a

“I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

Reflection - Brandon Hudson

Today’s reading may have sounded like a very dark, first century April Fool’s joke to the followers of Jesus. I can imagine them lounging around the table, basking in this celebratory meal with Jesus. They have entered triumphantly into Jerusalem. Jesus has promised not to orphan them. Jesus has washed their feet. They are at home with their Master.

Sure, there has been discussion about him going ahead of them and them not knowing the way. There has been discussion about suffering. There have been some strange words around betrayal. There have been some awkward moments.

But then, suddenly, he says this line about “when those who kill you.” That wasn’t an *if*, it was a *when*. I can imagine some awkward laughter around that moment - surely Jesus was joking.

But Jesus wasn’t joking. And he knew where the road of vulnerable love and breaking down walls of authority would lead not only for him, but for those who would follow. But an amazing thing happens. While there are some stumbles along the way for his followers (like Peter’s denial, perhaps!), most of them do get back up and follow on the way - even unto death!

Our lives are full of ups and downs. There are moments that feel like cruel cosmic jokes, and we are just waiting for the prank to be over, for things to return to normal on April 2nd and the mutually agreed upon insanity to end. Things rarely return and stasis is an illusion as change either creeps upon us or comes crashing through the front window of our lives. And yet, with the promise of Jesus, there is a new normal. We do not have a promise of ease or even success in the eyes of the world, but we do have the Promise of One who has gone before and will not abandon us. As we walk in the journey, through the hills and the valleys, may we find our stumbling eased by this memory and truth. May we know and lean on the promises of God to deliver us through our trials, not from them. That is the kind of promise that is no joking matter.

Saturday, April 2

John 16:4b-7

But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

Reflection - Dee Dee Lyon

When I was 25 years old, single, and an only child, I lost both of my parents. My mother had a stroke and died fairly suddenly, and although my father had physical illnesses, he was basically well enough to take care of himself, our house in our hometown, and my mother before her stroke. But after my mother died, my dad fell apart and died five months later. The doctors said that he did not want to live anymore, so I believe he died of a broken heart. I had just moved to Birmingham a couple of years before, mostly for school, and I had just started a new job when all of this happened. Talk about being mad at God! I could not believe He would let this happen to me so suddenly! But I had started going to a church in Birmingham and had met some wonderful new friends. The Comforter or Spirit can come to you in many ways, and It came to me in those wonderful people, who gave me peace and and comfort during that time of such distress. Many of them are still those friends that I still have today after 50 years. Amazing!!! Amazing what God does in your life and keeps on doing! I’m not mad at God anymore. I’m way over it. May these lyrics help guide us as well undergo journeys from distress to joy.

*He saw me plunged in deep distress,
and few to my relief;
For me He bore the shameful cross,
and carried all my grief.*

*To Him I owe my life and breath,
And all the joys I have;
He makes me triumph over death,
and saves me from the grave.*

“Majestic Sweetness” v. 3

Sunday, April 3

Psalm 145:10-13

All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.

Reflection - Allie Ford

One of my favorite worship songs is "So Will I (100 Billion X)" by Hillsong Worship. If you've never heard this song, I highly recommend listening to it as soon as possible. The music beautifully describes God's diverse and beautiful creation that "exists" to lift up God, and the summary of the song can be narrowed down to these lyrics: "If creation sings Your praises, so will I."

Walking through nature has always brought me comfort. In a world of imperfections and chaos, the serenity and perfection of nature speaks to God's glory... but nature cannot actually speak. Spreading God's word and love is up to us.

The tradition of Lent comes from the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness facing temptation and preparing to serve God. For Jesus, being in the wilderness was necessary. Jesus left ready to fulfill God's mission in his life. After spending some time in the evidence of God's glory (nature), Jesus was ready to spread some of God's glory on his own.

Eventually, we too have to come out of the wilderness. We have to leave the comfort of nature or our homes and face a world that isn't as peaceful. But, like Jesus, we can leave nature renewed and inspired by God's praising creation to do some praising of our own.

Our Psalms reading today sings, "All your works praise you, Lord," and they do! Go outside and see the budding flowers or quiet sunrise or awakening animals. God's world is beautiful, and God's good news is even greater. It is so great that we cannot keep silent for long!

And good news: we are not alone in our thanksgiving! Signing up to be a Christian is more than getting eternal life and earthly comfort. Being a Christian gives you a community of believers, an everlasting “kingdom.” In a world of chaos and politics and corruption, God’s dominion will endure, and Christians can sing—extol—God’s praises. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: God, thank you for today. Thank you for the earth around us, the peace that can be found in the wilderness, and the way You can make us feel renewed in You. Please help us to face this day with an attitude of praise. Help us to, like some of your praising people sang, listen and act out these lyrics, “If creation sings Your praises, so will I.” We love you, and we thank you for loving us. Amen.

Monday, April 4

John 16:8-12

And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

Reflection - Brandon Hudson

Jesus makes these statements in the upper room with his disciples, in the middle of many discourses about the path he is taking and the cross where it will lead. Earlier in this discourse and even earlier in this chapter, he is telling the disciples about the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, the gift that he will leave to his disciples after he is crucified, resurrected, and ascends.

One of the things that is fascinating to me about these words of encouragement that Jesus seeks to leave to his disciples is how the Spirit will deal with sin. Jesus was, in the eyes of those who sought to crucify him, a sinner. The way that he enacted the love of God in his mission on earth often brought him into conflict with those who had constructed an understanding of sin that excluded those with whom Jesus spent most of his time. And when he is discussing the role of the Spirit, he makes sure to note that when the Spirit fills God's people the understanding of sin would be challenged and changed.

It's easy to think of the ways that the Pharisees sought to trap Jesus, but it is harder to ponder the ways that we might be being called to rethink our own understanding of sin. We have all been handed and concocted various architectures of sin that we find fitting. For some of us, we use these constructed ideas to support our own ideas of what is right and wrong while turning a blind eye or hardened heart to what the Spirit wants to show us.

The sin that the Spirit reveals is a lack of belief in the person and work of Jesus. To cast aside this sin is to have our eyes opened to what God is doing not only in the past but actively in the present. It often means allowing God to deconstruct our built up walls and plans in order to build something more beautiful, more expansive, and more inclusive.

My prayer for us as we walk with Jesus is that we would take the advice of many a middle school dance chaperone and “leave room for the Holy Spirit!” When we do so,

we can put aside our map of how we think things should go and let the Spirit guide us into new and exciting places where we can watch God work in new ways first hand.

Tuesday, April 5

John 16:13-16

No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

"The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force.

Reflection - Wes Jeffcoat

Aha moment: How many of us have experienced an "aha moment?" Did you know that "aha moment" is listed in the Merriam-Webster dictionary? The definition given is, a moment of sudden realizations, insight, recognition, or comprehension. What a relief, pleasure, or comfort it is when we have that aha moment. When we gain understanding, it now makes sense, or we just get it.

In John 16:12, Jesus tells his disciples there is so much more, but they aren't able to comprehend it all now. But Jesus promises that there will be a time when we understand, when we get it, when we have that "aha moment." There are things that happen in our lives that we don't understand, but Jesus promises, through the Spirit, the truth will be revealed to us. In verse 13-14, the verb "will" is used five different times. Not now, but Jesus promises that when the time is right the Holy Spirit will reveal the truth. In verse 15, Jesus says, "the Spirit will take from me what is mine and make it known to you." That is our "aha moment," when through the Spirit, Jesus is completely revealed to us. We have total understanding. Until then we must trust in what Jesus promised.

The old Gospel Hymn, "We Will Understand It Better By and By", especially verse 3 and 4, acknowledges that there are things in our lives that just don't make sense. Things we don't understand. We must trust in the promise of Jesus and wait for that aha moment.

*"We Will Understand It Better By and By"
We are tossed and driven
on the restless sea of time;
somber skies and howling tempests*

*oft succeed a bright sunshine;
in that land of perfect day,
when the mists are rolled away,
we will understand it better by and by.*

Refrain:

*By and by, when the morning comes,
when the saints of God are gathered home,
we'll tell the story how we've overcome,
for we'll understand it better by and by.*

*We are often destitute
of the things that life demands,
want of food and want of shelter,
thirsty hills and barren lands;
we are trusting in the Lord,
and according to God's word,
we will understand it better by and by.*

(Refrain)

*Trials dark on every hand,
and we cannot understand
all the ways of God would lead us
to that blessed promised land;
but he guides us with his eye,
and we'll follow till we die,
for we'll understand it better by and by.*

(Refrain)

*Temptations, hidden snares
often take us unawares,
and our hearts are made to bleed
for a thoughtless word or deed;
and we wonder why the test
when we try to do our best,
but we'll understand it better by and by.*

(Refrain)

Wednesday, April 6

John 16:17-22

Then some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying to us, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They said, "What does he mean by this 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'? Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

Reflection - Dixie Ford

I can't remember how old she was when my youngest daughter, Anna, declared, "My happy place is wherever I am." She was young, that I know. You have to be young to make a statement like that.

Maybe.

Anna referred to her feeling as happiness, but what she actually described was joy. Happiness is a feeling of satisfaction based on favorable circumstances, and it comes and goes as circumstances change. Joy, on the other hand, is persistent and can stubbornly remain even when life is uncertain or even painful.

In our Scripture today, Jesus is giving the disciples hints about the near future. He warns them that soon they won't see him anymore, and it will be painful. But it won't be the end of the story. Jesus also tells them they will see him again, and when they do, their hearts will rejoice. They will be filled with joy that no one, no pain, can take from them. Once the disciples see their resurrected Lord, once they realize the end of the story, joy will be a constant companion, no matter what the circumstances.

The gift of joy is offered to us, as well. Because we know the story's end, because we know the resurrected Lord is with us always, because we know that Love wins, our hearts can hold joy, even within our pain. We can say with the little children, "My joyful place is wherever I am." Thanks be to God, who makes our joy complete.

Thursday, April 7

John 16:23-28

On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.”

Reflection - Donna Fitch

A Poem

So much overwhelms me in my life every day.
Never am I sure what's to come.
I'm not even sure what's come before.

Jesus, open the way.
Jesus, open the way.

Did I ask specifically for His help today?
Did I ask Him of what's to come?
He's my Guide and opening Door.

Jesus opened the way.
Jesus opened the way.

Father will provide when I ask in Jesus' name,
He has promised joy all complete.
I don't have to know what's come before.

Jesus opens the way.
Jesus opens the way.

A Little Prayer

Lord, help me ask in Your name for what I want, confident that the Father loves me and He will make my joy complete. Amen.

Friday, April 8

John 16:29-33

His disciples said, "Ah. now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe you came from God." Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me, I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulations. But take heart: I have overcome the world."

Reflection - Doug Bradle

The picture of John 16 is Jesus preparing His disciples for His departure from this world. He knows that the disciples will experience tremendous sorrow and distress when His crucifixion and death take place. He foretells of their falling away and hiding in their homes. Yet, He tells them that He will not be alone in His ordeal; that God the Father is with Him. As the Father is with Him, so He will give peace to His disciples who abide in Him. Clearly, He tells them that they will have troubles in this world but to take heart in His promise that He has overcome this world.

When I read Scriptures I have to remind myself that Jesus is speaking to me! I am one of His disciples. There is an old saying: God does not call the equipped; He equips the called. To me it means that I cannot wait for the stars to be perfectly aligned or for my character to be presentable to follow my Savior. I step out in faith, knowing deep in my heart that He has truly overcome the troubles of this world. If I abide in Him, like the branch within the vine, I can be used by Him and bear fruit for Him and have joy and peace in my life right now! The future never comes, all I have is this present day with all the moments to walk through. This is the day that the Lord has made, I will be glad and rejoice in it. How wonderful that we have a Savior who lives and who loves us and who will impart the strength we need to go through anything that the world throws at us! Today I chose to surrender my petty concerns and to let my Savior lead me. What a relief!

Saturday, April 9

John 17:6-9

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.

Reflection - Brandon Hudson

In a gospel that opens up with the idea of Jesus being sent for the whole of the world, it can be difficult to understand the portion of Jesus’ prayer that forms today’s Lenten reading. If God “so loved the world,” then why is Jesus “not asking on behalf of the world?” If we are not careful, we can miss the deeper and cohesive meaning of the work of God in Jesus and treat this verse as a justification for our own broken systems of exclusion.

Rather, the context for this prayer is in a moment of comforting the disciples *and* calling for their unity. Later in the prayer (vv. 20-23), Jesus will mention that these disciples, those gathered together, are being prayed for *and* those who would believe because of their witness. Taken out of context, this prayer becomes one that supports unhealthy theological frameworks that seek to demonize the world as outside the scope of God’s redemptive plan.

That, of course, is an easier interpretation than the one that takes the context into account. In a fuller interpretation of this prayer, we can begin to understand that Jesus is praying for those who believe (us!) so that we might bear a unified witness of love and be sent out into the world to love just as Jesus has love. The community who is empowered by these words of Jesus does not seek to go out and shame the world, but to provide a witness that shows the world the God who loved the world so much he sent Jesus.

We are given a truth that is foundational to our faith - that Jesus is the embodiment of God’s love on mission to save all. Now, as we work in our own journey to be made more like Jesus, we too are called to be that embodiment of God’s love. Jesus has prayed for us so that we can love the world. Now, what will we do about it?

Palm Sunday, April 10

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

his steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say,

“His steadfast love endures forever.”

Open to me the gates of righteousness,

that I may enter through them

and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;

the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me

and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected

has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord’s doing;

it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made;

let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!

O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The Lord is God,

and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,

up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;

you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,

for his steadfast love endures forever.

Reflection - Kevin Washburn

Bookends are helpful gadgets. On my desk, I have a set that features, on each side, one hemisphere of the human brain on a pile of books. This particular set of bookends holds the tomes that are the most important for my current work. They indicate, figuratively, the start and end of relevant knowledge; between them lie important truths that should inform my thinking and actions.

Psalm 118 features a beautiful set of bookends, both making the same claim: the love of God endures forever. The psalmist is telling us to start there and end there. His love endures forever.

Between these bookends we find important truths that should inform our thinking and practice. First, we see the importance of worship. In fact, the psalmist uses the imperative, commanding the gates to be open so that grateful worship can take place.

Second, we are reminded that the beauty of Christ was not what the “builders” saw. However, despite their blindness, Jesus is the stone that holds together the entire foundation. This is marvelous and something to celebrate!

Third, because God blesses us and shines His light on us, we should worship with a full heart and with a fulness of expression. Do not hold back, the psalmist tells us. Jesus is the cornerstone. Get to place of worship and go wild with reverence and celebration. After all, remember, His love endures forever!

Thankfully, the need to sacrifice animals as an act of worship ended on Good Friday. However, the truths between the bookends remain. Do I approach Sundays from a fullness of heart? Do I worship with abandon? Would I demand that the doors be open so that I could worship?

I should. Because His love endures forever!

Monday, April 11

John 17:10-13

All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

Reflection - Patsy Jeffcoat

These verses are part of the prayer that Jesus prays as he is wrapping up his ministry. He is praying for God's protection for his disciples as Jesus prepares to leave their earthly presence. Jesus came into the world as a gift of light from God, and much of the world has rejected that light and denied the gift. The world has subjugated and oppressed people that are loved and created by God. This is such a dangerous world that Jesus asks God to protect his people from it.

Here Jesus is praying for protection for his disciples, and his prayer covers us as well. The world is still fallen and dangerous, but Jesus petitions to God on our behalf, that we may have his joy complete in ourselves. The Common English Bible translation says, "so that they can share completely in my joy." What a beautiful prayer - that we all experience the joy of Jesus that comes from the never-failing source of the presence of God.

One of the things I remember Crosscreek's first pastor, Richard Wash, saying many times is that there is no one he would rather have pray for him than this body of believers. Much has changed over the years, but this still holds true. We know each other, good and bad, and love each other as brothers and sisters in Christ despite our differences. We aren't perfect, but we lovingly lift each other up to the One who is. May we all find comfort, protection, peace, and joy in that.

Tuesday, April 12

John 17:14-19

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Reflection - Dee Dee Lyon

I grew up in a very small town in Mississippi in a conservative church that believed that if you did not believe what they did, then you were going straight to hell! It scared me to death! It was hard to find a loving God there.

Eventually I came to Birmingham, discovered Cahaba Valley Church and the grace of God, and a loving Savior and Father. After Cahaba Valley dissolved, we have been to several other churches and I've learned that the family of God is everywhere. Jesus sacrificed himself for all of us – all of us who believe in Him. Just believe, have faith, and love each other. As we recall the many ways the presence of God shows up in communities, may we be guided by these lyrics.

*“A Common Love”
A common love for each other,
A common gift to the Saviour,
A common bond holding us to the Lord;
A common strength when we're weary,
A common hope for tomorrow,
A common joy in the truth of God's Word.*

Wednesday, April 13

Psalm 22:1-5

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,

enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted;

they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved;

in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Reflection - Brandon Hudson

King David, the writer of this Psalm, was described as God's own chosen and a king after God's own heart. And yet, even he knew the feeling of being abandoned by God. What's more, these words of the Psalmist are the words that Jesus utters as he hangs on the cross. Even God's own son knew the feeling of abandonment.

We do ourselves a disservice if we do not acknowledge our own feelings of being left by the One who loves us most. Almost every saint who has gone before us, in his or her most honest moments, has expressed feelings of a "winter of the soul" when they did not feel the connection to God they had once enjoyed. What a joy it is, however, to worship a God who holds space for all of our feelings, not just the positive ones.

This is one of the reasons I believe so deeply in the need for Christian community. I believe that in those moments when we cannot feel God, we can turn to others who are on the journey with us to guide us while we feel blind and lost. We can turn with comfort to those saints who have gone before, to King David, and even to Jesus and trust that on the other side of our feelings of abandonment there is a wide opened field of connection and hope.

The psalmist turns in the middle of these verse to explore this very idea. While holding his feelings of abandonment with ribald honesty, he then remembers that the holiness of God endures *and* that the trust of the ancestors who believed in God and continued on their journey of faith was not wasted - they were not put to shame!

May we take a moment today, as we head towards Maundy Thursday in the middle of this Holy Week to practice holy honesty. May we lay before God the feelings we have of abandonment and betrayal. Then, with tear streaked faces, may we remember that on

the other side of the cross, on the other side of our dismay, the tomb will be empty. We just have to keep walking to get there.

Maundy Thursday, April 14

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

Reflection - Wes Jeffcoat

In Psalm 116, the psalmist offers praise to the Lord for the deliverance from death. During Easter we celebrate the death and resurrection of our savior, Jesus Christ. We acknowledge that Jesus died for us to ensure our eternal life. He delivered us from eternal death. The psalmist recognizes that God and God alone, was the one that heard his voice, his cry for mercy and saved him. The psalmist pledges to be committed to and to call on God as long as he lives and not be tempted by the temptations he, like us, face every day. We too should celebrate, and praise God for hearing us and saving us and likewise, we should continue to trust and call on God for as long as we live.

Good Friday, April 15

John 19:23-30

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

"They divided my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots."
And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Reflection - Dixie Ford

If ever a passage of scripture emphasized the humanity of Jesus, this one does. Jesus is taking his final breaths, living the last moments of his life humiliated on a cross. We see Jesus in all of his humanness—concerned for his mom, thirsty, exhausted, bowing his head and giving up his spirit, dying.

This is our Messiah, fully human—experiencing physical angst, raw emotion, and death.

This is our Messiah, fully God. The Gospel according to John has been reminding us of this for weeks. This is the Word, who was with God and who was God. This is the Word made flesh who lived among us. This is the Messiah, lifted up on the cross, drawing us to himself, showing us what Love looks like.

May we receive him as the Messiah he is—not as we wish he were or as we think he ought to be, but as he is. May we believe that what we see him do is what the Father

does and what we are to do, too. May we recognize that sacrificial love is the way of the Word. May it be the way we choose today.

Holy Saturday, April 16

Psalm 22:6-8

But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”

Reflection - Donna Fitch

I find this passage painful to read. I've felt the way the psalmist does, sometimes because someone has actually scorned me, but far more often because I imagine this is how people think of me. It's a bleak outlook, easy to cultivate in these uncertain days. More forcefully it reminds me of Jesus on the cross, suffering not only physical abuse, but also emotional and spiritual trauma. He quotes from this psalm on the cross in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” But that's not the end of the story.

In a 2014 blog post <<https://blog.diocesewma.org/2014/02/27/psalm-2223-and-lenteaster/>>, Bishop Doug Fisher of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts suggests approaching Lent/Easter as a continuum, illustrating his meaning with Psalm 22 and 23 together. Rather than reading them separately, he suggests taking them as a whole, from the tone of extreme distress of a person who feels far away from God in Psalm 22 to the close caring of the shepherd in Psalm 23. Despite “all dire circumstances,” the psalmist “keeps praising God...keeps looking for deliverance.” What holds the two psalms together, the bishop writes, is “the faithfulness of God. God is present even when God seems absent to us.”

I must quote his illustration in its entirety because of its relation to Crosscreek. You'll understand why in a moment.

“I saw Psalm 22/23 lived out a few years ago,” Bishop Fisher writes, “in a news report from Haiti. It was one week after the earthquake that killed tens of thousands and destroyed so much of the country. Workers shifting through the rubble of a collapsed building found a woman still alive. She had a broken leg and she was so dehydrated that she could not speak. But as her rescuers carried her out on a stretcher, they saw she was mouthing the words of a hymn of praise to God. They knew the hymn so they started singing it aloud with her. It was a moment of Resurrection.”

But was God only there in that moment? In that Psalm 23 moment? Or was God also with her in those seven days when she laid buried in rubble, screaming herself hoarse pleading for help? In that Psalm 22 moment?

Our faith tells us that God was there throughout. In the pain and the joy. In what felt like death and in the rescue.”

A Brief Prayer

Our Father, help us to love and trust you no matter what our circumstances and no matter our trials. Help us always to be faithful to you. Amen.