Lenten Resources 2015



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About the Author



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Beth is a member of the CCIW Ethic's Investigation Team and the Worship Chair of the CCIW Women's Ministry Cabinet. She is co-chair of the CCIW Pro-Reconciliation Anti-Racism Committee Team and is a member of the CCIW Regional Counsel. She served as the worship coordinator for the 2010 International Disciples Women's Ministries (IDWM) Quadrennial Assemby that was held in Greensboro, N. C. She has written study materials for the IDWM and has published book reviews in *The Lexington Theological Seminary Quarterly*.

Beth is married to Mark. They have two children, Sarah who is married to Aaron, and Benjamin, and one granddaughter Chloe. She enjoys reading and learning new things especially, computer skills. Her other hobbies include knitting, quilting and listening to all genres of music. She enjoys cooking, especially for her family and friends. Beth and Mark love to travel. She finds strength in contemplative prayer and studying scripture. She loves being a pastor and feels called by God to work for justice.

From Dust to Dawn: A Forty-Day Journey of Renewal

From the earliest days of the Church, Christians have been an Easter people. The Paschal celebration was the first festival of the Church. Easter's glorious "yes" of God that validated the life and ministry of Jesus and that said "no" to the evil carried out in the passion and death of Jesus became the lens through which we see and interpret the good news of Jesus Christ. As the Church, we proclaim, "Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!"



While it was not until the sixth century that Lent was officially observed in both the Church in the East and the West, as early as the fourth century we find evidence of the Church getting ready for Easter with a forty-day period of preparation. Initially used as a time for the final preparation of catechumens for baptism, Lent was also a time for renewal for all members of the Church. It was a time of fasting and of prayer. It is a time for growing closer to God and for deepening in discipleship. And, it remains all of this today.

The Timing of Lent

The significance of the forty days has deep biblical roots where the number forty often symbolizes a time of preparation or testing. The earth was tested when God sent rain for forty days and forty nights and Noah and his family were safe in the ark. Moses spent forty days on Sinai when God gave him the Law. And, he returned for another forty days after breaking the first tablets upon finding the people worshipping the golden calf. Joshua and the spies spent forty days investigating Canaan. The children of Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness in preparation to enter the land of milk and honey. Elijah went forty days without food and water on Mt. Horeb. Ezekiel laid on his side forty days to symbolize the sins of Judah. Jonah preached to Nineveh for forty days. Jesus spent forty days fasting in the wilderness following his baptism and God's pronouncement in Matthew 3:17, "*This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.*" And, following the resurrection Jesus spent forty days with his followers before giving the great commission and ascending into heaven.



The mathematically astute might notice that while we speak of the forty days of Lent, there are actually more than forty calendar days between Ash Wednesday, which begins Lent, and Holy Saturday, which ends Lent. This can be easily explained but requires an understanding of how the Church views Sunday. Lent is traditionally considered a time of fasting, of discipline and restraint. Sunday is considered a feast day, a mini Easter celebration when we are called and bound together by communing with one another and with the Lord Jesus who calls us to the Table. Therefore, the Sundays that fall between Ash Wednesday and Easter are not included when we count the days of Lent.

The Special Days of Lent

In some cultures, Lent was preceded by a time of celebration and a final feast on Shrove Tuesday. Pantries and larders were cleaned of eggs, butter, meats, and sweets and consumed for one last meal before the time of abstinence and vigil. In the Catholic tradition, people traditionally went to confession before Lent, thus, from the Old English shrive meaning to confess, Shrove Tuesday. Today, while the religious connection may only be dimly remembered by some, this celebratory time and Shrove Tuesday are linked to Mardi Gras (French for Fat Tuesday) and Carnevale (from the Italian carne lavare or "taking away flesh").

Following Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday is the day when Christians are reminded of our own mortality. It is a day that calls for introspection and repentance as we acknowledge our sinfulness and respond to God's grace. It is the day when we hear the words from Genesis 3:19, "F*or you were made from dust and to dust you shall return*" as we receive the mark of the ashes. For some congregations, palms from the previous years celebration of Palm Sunday are burned and used for the imposition of the ashes that following year. The cruciform mark reminds us of salvation through Christ Jesus while at the same time being rooted in First Testament traditions of wearing sackcloth and ashes as a sign of repentance. Lenten practices remind the Church to keep a dual focus: 1) consideration and reflection on the human condition and 2) consideration and reflection on the possibilities offered because of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Beginning with Ash Wednesday, Lent culminates in Holy Week. During this week the focus narrows to how God enters and identifies with human suffering through the abandonment, suffering, and cross of Jesus



Christ. On Palm Sunday, we join the crowds of Jerusalem crying out "Hosanna," which can roughly be translated "save us." In this cry, we acknowledge that we too need a Savior – and that Savior is Christ the Lord. Then on Maundy Thursday, we remember how Christ washed the feet of his disciples and reflect on how we too are called to serve. We hear the mandate to love one another as Christ Jesus loves us, John 13: 34. In fact the word Maundy comes from the Latin mandatum that can be translated mandate. Following the meal in the upper room, we go to Gethsemane. There we must ask ourselves, "Can we stay awake? Will we be by the Master's side when the powers and principalities of the world confront?" On Good Friday, we hear the lament of Jesus as he is crucified and we are drawn to lament that which is incongruent with God's wholeness and shalom. On Holy Saturday we remember the loss, confusion, and grief of Jesus' disciples as they grieve the death of our master Jesus.

The Themes of Lent

As previously stated, Lent is a time of preparation and renewal. It is a time for introspection and to consider our mortality. It is a time of repentance. While often characterized, or defined, by abstinence or giving up, Lent can also be seen as a time of taking up. We give up free time, space, and energy to take up the disciplines of discipleship. We seek to respond to God's grace as we seek to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. We become introspective so that we may see the world and strive for God's justice in that world. It is a time to consider the possibilities in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a time to consider life as citizens of the kin-dom of God.

The themes of Lent point naturally to the need for time and space for lament. Lent's dual focus on the human condition and what is possible due to the actions and the nature of the incarnate God lends itself to conversation with God about the aspects of life that are incongruent with God's plan and God's character while at the same time holding fast to the understanding that the God whose nature is revealed in the resurrection can be trusted. We pause, we reflect, we make space for repentance, turning to God, and renewal through God's grace. As Laurence Hull Stookey states, "The fuller Lenten discipline is a self-examination that seeks greater conformity with the mind of Christ, and more effective ministry on behalf of the world (which is what true devotion is all about.)"

Some Disciplines of Lent

Daily Devotion

Many individuals have well-established patterns of devotion. These include time spent in study of the scripture and in prayer. Some individuals read devotional materials that have been written by others while others find journaling helpful for self-examination and reflection. Many resources have been written on prayer and how to deepen one's prayer life. This resource will provide a scriptural focus and a brief reflection to assist with your daily Lenten devotion. At times questions have been provided so that you may reflect on these or journal your response. Feel free to make note of your own questions as well as thoughts and feelings that come as you read each day.

Fasting

In the early church drawing on the teachings of Isaiah 58, one fasted by abstaining from food morning until evening and then consuming a simple meal of bread and water. Food that would normally be consumed and money would have been spent on meat and wine was given to the poor.

In the Middle Ages drawing on Jesus' words in Matthew 16: 24, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,*" fasting was viewed as a way to follow Jesus. During this time, fasting also became a practice of elite Christians who vigorously fasted on the behalf of the entire church. At times, this practice of fasting took extreme forms as women of the Church nearly starved themselves in the pursuit of holiness. Ordinary, Christians fasted on Fridays and during Lent. Finally, during the Middle Ages abuses of fasting began to take place, as wealthy Christians would purchase indulgences so that they might continue to eat rich food.

During the Reformation, fasting met with mixed reviews. Martin Luther objected to the Church setting fast rules for fasting. John Calvin believed fasting was a way to encourage prayer and humble oneself before God while objecting to the abuses of the Middle Ages. John Wesley encouraged Methodist to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.

For the first half of the twentieth century, the Western Church did not emphasize fasting. In the second half of the century, influenced by the Pentecostal movement and the Eastern Orthodox Church and by contact with churches in Africa, Asia, South and Central America, the Church began to rediscover fasting. This discovery has been strengthen by the leadership of Generation X and Y.

Today's Lenten practice of fasting can take one of two forms. First, it may be abstaining from food from morning to evening and then consuming a simple and balanced meal. Second, it may mean abstaining from a particular food for the entire forty-day period of Lent, for example giving up chocolate or soda for Lent.



Lament

In the book of Psalms we find a model for both individual and corporate lament. Making up one third of the Psalms, lament is a formalized structure of prayer that expresses the broken heartedness and hope of those praying. It is a bold form of communication that shows uncompromising confidence in the character of God and demands that God acts in ways that are consistent with that character. Lament prayers dare to enter into the deepest pain of the people and communicate a firm hope in God's engagement and concern with the events of the life of God's people.

Unlike any other form of prayer, lament takes us to the heart of God that is broken by pain and the incompleteness of the world. Throughout scripture, we see that God intimately cares for and is involved with God's people. We see God's grief and anger as humanity fails to love God with heart and soul and mind and to love neighbor as self. Lament allows us to enter into the paths of God and be shaped and formed there. It reconnects us with the image of God in ways that allow us to see the discrepancy between the pain and suffering that is a part of our reality and the world as God intends.

Individual psalms of lament include: 3 – 5, 7, 9, 10, 14, 17, 22, 25–28, 31, 36, 39, 40: 12–17, 41, 42–43, 52–57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, and 142. Communal psalms of lament include: 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, and 129. Although there is significant variation from one prayer of lament to another, they all share three basic elements:

1) a direct appeal to God regarding a specific concern,
2) complaint about the current situation, and
3) trust in the character of God and the outcome because of that character.

Incorporating lament into one's Lenten practices might include reading these psalms each day. Based on the model that is provided by the book of psalms, one might also write his or her own prayers of lament.

Service

On Maundy Thursday, we are reminded that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples providing us a model of servant ministry. To serve others is to follow this model as we seek greater conformity with the mind of Christ.

Incorporating service into one's Lenten practices might be done by setting aside a specific amount of time to volunteer in a service ministry of your congregation or community. Assisting at a meal site or food pantry, volunteering to mentor, finding ways to assist with residents in care facilities or other ways of serving others provides us with opportunities to follow Jesus' model of servant ministry.

The Relevance of Lent to Today's Church

Following Vatican Two, both Catholics and Protestants began the task of liturgical renewal. In the Protestant tradition, it began with denominations that followed liturgical practices more closely. However, the so-called mainline Protestant churches, including many of the congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) also began to make changes in their liturgical practices. One of these changes included reincorporating Lent into the practices of the church. The importance of the spiritual disciplines was reemphasized.

Today, we live in a world that is hungry for a relationship with God. We live in a world that needs committed and spiritually mature individuals who are prepared through the grace of God to face the powers and principalities that deny the reality of Resurrected life. Lent invites us to be intentional about growing as disciples of Jesus Christ. It invites us to give up so that we may take on the practices that will provide opportunities for transformation and growth as individuals and renewal and revitalization as communities of faith.

Conclusion

In 2015, Lent begins on February 18. You might want to begin your forty-day journey by attending a service that includes the imposition of ashes. Begin with dust and then spend the next forty days taking up the disciplines that will have effects long after the Lenten season. For after all Lent is not temporarily giving up something, it is taking up a deeper relationship with God and others. It is a journey from the dust of our mortality toward the dawn of the Resurrection where we encounter the Risen Christ and all that is possible because, "Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again."

Daily Readings for Lent

Ash Wednesday, February 18 – Easter, April 5, 2015

Wednesday Ash Wednesday	Thursday February 19	Friday February 20	Saturday February 21
Joel 2: 1 – 2 or Isaiah 58: 1-12	Psalm 25: 1-15	Psalm 25: 1–10	Psalm 25: 1–10
Psalm 51: 1–17	Daniel 9: 1-14	Daniel 9: 15–25a	Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5: 20b–6: 10	I John 1: 3-10	2 Timothy 4: 1–5	Matthew 9: 2–13
Matthew 6: 1–6 and 16–21			

Sunday February 22	Monday February 23	Tuesday February 24	Wednesday February 25	Thursday February 26	Friday February 27	Saturday February 28
Genesis 9: 8-17	Psalm 77	Psalm 77	Psalm 77	Psalm 22: 23–31	Psalm 22: 23–31	Psalm 22: 23–31
Psalm 25: 1–10	Job 4: 1–21	Job 5: 8–27	Proverbs 30: 1–9	Genesis 15: 1–6, 12–18	Genesis 16: 1–6	Genesis 16: 7–15
1 Peter 3: 18–22	Ephesians 2: 1–10	1 Peter 3: 8–18a	Matthew 4: 1–11	Romans 3: 21–31	Romans 4: 1–12	Mark 8: 27–30
Mark 1: 9–15						

Sunday March 1	Monday March 2	Tuesday March 3	Wednesday March 4	Thursday March 5	Friday March 6	Saturday March 7
Genesis 17: 1–7, 15–16	Psalm 105: 1–11 , 37–45	Psalm 105: 1–11, 37–45	Psalm 105: 1–11, 37–45	Psalm 19	Psalm 19	Psalm 19
Psalm 22: 23–31	Genesis 21: 1–19	Genesis 22: 1–12	Jeremiah 30: 12–22	Exodus 19: 9b–15	Exodus 19: 19b–15	Exodus 19: 16–25
Romans 4; 13–25	Hebrews 1: 8–12	Hebrews 11: 1–3, 13–19	John 12: 36–43	1 Peter 2: 4-10	Acts 7: 30–40	Mark 9: 2–8
Mark 8: 31– 38 or Mark 9: 2–9						

Sunday March 8	Monday March 9	Tuesday March 10	Wednesday March 11	Thursday March 12	Friday March 13	Saturday March 14
Exodus 20: 1–17	Psalm 84	Psalm 84	Psalm 84	Psalm 107: 1-3, 17–22	Psalm 107: 1-3, 17–22	Psalm 107: 1–3, 17–22
Psalm 19	1 Kings 6: 1–4, 21–22	2 Chronicles 29: 1–11, 16–19	Ezra 6: 1–16	Genesis 9: 8-17	Daniel 12: 5–13	John 3: 1–13
1 Corinthians 1: 18–25	1 Corinthians 3: 10 - 23	Hebrews 9: 23–28	Mark 11: 15–19	Ephesians 1: 3–6	Ephesians 1: 7–14	Numbers 20: 22–29
John 2: 13–22						

Sunday March 15	Monday March 16	Tuesday March 17	Wednesday March 18	Thursday March 19	Friday March 20	Saturday March 21
Numbers 21: 4–9	Psalm 107: 1-16	Psalm 107: 1–16	Psalm 107: 1–16	Psalm 51: 1-12	Psalm 51: 1–12	Psalm 51: 1–12
Ephesians 2: 1–10	Exodus 15: 22–27	Numbers 20: 1–13	Isaiah 60: 15–22	Isaiah 30: 15-18	Exodus 30: 1–10	Exodus 30: 1–10
John 3: 14–21	Hebrews 3: 1–6	1 Corinthians 10: 6–13	John 8: 12–20	Hebrews 4: 1-13	Hebrews 4: 1-14 – 5: 4	Hebrews 4: 14 – 5: 4

Sunday March 22	Monday March 23	Tuesday March 24	Wednesday March 25	Thursday March 26	Friday March 27	Saturday March 28
Jeremiah 31: 31–34	Psalm 119: 9–16	Psalm 119: 9-16	Psalm 119: 9-16	Psalm 118: 1–2, 19–29	Psalm 118: 1–2, 19–29	Psalm 118: 1–2, 19–29
Psalm 119: 9–16	Isaiah 43: 8–13	Isaiah 44: 1–8	Haggai 2: 1-9, 20–23	Deuteronomy 16: 1–8	Jeremiah 33: 1-9	Jeremiah 30: 10–16
Hebrews 5: 5-10	2 Corinthians 3: 4 – 11	Acts 2: 14–24	John 12: 34–50	Philippians 2: 1–11	Philippians 2: 12–18	Mark 10: 32–34, 46–52
John 12: 20-33						

Sunday Passion or Palm Sunday	Monday March 30	Tuesday March 31	Wednesday April 1	Thursday Maundy Thurs.	Friday Good Friday	Saturday April 4
Isaiah 50: 4–9a	Isaiah 42: 1-9	Isaiah 49: 1–7	Isaiah 50: 40–9a	Exodus 12: 1–4, 11–14	Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12	Job 14: 1-14
Psalm 31: 9–16	Psalm 36: 5-11	Psalm 71: 1–14	Psalm 70	Psalm 116: 1-2 12–19	Psalm 22	Psalm 31: 1–4, 15–16
Philippians 2: 5–11	Hebrews 9: 11–15	1 Corinthians 1: 18–31	Hebrews 12: 1–3	1 Corinthians 11: 23–26	Hebrews 10: 16–25	1 Peter 4: 1–8
Mark 14: 1–15: 47	John 12: 1–11	John 12: 1–11	John 13: 21–32	John 13: 1–17, 31b–35	John 18: 1–19: 42	Matthew 27: 57–66

Sunday Easter Day
Acts 10: 34 – 43
Psalm 118: 1 -2, 14 – 24
1 Corinthians 15: 1 – 11
Mark 16: 1 – 8



Daily Meditations

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

Psalm 51: 1
Common English Bible

Wednesday February 18
Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58: 1 – 12

"This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts.

Isaiah 58: 6 – 9
The Message Bible

Isn't his the fast I choose: releasing the wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke?

7Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family?

8 Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard.

9Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here." If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech."

Isaiah 58: 6 – 9
Common English Bible

When you live in the Northern hemisphere, nature itself seems to reflect the themes of Lent. Some days are gray and overcast as a chill hangs in the air and mud seems to cover everything as far as the eye can see. These days leaves one wondering if the new life of spring will ever come. Other days are bright and sunny with crocuses peeking from snowy flowerbeds and melting ice dripping from newly budding branches. These days are brimming with the hope of what is to come. The earth seems to rest while at the same time preparing to burst forth with new life. In these rhythms and cycles, we are reminded that "for everything there is a season" – birth, life, decline, and death.

Lent provides a time to pause and reflect on this. As we consider our mortality and the cycles of our lives, we are drawn to consider how we spend our days. Do our lives allow glimpses of hope to peek through like those crocuses blanketed in snow? Do they proclaim the promise of what will come when the reign of Christ bursts in full-bloom? Are we open to the light that "will break out like dawn" healing and cleansing the gray and muddiness of our daily existence as new life in Christ springs forth in us and in the world?

The prophet Isaiah writes to a people who know about the messiness and muddiness of life and at the same time who trust deeply in the hope of the Lord. He assures them – and us – that our cries are not unheard but God is surely here. He admonishes them – and us – to live our days letting hope peek through as we demonstrate the touch of God in our words and our deeds.

Isaiah seems to define righteousness, and religious devotion, as the very act of living so hope may peek through for others. He challenges us at the beginning of this Lenten season to consider that our devotion is not merely "giving up" for forty days. It is about experiencing transformed hearts and changed lives that are then seen in how we live with others. May these forty days deepen our understanding of what we are called to do to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation and end oppression.

Let us pray.

Holy God, as we begin this season of Lent hear our cries and draw near your people. Give us the courage to be honest with ourselves so that your refining Spirit may lead us to walk in righteousness. Deepen our devotion to you so that we may respond to others in ways that extend justice and mercy. In the name of Jesus the Christ we pray.

Amen.



Thursday February 19

I John 1: 3 – 10

"If we claim that we experience a shared life with him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we're obviously lying through our teeth – we're not living what we claim"

I John 1: 6
The Message Bible

"If we claim, "We have fellowship with him," and live in the darkness, we are lying and do not act truthfully."

1 John 1: 6
Common English Bible

A good paraphrase of I John 1: 6 might be, "Walk the walk and talk the talk." One of the Desert Fathers Abba Poemen, would say, "Teach your mouth to say what is in your heart."[1] For the heart to Poemen was the place where we most intimately encounter God and the place we enter in prayer. It is the place of transformation.

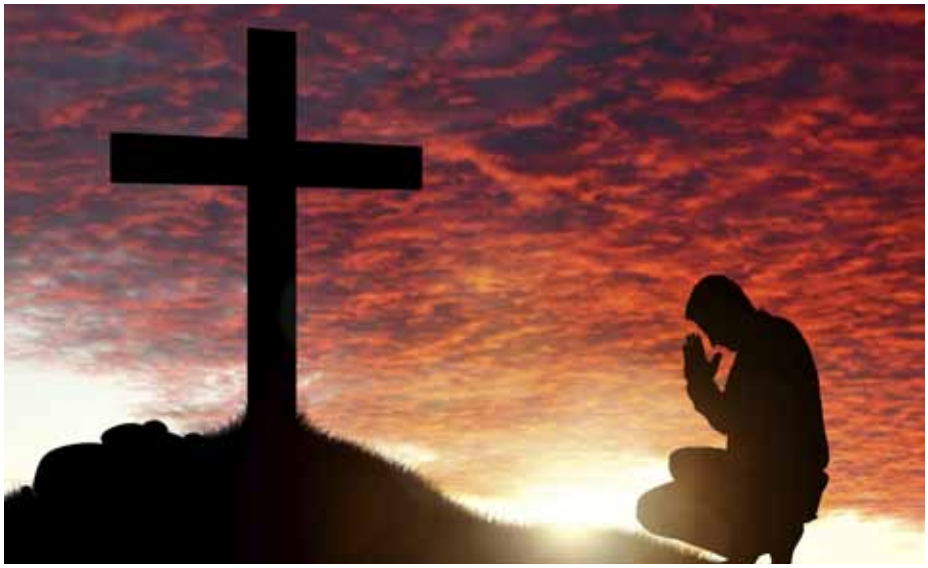
In this verse, the writer reminds those to whom he is writing that when our actions do not reflect our words, our actions speak most loudly and our words become lies. The writer reminds us to cultivate habits of the heart. And, we do this by entering into that place where we most intimately encounter God in prayer.

Reading the entire pericope, we can see that the writer recognizes the community to whom he is writing is not perfect. Whether he is addressing specific failures, or the universal nature of sin, the writer of 1 John recognizes the church is a community set apart by Christ that is constantly receiving God's grace and forgiveness.

Lent provides us with time and space to let the light of Christ shine over our lives so we may reflect upon what we see. We reflect upon our actions and acknowledge our sins. And in doing so, we open ourselves to the ever present possibility of God's grace.

Throughout this letter, the writer asserts that love is the expression of life shared with Christ.

Take a few moments and reflect



on how you showed Christ's love to others today? Consider when you felt less than loving today and ask yourself what stopped you? What can you do differently tomorrow?

Let us pray.

You showed us the depth of your love, O God, by sending your Son to come and dwell with us. Help me to draw closer to that Son so that his light may permeate all that I do and reflect in all that I say. Give me the wisdom and courage to acknowledge my short-comings so that I may accept your grace. I pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Friday February 20

2 Timothy 4: 1 – 5

"But you – keep your eye on what you are doing; accept the hard times along with the good; keep the Message alive; do a thorough job as God's servant."

2 Timothy 4: 5
The Message Bible

"But you must keep control of yourself in all circumstances. Endure suffering, do the work of a preacher of the good news, and carry out your service fully."

2 Timothy 4: 5
Common English Bible

When our children were younger, my husband Mark and I had a standing rule related to their participation in new things. If they joined a team or extra-curricular event or started a new hobby or activity they had to continue for a pre-determined period of time. For example, if they joined a team they had to play for one season and if they joined a club they had to participate for one semester. We believed this was important to help them develop an understanding of commitment and deferred gratification. We believed it was important for them to learn to persevere even when it might be hard – as is sometimes the case when trying new things. Mark and I felt it would help them develop patience.

Today, I believe that was and is an important lesson for our children, who are now adults in a society of instant gratification and built in obsolescence. We tap our fingers impatiently as we wait for our Keurig brewer to dispense coffee in less than a minute. We understand even before we purchase our new IPhone, Apple is working on the latest upgrade. We have come to accept the major some college students thoughtfully choose will result in degrees leading to jobs that no longer exist. In the midst of this world, Lent is countercultural. In a hurry up and move on world,

[1] Christine Valters Paintner, Desert Fathers and Mothers; Early Christian Sayings. Annotated and Explained (SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2012) Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 877 of 2730.



Lent is about patiently practicing disciplines that are meant to bring about something that is lasting rather than temporary.

The passage in 2 Timothy speaks to the call to be steadfast. It speaks of patient perseverance and due diligence in carrying out the tasks to which we are called. This is indeed countercultural in a world that demands immediate return to our investments. The Desert Fathers and Mothers were individuals who also knew of the importance of patience and ongoing practice even when it is challenging and difficult. Consider the following:

It was said of Abba John the Dwarf that he withdrew and lived in the desert at Scetis with an old man of Thebes. His abba, taking a piece of dry wood, panted it and said to him, 'Water it every day with a bottle of water, until it bears fruit." Now the water was so far away that he had to leave in the evening and return the following morning. At the end of three years the wood came to life and bore fruit. Then the old man took some of the fruit and carried it to the church saying to the brethren, "Take and eat the fruit of obedience.[2]

Lent provides us time and space to be persistent. Will you take the time to practice, to do the work to which you are called? Christine Valters Paintner writes, "Patience isn't just about being comfortable with the slow passage of time, but about coming into a new relationship with time; God's time."

Let us pray.

God in a temporary world, help me to set my sights on that which is lasting and true. Help me to be faithful in the tasks to that I am called, to endure even in the midst of struggle. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Saturday February 21

Mark 1: 9 – 15

After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee preaching the Message of God: "Times's up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message."

Mark 1: 14 – 15
The Message Bible

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, [15]saying, "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"

Mark 1: 14 – 15
Common English Bible

What is good news for some, may be seen as bad news by others. For many, John's message of repentance and change was bad news. Imagine the sigh of relief these individuals must have breathed once they heard the radical wilderness man was dead. And yet, scripture tells us at this moment Jesus appears in Galilee proclaiming God's good news. Like John, he proclaims repentance and CHANGE!

What does this good news mean for us? Jesus speaks of changed hearts and lives. He proclaims the kingdom of God. The season of Lent, particularly Holy Week reminds us this did not seem like good news to those in power in the first century. And, it is probably still not going to be seen as good news for those who long for power in the twenty-first century. The good news of God is about change, change in individuals and systems that identify some as less than and delegate some to places on the margins.

What does it mean to trust in the good news of God? Since 1996, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been intentional in trying to discern the nature of racism and in developing ways of dismantling racist systems. For some, this process means acknowledging the pain that is created by white privilege. For these individuals, it means accepting responsibility for destructive power of this privilege in the lives of persons of color and ultimately in the lives of those who benefit from the privilege. It means living changed lives and advocating for change even when this change means giving up privilege in exchange for lives grounded in God's care and concern for the needs of all people. It means taking a painful look at the experiences of Tryvon Martin and Ferguson, Mo., and of children who are sent down the school to prison-pipeline while still in elementary school or who die in random shootings in disenfranchised and forgotten neighborhoods. It is looking and asking how these experiences must change in the light of God's good news.

What does it mean to trust in the good news of God? For some it

[2] Painter, Location 1807 of 2730.

means recognizing that the needs of others are more important than our own wants. It is recognizing that God truly is about a distributive justice that allows the needs of all to be met so that all might live with dignity and in the light of God's abundance.

Jesus declares, "Now is the time." Today is the day to consider what the good news of God means for you, for your congregation, for your community, for the world. It means learning to live with an eye toward justice and a heart toward one another. Jesus promises, "Here comes God's kingdom." Lent is an opportunity for us to consider what it means to trust in God's good news as seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It challenges us to go out and live that good news today. [3]

Let us pray.

God who created us in a rainbow of colors help us to see each other and to value each other with all our similarities and differences. Open our ears so that we may hear and our hearts so that we may accept the good news of your kingdom. May we grow in understanding so that we may not only hear but also trust the good news for directing our lives. In Jesus name, we pray.

Amen.

Those who pray as well as work at the tasks they have to do, and combine their prayer with suitable activity, will be praying always. That is the only way in which it is possible never to stop praying.

Origen
Third Century

Sunday February 22

Mark 1: 9 – 15

[12]At once, this same Spirit pushed Jesus out into the wild. [13]For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by Satan. Wild animals were his companions, and angels took care of him.

Mark 1: 12 – 13
The Message Bible

[12]At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. [13]He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

Mark 1: 12 – 13
Common English Bible

In Greek, the word for desert is eremos and may be translated "abandonment." The desert was considered a place of abandonment and desolation where one's very existence could be threatened.[4] In the third through fifth centuries, it was also the place where men and women went to encounter God. This understanding of the Desert Fathers and Mothers had deep biblical roots. In Exodus, God instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh to let God's people go so they might worship God in the wilderness near Sinai (Exodus 8: 1). The children of Israel subsequently spent forty years in the crucible of the wilderness before entering into the Promised Land. There they encountered and came to learn more about God who traveled with them providing manna for the journey.

Today in our scripture, as Jesus prepares to begin his public ministry he is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he encounters both temptation and comfort as he is tempted by the devil and ministered to by angels. From these experiences, we see that the biblical depiction of the wilderness is ambivalent. It can be a place of danger and punishment and it can be a place where one encounters God who comforts and delivers. Like the children of Israel, Jesus, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and many spiritual pilgrims who have gone before us, we too can learn from time in the wilderness. In the wilderness, we wrestle with the demons of our lives as we engage in the discipline of prayer and self-reflection.

Each day, we make choices about how to spend our time, our money, and our energy. Each day we face temptations. Facing the wilderness can help us to identify what is truly satisfying. It can help us name those things that we try to substitute for genuine relationship and deep spiritual fulfillment. It can provide the space for us to encounter the living God who is there to lead us, to deliver us.

Wilderness time requires that we withdraw from the distractions of life. It means refusing to allow ourselves to be lulled into a state of numbness and apathy by endless hours of computer or television screen time. It means refraining from attempts to fill ourselves on food or other substances that is consumed mindlessly as we seek to quench an unnamed hunger deep inside ourselves. Wilderness time is found in silence as we sit and be still and know God. Today, seek to carve out time and space for silence. Seek to enter into a time of prayer where you listen for a word from the Lord.

[3] Ibid, Location 1856 of 2730.
[4] Paintner, Location 76 of 2730.



Let us pray.

God of cloud and fiery pillar, lead us as you led the children of Israel on their wilderness journey. Direct our steps and refine our wills so that we may receive your promises. We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Amen.

Monday February 23

Ephesians 2: 1 – 10

[4]Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, [5]he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us

Ephesians 2: 4 – 5
The Message Bible

[4-5]However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace!

Ephesians 2: 4 – 5
Common English Bible

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians wants us to know the first step in resolving a problem is identifying we have a problem. As the author of Ephesians notes one can be caught up in sin and not know it. A good example of this is found when one begins to engage in the work of dismantling racial systems. While some forms of discrimination and racism are painfully obvious others may be more subtle. In an anti-racism training, participants were asked to consider nine questions when evaluating the forming documents and policies of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The questions were designed to help identify the subtle forms of racism that creep into our practices and then our values. Some of these questions focused on how a particular policy or section of the policy might benefit some individuals over others, how it might hurt some, how it might keep us from being whole as God intended, etc. Like Ephesians, this exercise helps us to remember that to solve a problem one must first identify it as a problem.

While the example provides us insights with how this occurs at a systemic level, the issue also applies to our individual lives. For example, this principle is the cornerstone for persons in recovery programs for alcohol, drugs, gambling, and sex addictions. But again it is not limited to these. Ephesians reminds us that all of us were/ are caught up in sin, individual and systemic. We all are separated from God in some way and lack wholeness and shalom in areas of our lives. We were "all dead though the trespasses and sins in which you once lived" (Ephesians 2: 1).

However, the good news is that that passage does not end with challenging us to identify the problem. It does not end by pronouncing us dead. The writer of the Letter of Ephesians reminds us God comes and provides us with the answer to our problem. In Christ, we are made alive - "saved by God's grace." The writer of Ephesians reminds us it takes the power of God to break the cycle of death in our lives. It takes the power of God to bring life.

Lent invites us to dwell in the understanding that the very character of God is to draw near, to love, to bring life out of death. As the author of Ephesians emphasizes the life-giving power of God, Lent challenges us to consider the possibilities that are ours because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It invites us to diagnosis the problem knowing that the Great Physician is ready with the cure. The Desert Father Isaac of Niniveh stated, "He who is aware of his sins is greater than one who can raise the dead. Whoever can weep over himself for one hour is greater than the one who is able to teach the whole world; whoever recognizes the depth of his own frailty is greater than the one who sees visions of angels."[5] May we be formed and shaped as one of these individuals.



Let us pray.

God cure our blind eyes so that we may call out to you in our need. Give us the courage to weep for ourselves so that we might be freed to weep for the world. Thank you for the depth of your love as you continually draw near offering us grace and forgiveness that is unmerited and that comes through Jesus the Christ in whose name we pray.

Amen.

[5]Paintner, Location 1701 of 2730.

Tuesday February 24

I Peter 3: 8 – 18a

[8]Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble

I Peter 3: 8
The Message Bible

[8]Finally, all of you be of one mind, sympathetic, lovers of your fellow believers, compassionate, and modest in your opinion of yourselves.

I Peter 3: 8
Common English Bible

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines humble as, "Not thinking better of yourself than other people." For some this has been translated to mean one should not acknowledge one's gifts and talents. It can be seen in the church when someone is asked to take leadership and they respond, "Oh no I can't do that…." For the Desert Fathers and Mothers, humility or the quality of being humble had to do with an attitude of "trusting restraint."[6] It had to do with not pushing oneself to fast and not holding oneself back unnecessarily.

Desert Mother Syncletica stated, "For further illustration, let us examine how the experienced farmer will water more often the plant that is weak and small. He exercises greater care towards that plant so it might improve. If he observes the plant has put forth shoots prematurely, he will prune it to prevent further withering. The same case exists when a physician will encourage certain patients to increase their intake of good and to exercise more, whereas to others, the physician will order a fast. The same type of care is to be used by physicians of the souls. It is plain that humility is the summit of the virtues, and difficult for one to obtain." [7]

In speaking with those who have sought her wisdom and guidance, Syncletica instructs them in the importance of humility. It is the wise and mature person who knows oneself well enough to be aware of strengths and weaknesses and to accept both. For in doing this one is able to practice this "trusting restraint" as one acknowledges both strengths and weaknesses, nurturing what needs to be nurtured and exercising what is already present and developed. The humble person, according to the understanding of Syncletica is able to both put oneself forward acknowledging and using one's gifts and hold back when appropriate. It is rooted in a self-awareness that is neither self-aggrandizing or self-deprecating.

I Peter 3: 8 is part of a pericope that instructs us in how we are to live in relationship with one another. It does not differentiate between gender, economic status, race, but calls all Christians to one standard of behavior. Syncletica advises her charges to know themselves and to understand restraint trust allows us to hold ourselves in proper perspective. When we can do this we need not fear or envy another's gifts and talents. We need not exaggerate or underestimate our own. The humble individual is free to be loving, to be compassionate, to be of one mind with one another.

May this Lenten season be one in which we grow as individuals with humble and contrite hearts.

Let us pray.

God you see and love us as we truly are. You see and love others as they truly are. Help us to do the same so that we may live in loving relationship, seeking to be of same heart and mind. May we grow in compassion and live with trusting restraint. We pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Wednesday February 25

Psalm 77

[8]Is his love worn threadbare? Has his salvation promise burned out? [11]Once again I'll go over what God has done, lay out on the table the ancient wonders; [12]I'll ponder all the things you've accomplished, and give a long, loving look at your acts. [13]O God! Your way is holy! No god is great like God!



Psalm 77: 8, 11 – 13
The Message Bible

[8]Has his faithful love come to a complete end? Is his promise over for future generations? [11]But I will remember the LORD's deeds; yes, I will remember your wondrous acts from times long past. [12]I will meditate on all your works; I will ponder your deeds. [13]God, your way is holiness! Who is as great a god as you, God?

Psalm 77: 8, 11 – 13
Common English Bible

Psalm 77 has characteristics of an individual psalm of lament. This is most evident in the first ten verses while verses 11 – 20 reflects on the mighty and saving act of God in history. In these verses, the psalmist reawakens to the presence and the power of God. The shift between the despair of the first ten verses and the affirmation of God's power seems quite dramatic.

Grief, anger, unfairness, and rejection are as much a part of the human condition as joy, happiness, celebration and praise. Psalm 77: 1 – 10 speaks to the availability of God in every aspect of human life including suffering. As Christians, we understand that God fully entered into the experience of human suffering through the cross of Jesus

[6] David G.R. Keller. Desert Banquet. A Year of Wisdom from the Desert Mothers and Fathers. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), Kindle Electronic Edition Location 179 of 282. Ibid., Location 179 of 282.

[7] Ibid., Location 179 of 282

Christ. The lament section of this psalm leads us into the reality that human suffering is not beyond the scope and concern of God. Psalm 77: 11 – 20 then goes on to dramatically remind us how God can break into the darkest moments of life and despair. It speaks of how God passionately loves and desires what is best for all of God's creation.

Today, let us take our concerns to God. Let us be bold in conversation, calling out to God and naming that which is inconsistent with God's character of love and justice. Let us pray in a way that draws us into the heart of God so we may be shaped and formed in the image of God and we can learn to be vulnerable and available as God is vulnerable and available. Let us name the ways God has acted in our history, bringing liberation and freedom, salvation and forgiveness. Let us never forget to trust that God hears us and draws near to us.

Let us pray.

God, you hear our cries and you care for your people. Help us to learn to pray so that we are shaped by your heart, coming to love that which you love and caring for that for which you care. Help us, God to trust in you in the midst of despair. May we share the story of your love and mighty acts. We pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Thursday February 26

Genesis 15: 1 – 6, 12 – 18

6 And he believed! Believed God! God declared him "Set-Right-with-God."

Genesis 15: 6
The Message Bible

6 Abram trusted the LORD, and the LORD recognized Abram's high moral character.

Genesis 15: 6
Common English Bible



A familiar trust exercise involves one individual standing with his or her back to another. To demonstrate trust the individual in front falls into the outstretched and waiting arms of the other. In this exercise it is not sufficient to say, "I trust you;" trust requires action. The same can be said of faith. In Hebrews 11: 1, we read, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

In this pericope from Genesis, Abram metaphorically falls back into the arms of God. Abraham expresses concern about his future and God responds to those concerns. God makes a covenant with Abram stating his offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the night sky and assures him his offspring will inherit the land. Abram believes – he trusts- in God's word. It is important to note nothing has changed in the circumstances that have caused Abram concern prior to the assertion that he trusted in the Lord. He still does not have offspring; he still is wandering without a land. Without concrete evidence, Abram believes; he makes a leap to faith that is made possible because of God's word. Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "Faith is always related to what is not seen; in the setting of nature (in opposition to the senses) to what is invisible; in the setting of the spirit (spiritually) to what is improbable."[8] While God's promises seem improbable in light of the current reality, Abram trusts that God will fulfill the promise.

It is important we remember that the fulfillment of God's promise will take four hundred years. In this passage, God tells Abram of the delay. During these four centuries, Abram's children will experience many highs and lows in their existence. They will struggle with maintaining their faith and demonstrating trust in the Lord. It is no different for us today than it was for Abram's descendants so many centuries ago. We are also people who seek immediate gratification.

To trust in the Lord is to take the leap to faith that is seen in our actions. This is a challenge in a society that wants certitude. It is difficult in a society that wants to have the entire journey planned prior to starting the journey. Corrie Ten Boom, the Dutch Christian arrested by the Nazis for assisting Jews during World War II, states, "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."

What leap to faith is God waiting for you to take? What is the next step in your journey? Have you taken your concerns and anxieties to God as Abram does in this passage? Do you listen for God's promises and have faith that God will be faithful?



[8] Gordon Marino, The Quotable Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 176 0f 234.

Let us pray.

Hear our concerns and give us faith, O God, so we can trust in your word and follow your way. Help us to learn to accept and live in your time confident in your promises and secure in your love. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Friday February 27

Psalm 22: 23 – 31

[27]From the four corners of the earth people are coming to their senses, are running back to God. Long-lost families are falling on their faces before him. [28]God has taken charge; from now on he has the last word.

Psalm 22: 27 – 28
The Message Bible

[27]Every part of the earth will remember and come back to the Lord; every family among all the nations will worship you. [28]Because the right to rule belongs to the Lord, he rules all nations.

Psalm 22: 27 – 28
Common English Bible

Today, we again focus on a prayer of lament. Attributed to David, we most often hear this psalm on Good Friday as Jesus is crucified. In verses 27 - 28, we are confronted with the possibilities that spring forth as death gives way to the hope of the Resurrection.

As the psalm speaks of a promise of life that defies the reality of death, we are compelled to extravagant praise of God who is seen at the side of the afflicted sharing in their suffering. The sovereignty of God is acknowledged as the reason for our praise. The psalm ends with the dramatic pronouncement that even death cannot stand in the way of the faithful worshipping God. Traditional boundaries and borders are further obliterated in verses 27 – 31 as "All the ends of the earth" and "all nations" will bow before God's reign.

In June of 2011, members of



Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Moline, Ill., traveled to Bethlehem and the West Bank. Guided by leaders of the Joint Advocacy Initiative, a program of the East Jerusalem YMCA and YWCA that works for peace with justice in Palestine, the group visited refugee camps that have housed displaced Palestinians for over sixty years and spoke with leaders of various groups who seek peace with justice in this troubled area. We heard of the loss of life and the loss of olive groves that are being stripped away from families who have farmed there from the time of the Ottoman Empire. We heard of restrictions that attempt to strip away the humanity of those they attempt to control. The group heard the pain as stories were shared.



Bullet holes remain as reminders of the siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in 2002.

In these stories were the echoes of Psalm 22, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me. Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning." But most powerfully, we heard the hope of Psalm 22, as our guide Ibrahim spoke of the power and the possibilities of God. In this we heard the promise of Psalm 22, "Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it."

In 2012, a documentary was released entitled Little Town of Bethlehem. The movie tells the story of Sami Awad, Ahmad Al'Azzeh and Yonaton Shapira, three men who have lived their entire lives in the violence that overshadows Bethlehem and the West Bank. A Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew, these men tell the story of their lives and their commitment to bring an end to violence in their birthplace in their lifetime. Finding inspiration in the non-violent philosophies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi, they struggle with personal loss and challenge as they seek to bring hope and take a stand against violence.

Sami, Ahmad, and Yonaton know what it means to cry out, "How long, O Lord." They know what it means to experience conflict and tragedy. In the midst of this they seek a common humanity that speaks into reality the hope of Psalm 22 of the day when "God has taken charge."



A message of challenge and possibility found near Jerusalem on the wall that is being built by the Israelis.

As we open our eyes to the violence and pain in our own communities and in the world, we too can pray the words of this psalm. We too can long for the day when "Every part of the earth will remember and come back to the Lord." May it be a time when we seek to understand the pain that is part of so many lives and cry out to God in prayer as we long for the wholeness and shalom of all of God's creation. May this be a time when we learn more fully what it means to seek peace in our homes and live as harbingers of peace in our communities.

Let us pray.

Lord, we do wonder how long it will be until your shalom spreads throughout the earth and wholeness is the reality for all of your creation. We long for the promise of your kingdom. Help us, O Lord, to live this reality beginning in our homes and moving from there into our places of influence. Grant that we may seek to recognize the common humanity of all whom we meet. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Saturday February 28

Genesis 16: 7 – 15

7 An angel of God found her beside a spring in the desert; it was the spring on the road to Shur. 8 He said, "Hagar, maid of Sarai, what are you doing here?" She said, "I'm running away from Sarai my mistress."

Genesis 16: 7 – 8
The Message Bible

7 The LORD's messenger found Hagar at a spring in the desert, the spring on the road to Shur, 8 and said, "Hagar! Sarai's servant! Where did you come from and where are you going?" She said, "From Sarai my mistress. I'm running away."

Genesis 16: 7 – 8
Common English Bible

In this passage, Hagar finds herself in the wilderness. She feels hopeless and desperate without a sense of a future. In the midst of her despair, a messenger comes from God. Speaking directly to her, God presents future possibilities to her; a future in which God makes direct promises to Hagar. Her future will include a son, Ishmael, who has a part in fulfilling God's promise to Abraham.

In the passage, God calls Hagar by name, something that Abraham and Sarah have not done. Hagar gives God a new name, El-roi, "God who sees me." Hagar's understanding of God is of one who sees rather than speaks (interestingly Ishmael means "God who hears). Hagar's naming of God reminds us that God is not only one who speaks to us. God is one who sees the circumstances of our lives and responds to the specificity of those circumstances.

It is a commonly held belief that being able to visualize one's future helps one to reach his or her desired goals. Sports figures seek assistance to master visualization techniques that will help them improve their putting skills or hook shot. Corporations invest time and money in crafting the appropriate vision statement, as do individuals and congregations. In the book of Proverbs we read that without vision the people will perish (Pr. 29: 18). In this passage, Hagar sees herself without a future. God assists her by reframing her possibilities, refocusing her to consider her future. Sometimes we also have difficulty in seeing beyond the past. We act as if the best is behind us – this can be true of individuals and as communities of faith. God sees the reality of Hagar's circumstances and he recognizes her specific need. He responds in a way that suggests new possibilities. God can do the same for us. What are the possibilities that God is pointing you toward?

Hagar's needs have been overlooked by Sarah and Abraham, God sees and God responds. Who do we tend to overlook today? Who do we hurt as we exercise privilege and power over others? What are positive steps that you can take to work and advocate for a future with dignity and promise for these individuals?

Let us pray.

God you hold the promise for our future and the future of others. Help us not to be stuck in the past or anxious about the future. Help us to dream dreams and have vision for what can be when we hold fast to you, O God. Give us eyes to see so that we may respond to the needs of those around us. We pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Acquire the habit of speaking to God as if you were alone with Him, familiarity and with confidence and love, as to the dearest and most loving of friends.

Alphonsus Ligouri



Sunday March 1

Mark 8: 31 - 38

Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?

Mark 8: 34 – 37
The Message Bible

After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?

Mark 8: 34 – 37
Common English Bible

The verses that we read today come from a section of Mark where Jesus is speaking to the disciples about suffering. After Jesus predicts his own death for the first time, he summons the crowd and instructs them about discipleship and suffering. Jesus states that to be his follower, one must be ready to take up his or her own cross.

This was a shocking revelation for the crowds who followed Jesus during the first century and it may be a shocking revelation for his followers in the twenty – first century. We would much rather speak of the blessings of following Jesus rather than consider that discipleship leads to persecution – to standing at odds with society as we stand with today's anawim[9] , the lowly, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows, the orphans, the outcasts, and the maligned of our day.

In the past twelve months we have heard of the kidnapping of teenage Christian girls in Nigeria and the expulsion of Christians from Mosul thus ending the continuous presence of Christians in that community for over 2,000 years. Palestinian Christians suffer in the West Bank and Gaza as their movement, their employment, and the resources they need to survive are controlled. Christians from Myanmar flee their country seeking refugee status in the United States due to religious persecution in their own country and Christians in Central Asia regularly have their homes raided by police. Today, all around the world Christians face suffering and death as they seek to deny self and live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. For many Christians around the world the threat of violence is a reality that permeates their lives each day.

However, the call to deny self and take up the cross is not only being issued in far away places. In the United States, Jesus also calls us to deny ourselves and pick up our crosses. Like our forefathers and foremothers who heard Jesus' words in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, Jesus is calling us. As we face the reality of the school to prison pipeline and the New Jim Crow with the mass incarceration of young black men, and other horrors of racism in our society disciples of Jesus must be prepared to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters of color even if it means suffering for the sake of the gospel. As we face the reality of the harm that continues to be done to First Nation Peoples in light of the current implications of the Doctrine of Discovery, we must be prepared to speak out against policies and practices that continue to deny the dignity, rights, and humanity of indigenous peoples. We must not be ashamed of Jesus but be ready to speak up for those who society seeks to make invisible. We must not be ashamed of Jesus but must seek to understand and respond to the brokenness of society and the church. We must not be ashamed of Jesus as we refuse to give in to public pressure that might lead us to deny the good news of Jesus to and for others. According to A.H. Auden, Secretary General to the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld stated, "In our age, the road to holiness passes through the world of action."[10]

In this passage, we are reminded that we live in the in-between time. Jesus has proclaimed that the Kin-dom of God is at hand. The Resurrection, which we are again preparing to commemorate, testifies that God's will, will be done. In the in-between time the demands of discipleship will result in our living countercultural lives. It necessitates a life of prayer and action. As we give up this Lenten season, may we prepare ourselves through prayer and study of scripture to pick up our crosses and follow Jesus.



Let us pray.

Gracious God, we confess that we have sought a gospel of blessing and prosperity. While we have given thanks for the blessings, we have been reluctant to participate in your ministry of suffering. We long for comfort and the comfortable. Help us, Lord to deny self so that we may grow to be more like you. Help us God to be concerned about the victims of this world so that we may not continue to live as victimizers. Help us with our reluctance and empower us with your Spirit, in Jesus name,

Amen.

Monday March 2

Hebrews 1: 5 – 14

And again to the Son, You, Master, started it all, laid earth's foundations, then crafted the stars in the sky.

Earth and sky will wear out, but not you; they become threadbare like an old coat;

You'll fold them up like a worn-out

[9] Anawim is a Hebrew word that means "the poor who depend on the Lord for deliverance"

[10] W.H. Auden Foreword to Dag Hammarskjold: Markings Leif Sjoberg and W.H. Auden, translators (London: Faber and Faber, 1964) 23.



cloak, and lay them away on the shelf.

But you'll stay the same, year after year; you'll never fade, you'll never wear out.

Hebrews 1: 10 – 12
The Message Bible

And he says, You, Lord, laid the earth's foundations in the beginning, and the heavens are made by your hands.

They will pass away, but you remain.

They will all wear out like old clothes.

You will fold them up like a coat.

They will be changed like a person changes clothes, but you stay the same, and the years of your life won't come to an end.

Hebrews 1: 10 – 12
Common English Bible

Each year, Mark and I engage in an annual fall cleaning. Over several days, we go through our closets, drawers, and storage spaces making decisions on what to keep, donate, and throw away. Our general criteria for keeping or donating an item is have we used it in the past twelve months or will we need it in the next twelve months. We have found that we really can give up the things that don't fall within those two categories. We have found that this annual "downsizing" helps us to develop a deeper appreciation of what we need verses what we may have wanted at the time we acquired something. Over the years, it has helped us to evaluate our buying habits before we make purchases. The things that we retain are the things that we use and value, things that we need.

Today's passage is a series of seven quotations from the First Testament. Verses 10 – 12 quote Psalm 102: 25 – 27, a lament psalm that reflects on the brevity and fragility of our mortal existence. In this passage, our lives and nature are compared to clothes that are folded like an old coat after it has been taken off. While our lives are described as brief and changing, the psalm speaks to the eternal nature of God reassuring us that our future depends on God who is steadfast, compassionate, and just. In Hebrews, the author re-interprets these verses from the psalm to emphasize the role of Christ as creator and sustainer, as God's character of mercy and compassion is revealed.

Like our annual fall cleaning, Lent calls us to consider what we keep in our theological closets, drawers and storage space. It asks us to consider what "stuff" we hang on to. Do we seek meaning in that which will pass away and wear out like old clothes? Or do we seek meaning in life from our relationship with the eternal God and how life flows out of that relationship?

While this passage reminds us of the fragile nature of life, in the context of all of scripture we are told that God declares human existence good. Knowing this we can celebrate each moment of our existence. We can take the time that we are given, even if it may seem brief, and seek to live fully as God intends for us. We can reflect on our mortality and the brevity of life from the perspective that it is a gift from God. We can be humble acknowledging that we are the creation of a God who is loving and just, steadfast in mercy and compassion.

Take some time today, make a list of what you value in life. Consider what you are most proud of in your life. Consider when you are happiest. Consider when you feel the most satisfied. Consider how you have spent your time and money during the past week, month, year. Consider when you feel closest to God. Do the values and priorities that you hold on to and establish reflect an understanding of the goodness of human existence? (The existence of all people not only our own?) Do your values and priorities reflect your desire to treasure this moment, this day, as a gift from God? (do they allow others to experience the giftedness of the day?)

In Hebrews we are reminded that through Christ the steadfast love -the hesed- of God is revealed. We are reminded that it is Christ who sustains us in the midst of the brevity of life. Today, we can engage in a bit of spring cleaning as we offer thanks for the gift of life and make the most out of every moment of it. We can hold on and treasure that which promotes healing and wholeness, joy and hope, for ourselves and others. We can let go of that which keeps us from declaring the goodness of life and God.

Let us pray.

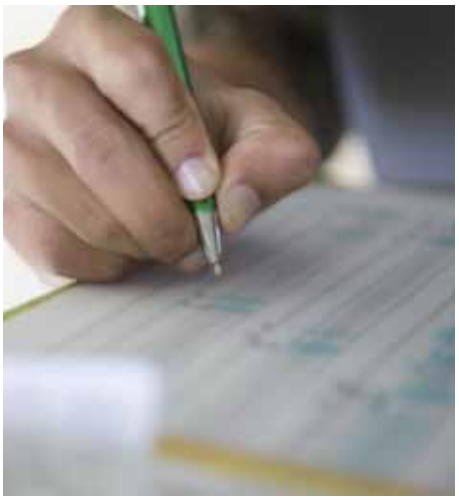
God you have given me today. Help me to embrace each moment with thanksgiving so that I may live a life that shows gratitude for all you do. Soften my heart so that I may be humble before you, O God. Let me reflect your steadfast love and seek your justice in all that I do. I pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Tuesday March 3

Psalm 105: 1 – 11, 37 – 45

Keep your eyes open for God, watch for his works; be alert for signs of his presence. Remember the world of wonders he has made, his miracles,



and the verdicts he's rendered— O seed of Abraham, his servant, O child of Jacob, his chosen.

Psalm 105: 4 – 6
The Message Bible

Thank God! Pray to him by name! Tell everyone you meet what he has done!

Psalm 105: 4
Common English Bible

Psalm 105 celebrates how God has acted on behalf of the children of Israel. It is full of praise as it recounts God's "wonderful works" as it focuses exclusively on what God has done. This prayer of elaborate praise comes during the horror and chaos of the exile. Faced with the loss of the land, the psalmist still has faith to pray with confidence and trust and words of praise.

As Christians, our story of God's "wonderful works" is most clearly revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today, take a moment, to consider this gift of salvation and to give thanks for what God has done for you through Jesus Christ. Let us also remember that the saving work of Christ Jesus is not merely a historical story but is the story that is being written each day as Jesus continues to show up in our lives. It is an ongoing story of God's persistence and grace.

Take a moment to reflect upon the wonderful works of God in your life. The answer that came after months of fitful praying. The peace that descended in the midst of anxiety and tension that hangs in the air all around you. The confidence to speak the words to power that you were certain would not come. A life that was turned around after years of struggling with the demons of addiction. The story is continuing all around us. In our individual lives, in our congregations, and in our world, we are surrounded by the mighty works of God, large and small.

Dag Hammarskjöld, Swedish diplomat, economist and author, served as Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 -1961 and was awarded a Nobel Prize posthumously in December of 1961. Following his death, the journals he had kept throughout his life revealed a deep mystical faith. Hammarskjöld wrote, "For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be yes." In his words, Hammarskjöld urges a level of faith that not only expresses gratitude for what God has done but that lives in hope and gratitude because of what God will do. It is a trusting faith that is rooted in relationship with a God who not only loves but who is love.

Today, is a day to reflect on God's wonderful works in our lives. It is a day to offer prayers of thanksgiving. It is also a day to dream dreams and have visions of what can be because God is and God continues God's wonderful works. Lent provides us with the time and space to say thanks for all God has done. May it provide us with the opportunity to say yes to all that will be as we seek to express gratitude in the midst of the uncertain and unfinished.

Let us pray.

Thank you God for the many blessings of my life. Thank you for the presence of the Holy Spirit. Thank you for what will be. Give me the courage to seek your will and the desire to follow in your righteousness. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Wednesday March 4

Jeremiah 30: 12 – 22

I'll turn things around for Jacob. I'll compassionately come in and rebuild homes

Jeremiah 30: 18
The Message Bible

The Lord proclaims: I will restore Jacob's tents and have pity on their birthplace.
Their city will be rebuilt on its ruins and the palace in its rightful place.

Jeremiah 30: 18
Common English Bible



Six months after hurricane Katrina, the congregation I was serving made our first trip to Louisiana to assist with the rebuilding process. The devastation was beyond words as we traveled through Slidell, St. Bernard's Parrish, and the Ninth Ward. There was an eerie silence as nature itself seemed to mourn what had happened. It was the first of several trips we made to the New Orleans area over the next few years.

Overtime we began to see the area being restored as people returned, houses were rebuilt, and schools and businesses were reopened. I remember tears coming to the eyes of several of us who made the first trip, as we heard children playing in a neighborhood that during that experience had been blanketed in silence and covered with the rubble of destroyed homes and the memorabilia of the people's pre-hurricane lives.

In our trips to New Orleans, we learned one of the most important things in the work of restoration was listening. Not only did we hang dry wall, we sat on piles of dry wall listening to what life had been like "before." We were drawn into people's lives as we heard of what it was like "during," as people shared stories of wading through the flood waters, of pain and loss and wondering what had happened to family members, friends and community members who had shared life in a shelter. We shared the story of how lives, not only buildings, were being restored as we engaged in the ministry presence that was essential to this process.

The passage that we are considering today, is a part of a larger pericope that extends from Jeremiah 30: 1–31: 40, that speaks of restoration. These oracles speak

words of hope in the midst of the oppression and domination of exile. Jeremiah embraces both the people of the Southern and Northern kingdom with his prophecies.

In verses 30: 12 – 22, God is identified as both a God who redeems and judges. Here we are told of a God who will restore the future by building the New Jerusalem. The rebuilding of the city is a reversal of what first appears in the story of the Tower of Babel. God rebuilds the city out of God's compassion and caring for the people. It is no longer a place where people do not understand one another, the New Jerusalem will be a place of wholeness and shalom.

Today, God's work of restoration continues in the building of wells and the establishment of cottage industries that provide economic stability and options for families around the world. It continues as individuals advocate for living wage, safe housing, and equal access to education. The power of God to restore is seen as people do the work necessary to recover from moral injury and entrapment in modern day slavery. It is being done when we claim our shared humanity and value each other's diverse stories as the confusion of Babel is reversed and we come to understand one another.

How have you shared in God's work of restoration? Whose story have you shared? Who have you made yourself vulnerable to as you have shared your own brokenness and need for restoration? May today be a day that you take time for this work of restoration.

Let us pray.

Gracious God help me to hear the stories of others with an open heart and open mind. Help me be a part of your work of reversal and restoration. Today, help me to see the places where I am being called to be an instrument of peace and a worker of justice. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Thursday March 5

1 Peter 2: 4 – 10

Welcome to the living Stone, the source of life. The workmen took one look and threw it out; God set it in the place of honor. Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you'll serve as holy priests offering Christ-approved lives up to God.

1 Peter 2: 4 -5
The Message Bible

Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God's perspective it is chosen, valuable. You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2: 4 – 5
Common English Bible

If you visit the National Benevolent Association's home page you find two great examples of this passage being put into action across their history. One hundred twenty-six years ago, six women gathered in the basement of a St. Louis church to pray to find a way to respond to the human suffering around them. Out of this prayer, National Benevolent Association was born. Living Stones built homes that cared for children and widows across the country.

Now 126 years later, young adults are seeking to find ways to respond to God's call in their lives as they seek justice for those suffering around them. Out of this vision, NBA's XPLOR program was born in 2014. Again Living Stones will impact neighborhoods and communities as we learn how to be church together in a new way. These Living Stones will engage in hands on justice work as they live together in communities seeking to discern their vocation and to exercise and develop leadership abilities. In 2014, this took place in sites, St. Louis, Mo.; Hiram-Mantua, Ohio; and North Hollywood, Calif.

As more respond to the building stones in this ministry, new places of ministry will be established. I am excited that in 2015 our congregation is going to be a part of this ministry in which God gathers the living stones, individuals, congregations, and in our case Regions to build something valuable, sacred whose cornerstone is Jesus Christ and his continued ministry in the world today.

Throughout 1 Peter, we are reminded of God's election and call. It reminds us that as God's chosen people we have been chosen for a purpose. As a part of our Lenten journey, we are called to set aside time and open up space to listen for that call of God. What is God building with your life? What have you been reluctant to offer to God?



Sign outside a church in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina

What has held you back? What does it mean for Jesus Christ to be the cornerstone of your life?

Let us pray.

God, forgive me for those moments when I have heard your call and ignored it. Forgive me those moments when I have tried to build my life on a foundation other than you. Open my eyes to the possibilities and opportunities that are before me so that I may live to build your kingdom. I pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Friday March 6

Psalm 19

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

Psalm 19:14
The Message Bible

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Psalm 19: 14
Common English Bible

C. S. Lewis states that Psalm 19 is one of the greatest poems in the Psalter and in the world.[11] The psalm reminds us that God reveals God's self to us through torah. Frequently, the First Testament term torah is translated law. In some instances we have come to reduce this translation to simply mean a list of rules that can be memorized or followed. While law is not an inaccurate translation of torah, the word "instruction" more clearly conveys what the word meant in the life and hearts of the people of Israel.

Torah is not merely a listing of rules and regulations but connotes a dynamic and vital relationship between God and God's chosen people. It is about seeking God and God's instruction in the midst of the particularities of life. For as God



instructs us, we find direction and purpose for our lives.

Memorization of the law is something that one may do once. We memorize and then we move on. Torah requires something very different. It is ongoing as we learn more and consider old interpretations in light of new instruction and understandings. Mary Turner Donovan writes, "over the centuries Jewish communities have understood that interpretation of the law must be ongoing; we must interpret it in light of our own lives."[12] A part of discipleship is the understanding that we are constantly interpreting and reinterpreting scripture in light of our own lives. Quoting Jewish teachers Donovan writes:

The world endures because of three activities: study of Torah, divine worship, and deeds of loving kindness.

Turn to it, and turn to it again, for everything is in it. Pour over it grow old and gray over it. Do not budge from it. You can have no better guide for living than it."[13]

We speak of Lent as a time of renewal. A time when we grow closer to God as we might deepen in discipleship. We speak of engaging in spiritual disciplines such as fasting, praying, etc.

You may be aware that both disciple and discipline come from the Latin discipulus meaning student or follower. Thus, discipleship is about seeking God's instruction for our lives. It is about forming the habits of the heart that provide us with the opportunity to listen to God and to grow in our relationship with God. It is a way of living.

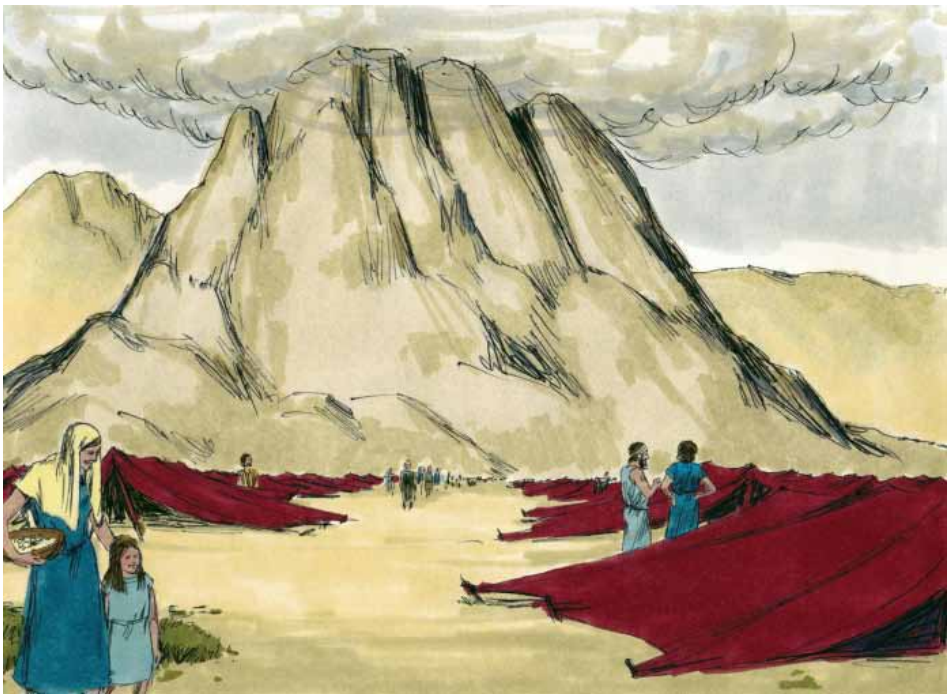
During this Lent, may we turn to scripture over and over again. May we seek the instruction of our God as we pour over it and do not budge from it.

The concluding words of the psalm that we have considered today are the psalmist prayer that his words be acceptable and his thoughts pleasing to God. Thomas Merton prays, "But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope I will never do anything apart from the desire." May our Lenten journey culminate in a place where these prayers become our prayers. As we seek God's instruction and as we are formed by God's words may our desire to please God in word and deed grow and deepen.

[11] *C.S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1958), 63.*

[12] Mary Donovan Turner, Old Testament Words: Reflections for Preaching (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003) , 120.

[13] Ibid, 120.



Let us pray.

Speak to me, O God that I may be formed and shaped by your word. Cast out desires and thoughts that distract and lead me in any direction except towards you. I pray these things in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Saturday March 7

Exodus 19: 16 – 25

Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God. They stood at attention at the base of the mountain. Mount Sinai was all smoke because God had come down on it as fire. Smoke poured from it like smoke from a furnace. The whole mountain shuddered in huge spasms.

Exodus 19: 17 – 18
The Message Bible

Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their place at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord had come down on it with lightning. The smoke went up like the smoke of a hot furnace, while the whole mountain shook violently.

Exodus 19: 17 – 18
Common English Bible

What are the criteria you use to evaluate worship? Do you consider it a good worship experience when you have a familiarity with and love of all the songs or hymns that were selected? Do you feel as if you have truly worshipped when you leave knowing that the preacher was speaking to your needs in her sermon? Do you rank your worship experience on the quality of the relationship you have with those who join you in worship? Do you know you have worshipped when you have encountered God and leave feeling shaken?

Today, using a liturgical form the narrator speaks of the people preparing to worship. God has sent Moses to Pharoah to demand the people be allowed to go worship God (Exodus 9:1). After much struggle, liberation has happened and the people are free to worship. Here we are reminded that worship is entering into holiness.

At Sinai, the people will encounter the holy God. There are no adequate words to describe God's coming, so we are shown the impact of that presence in the response of nature itself. The narrator wants us to join with the quaking earth, to stand in awe before our God for it is not a place of complacency or comfort. The God who comes to Sinai is not to be tamed or domesticated. For this is One who has heard the cries of the people and has had mercy upon them. This is the God who has freed the people from the yoke of Egypt and the oppression of the Empire. It is the God who will lead them into a new way of living. Now, they stand ready to meet the God of liberation at the base of Sinai. God will speak.

Encountering the living God is both comforting and challenging. For worship to occur, the people of Israel were freed of that which enslaved them. We too must be freed if we are to enter into holiness and encounter God. Today, consider when you feel closest to God. What is different in those moments verses the moments when you feel detached from or distant from God? What do you need to let go of to turn and move toward God.

At Sinai, the people encountered God on the mountain and life would never be the same. This encounter would be the pivotal event to bring order and purpose to their lives. Orginally speaking of newspapers, Finley Peter Dunne, a humorist first used the expression "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." It is an expression that is often used in the context of ministry after being used by Reinhold Niebulr and speaks to the encounter of the people at Sinai. In the shadow of Sinai, the people will hear the voice of the One who set them free. They will hear the voice of the One who causes mountains to tremble and who gives a Law by which they are to order their lives. It is both comforting and challenging. God continues to speak today calling us into encounters with holiness. God continues to speak today calling us to lives that testify to the worthiness of the God who speaks to us.

Finally, lest we overlook it, note that God comes down to earth (verses 18 and 19). That is always the case, God invites and we answer. God initiates and we respond. God brings holiness to us. it is the very nature of grace which Lent calls us to contemplate.

Let us pray.

Holy God, you speak and the mountains tremble and the earth shakes. May we testify to your love as we worship you with words and deeds each day. Speak to our hearts and liberate us from all that separates us from your holiness. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

The language that God hears best is the silent language of love.

John of the Cross
Sixteenth Century

Sunday March 8

1 Corinthians 1: 18 - 25

But to us who are personally called by God himself—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one.

I Corinthians 1: 24
The Message Bible

But to those who are called – both Jews and Greeks – Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.

1 Corinthians 1: 24
Common English Bible

Throughout history, there have been individuals who lived the lives of fools to teach the wisdom of God. In the sixth century, there was a Syrian monk who was known as Simeon the Fool who lived as a hermit for twenty-nine years in the desert near the Dead Sea. Simeon's life was characterized by his asceticism and his social and charitable acts of service. He was also known for his unorthodox practices – dragging dead dogs through the streets, throwing nuts at priests as they preached, and restricting his diet to lentils. Simeon's unusual behavior was intended to challenge an attitude of spiritual superiority in others.

A few centuries later Brother Juniper, a companion of Francis of Assisi, was known as the Jester of God due to his outrageous acts. Juniper's foolishness was intended to discourage those who wanted to be his disciples and encourage them to be disciples of Christ as he himself sought to be more like Christ.

Similarly, in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church there are reports of individuals identified as holy fools, persons who engaged in seemingly foolish acts as a way of challenging an understanding of the superiority of an intellectualized faith.[14] These holy fools were sane individuals who feigned insanity for the edification of others.

The lives of the holy fools remind us that faith is not merely what we ascribe to intellectually; it is not merely a list of propositions that we hold. Faith is about humble service and compassionate concern for others as we live to grow closer to God. Through their odd and unorthodox behavior, holy fools want to shock the world from an apathetic and complacent faith and propel individuals to passionate and active faith lives. As Murray Bodo states of Brother Juniper, "He played the fool lest he became a real fool by allowing others to invest in him a holiness and wisdom that belongs only to God."[15]

In our scripture today, Paul states, "the message of the cross is foolishness." He further explains that God will "destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent." With these words Paul calls us to an entirely new way of seeing and interpreting the world around us. The cross and resurrection of Christ becomes the lens through which we are to perceive the world.

This message did not make sense to many who were familiar with the law and its admonishment that anyone who is hung on a tree is cursed (Deuteronomy 21: 22). It may not make sense to those who find strength in power, material success, intellectual accomplishments, and control and domination over others. Yet, this is the wisdom to which we are called. It is a wisdom that finds strength in vulnerability and humility. It is the wisdom that says power does not come by force but through invitation to a transformed life. It is the wisdom that brings about reversals of power structures and that brings down the principalities that deny the wholeness and shalom of life.

Today, we continue to be challenged by the conventional wisdom of the world. The wants of the few are emphasized over the

[14] *Murray Bodo, Brother Juniper (Phoenix, AZ: Tau Publishing, 1983) Kindle Electronic Edition; Sergev Ivanov, Simon Franklin (translator) Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond. Oxford Studies in Byzantium. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jaroslav Pelikan, Fools for Christ (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001).*

[15] *Bodo, Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 30 or 1013.*



The desert near the Dead Sea.

needs of the many. Privilege and prestige are withheld for the social elite while the dignity and value of all God's children are denied. As we journey through Lent, let us remember that the Resurrection is God's yes to the ministry of Jesus Christ. A ministry in which sinners are forgiven, the oppressed are lifted up, the marginalized are brought in and so much more.

How can we live the reality of that "yes" today?

Let us pray.

Gracious God may I also seek your wisdom rather than depend on the knowledge and ways of the world. May I never fear being considered a fool by others as I trust in you and seek your ways. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Monday March 9

1 Corinthians 3: 10 – 23

You realize, don't you, that you are the temple of God, and God himself is present in you?

1 Corinthians 3: 16
The Message Bible

Don't you know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you?

1 Corinthians 3: 16
Common English Bible

Throughout scripture, the temple represents much more than just a place where people gather for worship. The temple is God's dwelling place and a sign of God's victory over His enemies. It is a symbol of holiness and a sign of God's justice and shalom.

In this passage, we are reminded that we are the temple of God. We are called to be God's dwelling place and to be the sign of God's victory as we have experienced it through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (our foundation). We are to be holy as God is holy and our communities are to be places of justice and shalom.

In our passage today, Paul admonishes us to be wise in our selection of building materials. While our salvation is solely through the grace of God, as revealed through Christ Jesus, Paul instructs us that the materials that we use to build on that foundation will impact the durability and stability of the project. He goes on to admonish that the quality of building materials will be tested. He instructs that behaviors that do not edify will ultimately be destroyed.

There are many theories on the reason for the decline of the mainline church today. One of these theories relates to the inability of churches to identify and articulate what they believe. Another theory suggests churches have not emphasized the need for spiritual maturation and daily engagement in practices of the faith. Perhaps the church is going through a time of testing as we are being called to consider the building materials we have used for our individual and communal lives?



In his book *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ,* George Barna states that in seeking to make disciples one needs to strive for the following:

- The passion of Stephen
- The joy of the post-Pentecostal apostles
- The integrity of Nathaniel
- The availability of Mary
- The perseverance of Paul
- The transformation of Peter
- The wisdom of James
- The servanthood of Martha
- The love of John
- The generosity of Joseph the Levite from Cyprus
- The seriousness of John the Baptist
- The studiousness of Luke
- The humility and reverent faith of the centurion
- The evangelistic sharing of Andrew
- The character of Jesus[16]

Now, that might seem like a pretty overwhelming list if one seeks to embody all of those characteristics. Barna suggests even the individuals on the list do not embody all the characteristics. Instead, each had a handful of qualities that were their strengths and worked on the developing those that were their weaknesses.

To become a mature follower of Jesus Christ, Barna suggests we need to focus on the fundamentals. Worship God, celebrate and give thanks for the gift of salvation. Seek to be a life long learner through study of scripture and prayer. Serve others and work for justice in your community. Share your faith in word and in how you live.

Today, remember you are the temple of the Living God and consider what materials you are using to build the temple of God. Who do you identify with on the

[16] *George Barna Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbook Press, 2001), 164*

list of biblical pillars of faith? Can you preach like Peter? Pray like Paul? Share like Andrew? Live like Nathaniel? How are you showing this as you live your life each day? What are the characteristics that you are seeking to strengthen in your life?

Let us pray.

Living God, as I practice the disciplines of faith may I come to know the qualities of faith that are my strengths. May I demonstrate these traits regularly as I seek to grow and mature as a follower of Christ Jesus, in whose name I pray.

Amen.

Tuesday March 10

Psalm 84

One day spent in your house, this beautiful place of worship, beats thousands spent on Greek island beaches.

I'd rather scrub floors in the house of my God than be honored as a guest in the palace of sin.

Psalm 84: 10
The Message Bible

Better is a single day in your courtyards than a thousand days anywhere else! I would prefer to stand outside the entrance of my God's house than live comfortably in the tents of the wicked.

Psalm 84: 10
Common English Bible

Born in poverty in the seventeenth century, Nicholas Herman was an unlearned man who served as a footman and a soldier prior to entering the Carmelite order in Paris where he took the name Lawrence of the Resurrection. In the priory, Brother Lawrence spent most of his time in the kitchen or repairing sandals as he lacked the education to become a cleric.

Despite his seemingly lowly station, Brother Lawrence's profound peace and spiritual depth drew others to him. His book *The Practice of the Presence of God* is considered one of the spiritual classics. He considered that God's love could be found in the midst of the mundane and the ordinary routine of life. Of his life in the kitchen, Brother Lawrence writes, "The time of business, does not differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."[17]

Once again, our scripture passage asks us to consider the temple of God. A prayer for pilgrims making their way to the Temple for the autumn festival of Tabernacles, Psalm 84 gives voice to the longing and joy associated with worship. The pilgrims speak of the blessing of being able to dwell continually in the Temple. Indeed, in our focus verse for the day, the psalmist states that it is better to have the most humble task associated with the Temple than to be in a place of power and prestige and be cut off from God. The psalmist instructs us that the true blessing in life comes from trusting God.

Brother Lawrence spent years yielding his heart and mind to God's presence. He did this with a humility that birthed tranquility and an understanding that there is no place that he would rather be than in God's presence. He shows us that, God is not only to be found in mountain top experiences or by complicated routines and practices. God is present as we wash the dishes and as we walk the dog. As the psalmist reminds us we are more blessed when we engage in the most humble task for the glory of God than when we hold the highest positions in society but alienate ourselves from God.

Today start your day by offering it to God. Ask God to be present with you throughout your day. Throughout the day give God thanks for the tasks in which you are engaging and the people you encounter. Listen for the voice of God throughout your day.

Let us pray.

Thank you God for the tasks before me. Help me to seek your presence wherever I am today. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.



Wednesday March 11

Ezra 6: 1 – 16

The Temple where sacrifices are offered is to be rebuilt on new foundations

Ezra 6: 3
The Message Bible

In the first year of his rule, King Cyrus made a decree: Concerning God's house in Jerusalem: Let the house at the place where they offered sacrifices be rebuild and let its foundations be retained.

Ezra 6: 3
Common English Bible

For seventy long years, the children of Israel waited for God to deliver them from exile. Now, God working through Cyrus is ready to act. The new exodus will happen and the people will return to their homeland. Scripture makes it clear that is it the Spirit of the Lord who is motivating Cyrus who encourages and supports the people's journey home.

Over the course of the time in exile, some individuals had begun to develop roots in Babylon. Some had even experienced prosperity in this strange land. Despite the fact that Cyrus is sponsoring the repatriation, the journey would still

[17] *Brother Lawrence, The Brother Lawrence Collection: Practice and Presence of God, Spiritual Maxims, The Life of Brother Lawrence (Floyd, VA: Sublime Books, 2014) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 259 of 1449.*

be a difficult one. The people were returning to a war torn land, a land that has been inhabited by strangers. They are not returning to establish an independent nation but one that is under the rule of Persia.

Can you imagine what this journey must have been like for the people? Some were excited about the possibilities that lay before them; some were reluctant to leave the familiar and what had become comfortable homes of Babylon. Some were eager to begin the work of restoration; some were uncertain that they were ready for the work ahead. All shared in the same task of restoring worship of YHWH. At the heart of this task was the rebuilding of the Temple. It was a task that would take place under adverse circumstances and with opposition.

Today, we continue to be called to establish the dwelling place of God where we are offered as living sacrifices. What do you bring to God as your offering? What are the opposing forces that you face in this task? What contributes to your reluctance as you face the task? When do you feel most eager? What are the signs of restoration you see around you?

Let us pray.

God you always find a way to bring your people home. Give me strength for the journey even when it may seem difficult. Help me to keep my eyes focused on you so that I do not get lost or distracted along the way. I pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Thursday March 12

Ephesians 1: 3 – 6

Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

Ephesians 1: 5 – 6
The Message Bible

God destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ because of his love. This was according to his goodwill and plan and to honor his glorious grace that he has give to us freely through the Son whom he loves.

Ephesian 1: 5 – 6
Common English Bible



The book of Ephesians opens by praising God for salvation that comes through Christ. Verses 3–14 consist of a single sentence in Greek that can be divided into three parts, each part ending with "to the praise of his glory."

Our focus scripture today, verses 3–6, reminds us of our calling. In this passage we are reminded that God is the initiator of salvation. We are the ones who respond.

When I was a young child about four or five-years-old, I went with my grandparents and sister to take my grandfather for a doctor's appointment in Peoria, Ill. Now at that time Peoria seemed like a very big city that was very far away from my hometown of Canton. After my grandfather's appointment, my grandparents took my sister and I to the Woolworth for lunch.

Finishing up my submarine sandwich and milk, my grandfather said he would take me to the toy department to look at the toys while my sister and grandmother shopped. At some point in my browsing, I became separated from my grandfather.

When I realized I couldn't see my grandpa, I began to "look" for him. The more I "looked" the more lost I felt. After what seemed like an eternity, in actuality maybe ten minutes, I sat down under a rack of clothes. I shut my eyes and slumped down; I was certain I would never see my family again. I was certain I would be left in this big and scary place far from home. As I sat there contemplating my fate, I heard my grandpa's voice calling my name. And, I began to call back. At first grandpa's voice seemed pretty faint but soon he had found me. I was scooped up and hugged, prior to being told once again about not wondering off.

While not a perfect analogy, some similarities can be found in my experience as a lost five-year-old and our experience prior to hearing God's call of redemption. First, trying on my own was not successful. I needed someone to call my name, someone to come and get me. This passage reminds us that God sends Christ Jesus and through him we are found. In both cases, the search is motivated by love, even when we are responsible for being lost.

Today, take some time to consider the first time you recognized the voice of God calling you. Have there been other occasions when you have felt lost and heard God's call? Give thanks to the God who seeks and calls. Give thanks for His ongoing presence and love in your life.

Let us pray.

Open my ears, O God so that I may always hear your call. May I always seek you and depend on you each day. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Friday March 13

Ephesians 1: 7 – 14

It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

Ephesians 1: 13 – 14
The Message Bible

The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, which is applied toward our redemption as God's own people, resulting in the honor of God's glory.

Ephesians 1: 14
The Common English Bible

Our focus passage today, continues from where we left off yesterday. Ephesians 1: 7–14 includes the remaining two sections of that single Greek sentence we were considering yesterday. In verses 7–12, the focus is on salvation accomplished through Christ who is identified as the fulfillment of God's plan for salvation.

Verses 13–14, speak of the presence of the Holy Spirit as sign of our full redemption as the kingdom of God is fully established. Founders of the Disciples movement, Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone shared the understanding that the Holy Spirit is given after faith. In a suggested liturgy, for baptism following a candidates immersion in the water the celebrant places his/ her hands on the baptized head and says, "The Holy Spirit abide with you, the Spirit of Wisdom and understanding; the Spirit of counsel and inward strength; the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness; the Spirit of joy and hope" or "The Holy Spirit be at work in you to do far more that you dare ask or imagine keeping you in the knowledge of Christ's love, too wonderful to be measured."[18] The Holy Spirit unites us within the community of the church and facilitates our understanding of Christ's teachings and ongoing presence. As we receive the Holy Spirit, we become a part of the priesthood of all believers and enter into the ministries of the church.

In his writings to the congregation at Corinth, Paul reminds us prayer is made possible through the gift of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12: 3). We are told in the gospel of John that this Spirit is a gift from Jesus Himself (John 16: 7). Through the Holy Spirit, God enters our lives in the most intimate of ways and enters into communion with us. Thomas Merton states, "The union of the Christian with Christ… is a mystical union in which Christ Himself becomes the source and principle of life in me. Christ Himself… "breathes" in me divinely in giving me His Spirit."[19]

In Galatians, we learn that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5: 22 – 23) This suggests that the indwelling Spirit frees us to love in ways that are manifested as we demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in our relationships with others.

Today, stop and reflect on your own baptism. What do you remember about that event? Reflect on the gift of the Holy Spirit in your life. Henri Nouwen suggests that the Holy Spirit takes away our narrowness giving us new breath, new freedom, new life.[20] Consider what this means. Consider the fruit of the Spirit, how are they maturing in your life?

Take a few moments to sit in silence. Sit comfortably and begin by concentrating on your breathing. Breathe in deeply and exhale fully. Make a list of people who need your prayers today. Ask God to show you how you might minister to their needs.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, breathe in me and open me to new possibilities. Take away my narrowness of mind and heart and open me to the world around me. I pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Saturday March 14

John 3: 1 – 13

You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God."

John 3: 8
The Message Bible

God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

John 3: 8
Common English Bible

Today, we hear the story of Nicodemus. A respected leader of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night, something that not only indicates a time of day but also provides insight into the spiritual life of Nicodemus. While Nicodemus seems to know about Jesus, as

[18] *Colbert S. Cartwright and O.I. Cricket Harrison, Chalice Worship (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1997)30.*

[19] *Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation (New York, NY: Directions, 1961). 159*

[20] *Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out : The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life, New Your, NY: Doubleday1975) Kindle Electronic Edition, pg. 109.*



indicated in his identification of Jesus as a teacher coming from God, Nicodemus does not seem to have a relationship with Jesus as indicated in Jesus' response to the greeting. Jesus seems to startle Nicodemus when he begins to talk with him about the need to be born again. As Jesus converses with Nicodemus, he differentiates between being born of the flesh and born of the Spirit. This new birth comes about in the cleansing of baptism with the corresponding transformation of heart.

In the Celtic tradition, Bridget, along with Patrick and Columba are identified as key leaders in the conversion to Christianity of Ireland. According to legend, Bridget is sometimes identified as Mary's midwife. According to tradition she was an early Irish shepherdess, abbess and founder of several monasteries for women including Kildare. In the Catholic tradition she is the patron saint of travelers, healers, midwives, and new babies. She is associated with newness of life and spiritual birth.

Bridget was known for her generosity to the poor. It is said that she frequently gave bread, butter and milk to the poor who came to the abbey. Legend tells of her preforming healing miracles, mostly related to women. Her compassion extended to both pagans and Christians.

Consider this Song of Bridget

I long for a great lake of ale
I long for the meats of belief and pure piety
I long for flails of penance at my house
I long for them to have barrels full of peace
I long to give away jars full of love
I long for them to have cellars full of mercy
I long for cheerfulness to be in their drinking
I long for Jesus too to be there among them.

What are the meat of belief and piety for which you long? What would barrels of peace and jars of love look like in your life? Does your life reflect a longing for Jesus?

Let us pray.

Born of spirit, may I grow in love and mercy of others. May I seek peace and righteous today and all days. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Sunday March 15

Numbers 21: 4 – 9

They spoke out against God and Moses: "Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can't stomach this stuff any longer."

Numbers 21: 5
The Message Bible

The people spoke against God and Moses: "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us in the desert, where there is no food or water. And we detest this miserable bread!"

Numbers 21: 5
Common English Bible

At the beginning of the wilderness journey, the children of Israel were hungry. The road was difficult and the journey arduous. The people began to ask themselves if it would not have been better to die in Egypt then in this unfamiliar wilderness. God hears the complaints of the people and sends manna. Imagine what the people must have thought as they received this unfamiliar "food." As they experienced this substance that would be essential to life and nourishment for the first time, some must have gingerly took a small hesitant bite and others must have gulped it down as if it they were expecting something foul tasting. According to Mary Donovan Turner, "Manna is a sign and a symbol. As sign it was visible food itself. As symbol it pointed beyond itself to the giver. It represented God's caring presence, which we may encounter at the limits of our power."[21]



Now in this passage, perhaps succumbing to unrealistic memories of the past and longing for the "good old days" the people have begun to grow surly and impatient. They complain about the manna. In doing this, the people were not only rejecting a meal, they are demonstrating a lack of trust and confidence in the one who is the giver of the meal. Scripture tells us they were punished by being bitten by snakes and then paradoxically saved by looking upon a bronze serpent once they have repented.

How easy it is for us to cling to the familiar and to hold on to the past. The unknown future may seem to be scary and the road we are traveling on may seem unmarked and confusing. Yet, be assured that the God who provides is faithful.

In August of 2013, after fifty years of shared ministry the day care we founded announced they were closing. Understandably the congregation at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) mourned this loss. Originating out of a seen need in the community, the day care center was one of the first in the community. In the early years, members of the congregation had served as board members, directors, and guiding lights as affordable childcare was provided to children in our area. In the later years, the oversight had moved to an independent board but Mondays through Fridays our Fellowship Hall and basement classrooms were filled with the sounds of energetic toddlers

[21] *Turner, 77.*

and pre-schoolers. With the closing of the center, there was much to celebrate and much to mourn, there were many questions regarding what God had in store for us next. There were some murmurings about our future.

In June of 2014, in partnership with the Church of Peace, a United Church of Christ congregation in Rock Island, our congregation became a meal preparation and feeding site for a grant funded summer meal program for children between the ages of one and 18. Every Monday to Friday morning, Yvonne arrived to prepare an average of 375 meals daily to be delivered or served to the children who arrived between the hours of 11:00 and noon for a hot lunch. The response of the congregation was great. Over 500 volunteer hours were clocked from June 9 and August 8. Meals were delivered to four sites in Moline, Ill., lunch to two and breakfast and lunch to two. Children have been served most days in our Fellowship Hall. While I cannot say we have fed hundreds in our Fellowship Hall, we are happy with our initial efforts and are committed to an ongoing partnership with Church of Peace in this ministry of feeding hungry children.

What are the "good old days" that you might be holding on to? What new thing is God giving you that you may be unsure about?

Later, in scripture this passage will be reinterpreted as we are told of Jesus being lifted up on the cross. May we cast our eyes on Jesus this Lent and keep him in our sights forever more.

Let us pray.

God you are the source of all blessings. You are the one who finds a way even when we believe that we are at the limits of our powers. Help us to be grateful for the opportunities that you provide for us. May we grow to trust you more deeply as we receive your blessings. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Monday March 16

Psalm 107: 1 – 16

Oh, thank God—he's so good! His love never runs out

Psalm 107: 1
The Message Bible

Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.

Psalm 107: 1
Common English Bible

God is good all the time.

All the time God is good.

Robert Emmons is considered one of the worlds leading experts on gratitude. A professor of psychology at the University of California, Emmons has written a number of books and is the founding editor of a journal on giving thanks. He believes that gratitude helps us have healthier happier lives. Emmons states that gratitude not only helps us feel good it helps us do good. He advises that gratitude is a virtue that requires discipline and is rooted in memory.

In his research, Emmons has found a correlation between humility and gratitude. Paul Wong, president of the International Network on Personal Meaning suggests the following practices for developing humility.

- Acknowledge wrongdoing
- Receive correction and feedback graciously
- Don't criticize others
- Forgive others
- Apologize for wrong doings
- Be patient and nurture a forgiving spirit
- Say good things about others
- Celebrate others success
- Count your blessings
- Seek opportunities to serve others
- Help others anonymously
- Show gratitude for success
- Acknowledge others contributions to your success
- Treat success as an opportunity to do more
- Learn from your failures
- Assume responsibility for your failures
- Accept your limitations and circumstances



- Acknowledge the social reality of discrimination and prejudice
- Treat others with respect and do not differentiate based on social status
- Recognize you are also a lowly outsider[22]

Consider how you might practice these as you seek to develop a more gracious spirit.

While the psychological research may be new, the understanding of the importance of gratitude is ancient.

Psalm 107 begins with a call to give thanks. Those who have been liberated by God are called to testify to God's goodness. While four particular groups are identified, desert wanderers, prisoners, the sick, and seafarers, the psalm acknowledges God's goodness is not limited to Israel. In verses 8, 15, and 22 God's goodness to all of humanity is acknowledged.

Are we not one of those whom the psalm identifies? Haven't each of us been a wanderer, a prisoner, sick of soul, or a seafarer in one-way or another? Have we not experienced the goodness of God when we were strangers? Take some time today to consider - to remember - the goodness of God in your life. Take time today to write, text, blog, or message someone to express your gratitude for their presence in your life. Be specific as you say "thank you."

Finally, at the end of the day take a few minutes to engage in a prayer practice of Ignatius Loyola, the Examine.

1. Consider when you felt close to God today.
2. Think about the day. Consider your blessings. Give thanks to God for these.

[22] *Robert A. Emmons Gratitude Works: A 21- Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2013), Kindle Electronic Edition 2120 of 3387.*



Fresco of Jesus sitting at the Right Hand of the Creator with the Holy Spirit between in The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem

3. Consider your actions and attitudes. What motivated you to do the things you did today. Be open about when your motivated. When were you motivated only by your own self interests? When were you motivated by love and compassion for others?
4. Consider your day. How did you respond to God's blessings? Did you grumble, complain? Could you have found something to be thankful for instead of complaining?
5. Talk with God about what you have discovered about yourself. In your conversation, seek forgiveness where necessary, ask for help or direction and express thanks.

Let us pray.

God give me a humble and grateful heart. Help me to recognize my blessings, large and small. Teach me to live as a blessing to others. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Tuesday March 17

1 Corinthians 10: 6 – 13

No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.

1 Corinthians 10: 13
The Message Bible

No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it.

1 Corinthians 10: 13
Common English Bible

When I was in college, I took a literature class in which we studied the Greek tragedies. I remember being told these tragedies dealt with big issues of life – love, loss, pride, power, and relationship with the divine. I remember being told these themes are continually addressed in great literature throughout time.

Similarly, in another literature class I was told there are at the most forty themes that literature across time and culture continually addresses. While I do not remember all of these, I do remember some of those themes are journey, loss of innocence, sacrifice, and the fall from grace. I remember being told all great stories are simply the reworking of these universal themes that examine the big issues of life. In this way great literature draws us in to a story to which we can relate and in which we can obtain catharsis. Great literature stands the test of time as subsequent generations relate to the struggle that is told.

In verse 13, Paul reminds the community, and us, that the temptations they face are not new. He assures them these temptations are manageable for God empowers us to overcome. God is faithful and God will deliver us from temptation.

In our passage, Paul also reminds us that while each of our lives are unique, the temptations – the big picture of that with which we struggle – are not. We face the same temptations. Our stories share universal themes. How do we put God first, loving with heart and mind and soul? What does it mean to live the fully human life in community with others? Today, take some time to consider if you are seeking your answers in the stories of the world or in the story of Christ and God's engagement with God's people.

In this passage, Paul relates materials of the Exodus, including a quote from Exodus 32: 6, to the Christian life. He does this in light of his understanding that he and the Corinthians are living at the crossroads of the current reality where God's will is not being done and kingdom reality where God's will is done. It is the in-between time. The whole world is pregnant with God's new creation that is quickening but not fully delivered.

Paul assures us that we are not alone in our struggles. He assures us that Christ, our high priest who sits at the right hand of God, knows our struggles for they have been his struggles. He assures us that through Christ, we have the power through the indwelling Spirit to overcome temptation.

Like the Corinthians we live at the crossroads, the in between time of

Jesus initiating the kingdom and the fulfillment of that kingdom. Like the Corinthians, we are not alone. How do you experience the quickening of kingdom life? Where do you see signs of the in-breaking of the kingdom?

Today, consider the temptations that you are currently facing. What do you need to claim the power of God in your life at this moment?

Let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit fill my life with your presence and set my heart on fire with your love. Strengthen me to resist temptation and teach me to walk in the ways of righteousness. I pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Wednesday March 18

Isaiah 60: 15 – 22

There'll be no more stories of crime in your land, no more robberies, no more vandalism. You'll name your main street Salvation Way, and install Praise Park at the center of town.

Isaiah 60: 18
The message Bible

Violence will no longer resound throughout your land, nor devastation or destruction within your borders. You will call your walls Salvation. And your gates Praise.

Isaiah 60: 18
Vommon English Bible

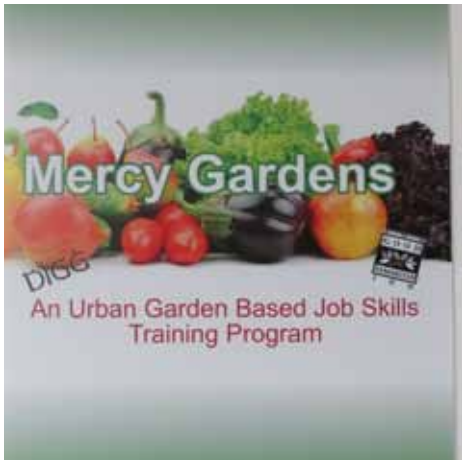
Once again the theme is on restoration of Jerusalem. Isaiah has already established God's intentions for the city and the people of Israel. There will be a new Jerusalem which will be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42 and 49). Zion will be a magnificent place, a place of peace and righteousness. Violence and oppression is over. Isaiah 60: 18 speaks of the day when light will break through the darkness and peace and prosperity will be restored. The day will come when those who had oppressed the people will acknowledge God's special place and special people.

According to some travel experts, Honduras is one of the most dangerous places in the world to visit. The soaring crime rate, including the highest murder rate of any nation in the Western Hemisphere, reflects the poverty and unemployment of the people. A major drug route, gangs and violence are a part of daily life in Honduras. Due to the peril of living in Honduras, the Peace Corp withdrew from the country in 2012 citing the rising crime rate.

In the midst of this reality, the church provides light in the darkness. Between 1996 and 2009, Mark and our children were part of four trips to Honduras. Volunteering in Tegucigalpa with the Christian Commission for Development, they helped a variety of projects designed to provide assistance for women and children fleeing from domestic violence and to provide education and vocational opportunities that would give individuals opportunities outside of the gang life.

A little closer to home in downstate Illinois, many who are released from prison find themselves facing a life without opportunities. With a record of a felony conviction, housing and employment options are rare if available at all. In Decatur County the impact of this is felt on a daily basis. Again in the midst of this reality the church is making a difference.

In Decatur, each day approximately 300 individuals receive meals thanks to the ministry of Good Samaritan Inn. Through the organization's Mercy Kitchens, those who might not otherwise have the opportunity can participate in a thirteen-week course designed to teach culinary job skills. Mercy Gardens takes abandoned city lots and converts them into gardens where individuals can learn sustainable agriculture skills. Mercy Gardens provides opportunities to revitalize neighborhoods and lives.



The children of Israel would experience the reality of exile before the promise of restoration began to be realized in their lives. Today, we live in the time between Jesus' declaration that the kingdom is at hand and the full realization of that promise. The Easter season reminds us that light does come in the midst of the darkness. It reminds us God is to be trusted.

Speaking of the Civil Rights Movement, Activist and Congressman Lewis said, "It was not enough to come and listen to a great sermon or message every Sunday morning and be confined to those four walls and those four corners. You had to get out and do something." Couldn't this be said of the life of faith in general? Aren't we all called to go and do something?

One of the disciplines of Lent is the discipline of service. Today, take some time and consider where in your community is the world awaiting the coming of the New Jerusalem? What glimpses of light are you seeing? How is God calling you to be a part of God's ongoing work of restoration and revitalization? Consider spending some time volunteering as you seek to find a place you can practice the discipline of service.

Let is pray.

God we look to the coming of the New Jerusalem. We long for the day when there will be no fear and no violence but when all will experience wholeness and well-being. May we claim the promises of Salvation for our lives and for the peace of your world, O God. We pray in Jesus name,

Amen.

Thursday March 19

Isaiah 30: 15 – 18

But God's not finished. He's waiting around to be gracious to you. He's gathering strength to show mercy to you. God takes the time to do everything right—everything. Those who wait around for him are the lucky ones.

Psalm 30: 18
The Message Bible

Nonetheless, the LORD is waiting to be merciful to you, And will rise up to show you compassion. The LORD is a God of Justice; Happy are all who wait for him

Isaiah 30: 18
Common English Bible

In his book *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, Walter Wink shares instances of the success of nonviolence resistance. In the Philippines a church supported resistance led to the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos. While it took several decades, the Solidarity Movement in Poland saw the end of the Communist regime. Ghandi's tactics from India were showing up in South Africa, Latin America, and Communist controlled European nations, as well as in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.[23]

In Isaiah 30: 1 – 18, the prophet points out that God has a plan for the people and it is not the plan of their leaders. While Judah's leaders are planning an alliance with Egypt in light of the Assyrian threat, God is not advocating a policy of meeting force with force. God's plan is for retreat and patience. The national leaders will have nothing to do with it. As a result, there is violence, suffering.

Here in verse 18, the prophet assures the people, and us, that God will bring healing beyond a time of suffering. God will bring peace that will end the violence. For those who experienced the exile, liberation will come with Cyrus of Persia.

For Christians, God's wholeness and shalom comes through Jesus Christ. Evil will be defeated. Wink identifies this as Jesus' third way. It is a way that allows us to stand our ground, claim our dignity and recognize our power while at the same time recognizing our shared humanity and letting others do the same thing.[24]

Some say the song *We Shall Overcome* originates with the gospel hymn lyrics of Louise Shropshire, the granddaughter of slaves, who obtained a copyright for *If My Jesus Wills* in 1954.

I'll Overcome, I'll Overcome, I'll Overcome Someday

If My Jesus Wills, I Do Believe, I'll Overcome Someday

Others say it originates in the 1873 negro spiritual written by Gustauvs D. Pike, *No More Auction Block for Me.*

No more auction block for me. No more, no more. No more auction block for me. Many thousand gone

No more peck of corn for me…
No more driver's lash for me…
No more pint of salt for me…
No more hundred lash for me…
No more mistress' call for me…

All agree that is was in the late 1950s that the folk song *We Shall Overcome* became a leading anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. In its lyrics many found inspiration as they marched, were beaten, and arrested while working for freedom and justice.

Like the words of Isaiah 30: 18, *We Shall Overcome* provides words of hope that proclaim it is not over until the justice of God is established. In the words of the song,

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace
We shall live in peace someday
Deep in my heart I do believe
We shall overcome someday.

Lent is a time to contemplate the work, the discipline that is necessary for us to overcome. We may be tempted to reduce Lent into a period of self-help in which we focus only on our personal relationship with God. It may start there but cannot end there. For Lent is a time when we consider the possibilities that exist because of the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are cosmic possibilities. All of creation is born again. God's justice will be established in individual lives, in communities and to the ends of the earth. In the words of Isaiah, "He is gathering strength to show mercy to you."

Let us pray.

God thank you for your patience and your mercy. Help me to see the world with your eyes, to be patient and courageous in working for your justice. May the desire of my heart match your plans, O Lord.

Amen.



[23] *Walter Wink, Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003)*

[24] *Wink, Kindle Electronic Edition, pg 26.*

Friday March 20

Psalm 51: 1 – 12

Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean, scrub me and I'll have a snow-white life.

Psalm 51: 7
The Message Bible

Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean: wash me and I will be whiter than snow

Psalm 51: 7
Common English Bible

In a commentary written by Cassisdorus, Flavious Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus, a Roman politician and writer who devoted much of his life to supporting education of the Christian community, seven psalms were identified as the penitential psalms. The psalms, 6, 32, 51, 102, 130, and 143, each express sorrow for sin. Orlande de Lassus set the psalms to music in his Psalmi Davidis Penitentiales in 1584 and William Byrd used the English translation of all seven in his Songs of Sundrie Natures in 1589. Psalm 51 is often referred to as *Miserere* which is Latin for mercy. *Miserere* has many musical settings including works by Josquin Des Prez (1503), Gregorio Allegri (1630), Henrik Górecki (1981). In addition the music that it has inspired, Psalm 51 appears many times in the liturgies of the Western and Eastern Christianity. A full 14 minute version of *Misere mei, Deus* composed by Allegri and preformed by the Choir of New College, Oxford can be found on You Tube at http://youtu.be/36Y_ztEW1NE.

Take some time and listen to *Miserere*. What emotions are evoked by the music?

In 2003, Phillips, Craig & Dean released *Mercy Came Running.* The chorus of the song state:

Mercy came running
Like a prisoner set free
And past all my failures
To the point of my need

Like Psalm 51, this song reminds us that God's mercy cleanses us, making us whiter than snow. God's mercy goes beyond all are failures, all the set-backs in our lives. God's mercy is greater than our sinfulness. Today consider where you have experienced God's mercy? Where do you need God's mercy?



The monastery overlooking Jericho at the Mount of Temptations

Finally, Henri Nouwen writes,

> *"We spend an enormous amount of energy making up our minds about other people…. Once we let go of our need to judge others, we will experience an immense inner freedom. Once we are free from judging, we will be also free for mercy."*[25]

Today, in light of the mercy that you have received may you practice mercy with others.

Mercy Came Running can be found on on You Tube at http://youtu.be/sbq3nRFuhfU

Let us pray

Gracious God, you wash me as clean as snow going beyond what I am and seeing all that I might be. Help me to look at myself and others in the light of your love, O Lord. In Jesus name.

Amen.

Saturday March 21

Hebrews 4: 14 – 5: 4

Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God—let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.

Hebrews 4: 14 – 16
The Message Bible

Also, let's hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God's Son; because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin. Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

Hebrews 4: 14 – 16
Common English Bible

Hebrews 4: 14 – 16 transitions us from discussing access to God in terms of entry into the promised land to discussion of access to God in terms of cultic imagery. In this passage, Jesus is identified as the high priest. He is a high priest that understands us for he has fully experienced what it is like to be human just as we are human. Enthroned at the right hand of God, Jesus intercedes for us with compassion. This compassion lies in his humanity, a humanity that has experience the same things that we experience. The passage speaks of the similarities between us and Jesus, while at the same time emphasizing one difference – Jesus is without sin.

[25] *Henri J.M. Nouwen. Bread for the Journey: Daybook of Wisdom and Faith (New York: NY, HarperCollins e-books) EPUB Edition, 2007) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 1382 of 4215.*



On many occasions when we say, "We are only human," it is an excuse for some weakness, some failing or inability to hit the mark of good living. In Hebrews the author reminds us that Jesus was human and with this statement sets a new benchmark for human existence because of the truth of Jesus being fully human.

In the fourth century, during the reign of Constantine, the church struggled with the developing understanding of the full humanity and full divinity of Christ. Representing what would become the orthodox understanding, Athanasius, a theologian and deacon in the Alexandrian church, defended an understanding of the full humanity and divinity of Jesus. In his writings on the incarnation, he states, "The Word visits the earth, where He has always been present, and sees its evil condition. He takes a human body, born of a pure virgin in whose womb He makes human flesh His own, in which to reveal Himself, conquer death, and restore life. For this purpose, [to restore creation, to suffer for us and to appeal on our behalf to the Father] the incorporeal and incorruptible Word of God comes to our realm. But He was never far from us, because no part of creation has been emptied of His presence: He fills all things everywhere, while remaining present with His Father. But He humbled Himself and came to show His love for us, and to visit us."

Consider what it means for Christ Jesus to fully understand our struggles, our fears, our temptations? Consider what it means to have the One who fully understands at the right hand of God mediating for us. Consider what it means that Jesus is never far from us? Imagine Jesus laying his hand on your shoulder, saying, "I am here. I've got your back." Imagine what it means to be fully human in light of this truth.

Let us pray.

Emmanuel, God with us you laid down your divinity and came to experience our humanity so that through you we might learn how to live fully human lives. Fill us with your Spirit God so that we might have the power to overcome temptation and to live righteous lives. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.

Come, my Light, and illumine my darkness.

Come, my Life, and revive me from death.

Come, my Physician, and heal my wounds.

Come, Flame of divine love, and burn up the thorns of my sins,

Kindling my heart with the flame of thy love.

Dimitrii of Rostov
Seventeenth Century

Sunday March 22

Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34

"That's right. The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah.

Jeremiah 31: 31
The Message Bible

The time is coming declared the LORD when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.

Jeremiah 31: 31
Common English Bible

As we read through Jeremiah, we find both harsh words of judgment and tender words of mercy. The prophet is a realist that does not minimize or deny the sin of the people and the consequences that will result. The prophet is a realist who remembers and calls the people from their amnesic state to remember the compassion and steadfast love of God.

The passage we are considering today comes from the Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30: 1–31: 40), a collection of oracles that speak to the restoration of Israel and Judah. These oracles do not gloss over the current reality of the people as they reorient the people toward the hope of what God will do because of God's steadfast love and mercy.

In Jeremiah 31: 31–34, the people are promised that God is about to establish a new covenant with them. The people would have been familiar with the concept of covenant, an agreement in which a greater power pledges to protect a lesser power in return for the lesser power's loyalty. They would have known that God's covenants are everlasting.

Throughout salvation history, God has worked in covenant. Following the flood, God hangs the bow of the Warrior and makes a covenant with Noah and all of creation. "Never again" will God flood the earth. Later, God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, and subsequently the patriarchs and matriarchs, that He will be their God and they will be His people. They will receive the land and their descendants will prosper as they promise to be God's people living as blessing to the nations.

In Jeremiah 31, the oracle speaks of God writing the covenant on the hearts of the people. The agreement will no longer be external but the agreement with God will be internalized transforming the hearts of the people as the Law is written on their hearts. In this new day, God will not only forgive sin, God will forget the sins of the people.

One of the oldest liturgies of the church, *The Church Order of Hippolytus*, comes from the third century. In it the church is instructed to bring their hearts to the Lord's table each week.

Consider these words:

Bishop [Officiant]: *The Lord be with you.*
Congregation: *And with thy spirit.*
Bishop: *Hearts up.*
Congregation: *We give them to the Lord.*
Bishop: *Let us give thanks to the Lord.*
Congregation: *It is meet and right.*
Bishop: *We thank thee, God through Thy beloved Servant Jesus Christ, whom in the last times Thou has sent us as Savior and Redeemer and Messenger of Thy counsel, the Logos who comes from Thee, through whom Thou has made all things, the virgin, and in her body He became flesh and was shown forth as Thy Son, born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin. To fulfill Thy will and to prepare Thee a holy people, He stretched out His hands, when He suffered, that He might release from suffering those who have believed on Thee.*[26]

Today, let us remember that each week as we come to the Communion Table as covenant people, we offer up our hearts so that the Word may be inscribed upon it. Our sins are forgiven and forgotten when we bring them to God. Let us consider how the Word is shaping and forming us as people of God's new covenant.

Let us pray.

God, I offer my heart to you. Write your covenant upon it so that I may give thanks to you with all I say and all I do. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Monday March 23

Psalm 119: 9 – 16

I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart so I won't sin myself bankrupt.

Psalm 119: 11
The Message Bible

I keep your word close, in my heart so that I won't sin againt you.

Psalm 119: 11
Common English Bible

An expansive acrostic poem, Psalm 119 begins each of its 22 sections with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In this prayer, God is praised for the wonders of *Torah* and the glory of God. In both the *Common English Bible,* and *The Message Bible* ,*Torah* is translated word.

A deeply pious individual who sees *Torah* as a gift from God wrote Psalm 119. *Torah* is spoken of "sweeter than honey" and "more precious "than gold." Rather than being seen as something that is restricting and limiting, *Torah* is seen to point one to the abundant life. In Psalm 119: 11 we are instructed that God's word is something that is to be kept close, savored.

Both the gospel of Matthew and Luke tell us that our heart will be with that which we treasure (Matthew 6: 21 and Luke 13: 34. Psalm 119 gives us a little different spin suggesting that we should fill our hearts with the treasure - the treasure of God's word. The psalmist and the evangelists are both reminding us to keep our focus on God. God will be the focus of our hearts when we treasure God. And, in a culture where heart represented the core of our personality, intellect and memory, will, and emotions, to fill one's heart with the word of God was to have one's very being formed by that word.

Today, memorize today's passage. Return to it throughout the day considering what it means to your life.[27] Break the passage down and consider words or phrases. What are the various ways to keep God's word close? What does the word sin mean to you? At the end of the day thank God for the insights you have gained. Try this with other scripture passages.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, may your word take root in my heart and produce fruit in my life. I pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Tuesday March 24

Isaiah 44: 1 – 8

For I will pour water on the thirsty ground and send streams coursing through the parched earth.

I will pour my Spirit into your descendants and my blessing on your children.

Isaiah 44:3
The Message Bible

I will pour out water upon thirsty ground and streams upon dry land.

I will pour out my spirit upon your descendants and my blessing upon your offspring.

Isaiah 44: 3
Common English Bible

[26] *Judith Couchman, The Mystery of the Cross: Bringing Ancient Christian Images to Life (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 189- 190.*

[27] *Linda Douty, Praying in the Messiness of Life: 7 Ways to Renew your Relationship With God (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2011) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 47 of 107.*



One of the defense mechanisms that individuals use, who were wanting to alleviate pain but fundamentally do not know how or what to change, is bargaining. It was a way of trying to get one's needs met while at the same time maintaining the status quo. As Christians, we sometimes try to bargain with God. We try to make agreements that function in a tit for tat manner saying, "God if you do this then I will do that." With our bargains we try, directly or indirectly, to hold on to the illusion of control and complete independence as we attempt to define the nature of the bargain.

Another common issue is a devaluing or an evaluation based on the wrong criteria of our worth. We believe that there is some imaginary goals we must meet before we are worthy of love and acceptance. This also functions within the church when we forget we are a part of the creation that God declared good. God said this prior to our doing anything - good or bad. We sometimes forget that sin separates us from God but doesn't negate God's desire and plan for reconciliation.

The passage we read today comes from a pivotal section of Isaiah when the people of God who are still in exile begin to hear the promise of restoration. Soon Cyrus will appear on the world stage and Babylon will be overthrown. The people will be freed to go home. In Isaiah 44: 1–8, the oracle speaks of judgment in light of Israel's sin. Soon however, this punishment will be over. God has not abandoned the people, but will forgive them. They will have a new chance to live as God's people.

At the heart of this section is the understanding that this forgiveness is solely because of God. God's mercy and God's compassion alone is responsible for the reversal of Israel's fortunes. This passage is a promise of God's grace. The opportunity will come not because of their faithfulness but because of God's faithfulness.

C.S. Lewis states, "The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us." As people of God, we cannot bargain for our salvation. Neither can we achieve it with accomplishments of our own. Forgiveness comes as God's initiative. Our repentance is the response of recognizing and accepting what God is already offering. In Isaiah God repeatedly says "I will..."

What will God do for you today? Where is God offering God's grace for your life?

Let us pray.

God you are faithful, offering me new opportunities each day. As you send the rain to water dry ground, you send grace to water and refresh my soul. Open me to what you will be doing today. In Jesus name.

Amen.



Wednesday March 25

John 12: 34 – 50

Whoever looks at me is looking, in fact, at the One who sent me.

John 12: 45
The Message Bible

Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me.

John 12: 45
Common English Bible

In my office I have several collections I have obtained over the years. On the top of my bookshelves sit chalices and patens from special worship services that I have planned and from places friends and I have visited. One wall is covered with crosses and crucifixes I have also obtained from a variety of places and friends have given me from their travels. I also have a number of different images of Jesus. One of these is a glass reproduction of the Byzantine image *Akra Tapeinosis* (Man of Sorrows) I purchased from an art studio in North Carolina when I was there for the 2010 ICWF Quadrennial Assembly. This image of Jesus' face is somber, filled with concern and worry.

In our mind's eye, we see God as powerful, compassionate, loving, merciful. We imagine God as joyful – like the *The Laughing Jesus*. At times, we even think about God as angry. Some use terms like omnipresent and omnipotent. But, do we consider a God who not only understands our sorrows and grief, but shares them? A God who mourns and suffers? While it is not the dominant voice, a careful reading of the First Testament, especially the prophets, reveals a God who suffers for us and with us. Soon we will be entering Holy Week, a time to remember that God fully entered into the experience of human suffering through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Our passage today, reminds us that God is most clearly revealed to us through His son Jesus Christ. In Him we see the mercy and compassion that fed thousands, healed the lame, the blind, the leper. Through Him, we see the love and grace that welcomed and forgave sinners. Through Him, we see the anger that upsets tables as market strategies find their way into holy

places. Through Him, we see the Man of Sorrows who can cry over the death of a friend and weep over a city that fails to listen to the prophets. In Jesus, we see God who cares and suffers because of the disparity that exists between what is and what God would have. We see God available in every aspect of human life. Where have you seen God today?

Let is pray.

Keep my eyes on you dear Jesus so that I may come to live the fully human life. In Christ's name.

Amen.

Thursday March 26

Philippians 2: 1 – 11

Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends.

Philippians 2: 2
The Message Bible

Complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other.

Philippians 2: 2
Common English Bible

One need not scroll very far on a news website or listen very long to a news broadcast, before there is a story illustrating the brokenness and factionalization of our world. Over and over again, we are bombarded with "us" verses "them" mentality and an attitude of protectionism and isolationism. Our world is marked by an increased tribalism rather than a sense of unity, and competitive rather than cooperative spirit.

While this is true outside of the church, it can also be the case within the church. Philippians 2 serves a corrective, admonishing the community of faith to live in unity. In this section of Philippians, the community is called to consider its inner life. In verses 1–2 the community is instructed to relate to each other as Christ related to God.

The wild goose is the Celtic symbol



for God's spirit and the symbol for unity. Alone a wild goose can only fly one-third as fast as it can when flying in formation.[28] Traveling at up to 70 miles an hour when in formation, the constant honking of the wild goose is a call of encouragement to others in the group. The V-pattern that is characteristic of geese in flight also aids the group. It assists with wind resistance boosting efficiency and range. When the lead goose tires, that goose will fall back and another goose will take the point. We can learn an important lesson from the wild goose. We are stronger when we travel together and encourage one another along the way.

How are you like the wild goose? Do words of encouragement and appreciation come easily? Are you willing to assist another on the journey? When you see a need do you step up for the good of the community? Today, be the honking goose. Express gratitude to and for others. Identify when others are vulnerable, weary and fatigued, and seek to assist them so they may be stronger because of your presence. Look for win - win options. Practice consensus-making. Assess your gifts and talents and look for the place the world needs them, be ready to take the point.

Let us pray.

God, it is indeed good when brothers and sisters can live together in harmony. Forgive us when we seek others vulnerabilities as points of advantage. Forgive us when we believe that the interests and wants of our affinity group are more important than the concerns and needs of others. Fill us with the Spirit so we may live as wild geese. We pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Friday March 27

Philippians 2: 12 – 18

That energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.

Philippians 2: 13
The Message Bible

God is the one who enables you to both want and to actually live out his good purpose.

Philippians 2: 13
Common English Bible

[28] *Ray Simpson, Celtic Christianity: Deep Roots for a Modern Faith (Vestal, NY: Anamchara Books 2014) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 2381 of 3341.*



Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher states that a normal part of the human experience is to prioritize one's own interests. He states, "It is a general rule – be not deceived – that every living thing is to nothing so devoted as its own interest." While this may be true of the world, in Philippians we are instructed that through the power of the indwelling Spirit we are able to relate to one another as Christ related to God.

This unity begins with each of us when we practice forgiveness, empathy, communicate so that we both speak and listen. It is seen when we seek to understand the other person as well as being understood and to serve as well as to be served. It is a discipline to be nurtured as any other spiritual discipline.

Creating a *One Another Collage*[29] is a way of opening oneself to God's gift of unity. Take a blank piece of paper and draw a number of circles. Label the circles "one another."

Start with the principles of the passage in "love one another," "agree with one another," and expand from there, i.e. "pray for one another," and "thank one another," etc. Write the name of one or two people in each circle. Decide on a concrete way you can respond to God's gift of unity in your life.

Let us pray.

Lord you have said there is one Lord, one baptism, one Spirit. Help me to live this reality. I pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

Saturday March 28

Psalm 118: 1 -2, 19 – 29

Swing wide the city gates—the righteous gates! I'll walk right through and thank God!

Psalm 118: 19
The Message Bible

Open the gates of righteousness for me so I can come in and give thanks to the LORD!

Psalm 118: 19
Common English Bible

Psalm 118 is the last psalm of the Hallel (the Hebrew term for praise) psalms that are recited at the Passover meal. Repeatedly naming God's mercy as the reason for thanksgiving, the psalmist speaks of the benefit of trusting in God who is the source of strength and salvation.

In our focus verse today, the king leads the worshippers who have been identified as the people, the priests, and those who fear God to the gates of the temple. There they ask the gatekeeper to open the gates so that they might come in and give thanks.

The praise song *Forever*[30] was written by Lamont Dozier, Brian Holland, and Freddie Gorman and recorded by Chris Tomlin expresses similar expressions of thanks and praise.

You can listen to it on You Tube at: http://youtube/Cxw7nNuCLSk.

Or read the lyrics that have been provided.

Give thanks to the Lord
Our God and King
His love endures forever

For He is good
He is above all things
His love endures forever

Sing praise, sing praise
With a mighty hand and outstretched arm
His love endures forever

For the life
That's been reborn
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise
Yeah

Forever, God is faithful
Forever, God is strong
Forever, God is with us
Forever, forever

From the rising
To the setting sun
His love endures forever

And by the grace of God
We will carry on
His love endures forever

Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise
Yeah

Forever, God is faithful
Forever, God is strong
Forever, God is with us
Forever, forever

Forever, God is faithful
Forever, God is strong
Forever, God is with us
Forever, forever, forever

His love endures forever
His love endures forever
His love endures forever
Forever

Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise
Yeah

[29] *Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 1895 of 3484.*

[30] *Lamont Herbert Dozier, Brian Holland, Freddie Gorman Forever (Sony/ ATV Music Publishing LLC) Viewed at metrolyrics.com accessed on December 23, 2014.*

Forever you are faithful
Forever you are strong
Forever you are with us
Forever and ever and ever, yeah

Forever you are faithful
Forever you are strong
Forever you are with us
Forever, forever

You are our God
You are God
Forever and ever and ever

And ever and ever
And ever and ever
And ever

What emotions are evoked by the song? Take time to consider the things for which you are grateful. For what do you praise God? What does it mean for you to carry on by the grace of God?

Let us pray.

Abundant and generous God, I give you thanks for the blessings that will come today. Give me eyes to see and a heart to appreciate them in the moment. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

God, of your goodness give me yourself for you are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all.

Julian of Norwich
Fourteenth Century

Sunday March 29
Palm Sunday

Mark 14: 1 – 15: 47

You will have the poor with you every day for the rest of your lives. Whenever you feel like it, you can do something for them. Not so with me.

Mark 14: 7
The Message Bible

You always have the poor with you; and whenever you want, you can do something good for them. But you won't always have me.

Mark 14: 7
Common English Bible

On many occasions, when someone quotes this verse it is out of context and used to justify, at the best apathy and at the worst greed and selfishness. In context, the verse conveys Jesus' disapproval.

The gospel tells us that while Jesus is dining at the home of a leper, a woman comes and anoints his head with expensive oil. Some become angry; some scold her and express concern over the "waste" is voiced. Jesus defends the woman's actions and reframes what she has done in light of his impending death. In the Markan gospel this will be the only burial anointing that Jesus receives. When the women arrive at dawn on the first day, Jesus is already gone.

In his defense of the woman, Jesus reinterprets the teachings of Deuteronomy 15 (take some time and read that chapter). Verse 11 of the chapter concludes by saying, "Therefore, I command you saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land." Immediately before this verse, the children of Israel are instructed "not to harden your heart or close your hand from your poor brother." They are told to "generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. (Deuteronomy 15: 7–9). For not to care for the poor and the needy is to sin (Deuteronomy 15:9) and caring for the poor and needy is a part of the Sabbath principle by which God's people are called to live.

The presence of the poor and uncared for is an indictment and sign of the brokenness of the world. The coming of Jesus announces the reversal of this but it is only in the fulfillment of the kingdom that true equity and justice will be established. The poor are among us so do we freely open our hands to our brothers and sisters? Do we give generously for the needs of others?

Abraham Cronbach differentiates between charity (almsgiving) and social justice saying, "charity seems to signify the relieving of poverty without regard to what people may have done to cause the poverty, while social justice holds people - that is, people other than the sufferer – accountable and directs its course accordingly. We live in a world that often wants to blame the sufferer. Perhaps Jesus might be saying to us that the poor will always be with us because we fail to look at the underlying reasons and attitudes which create economic stratification and poverty. We fail to name the sin of materialism and capitalism. We focus on charity – something that cannot be ignored – while we fail to work for social justice.

The Lord's Prayer includes the words

"Give us this day our daily bread



and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." What do these words mean to you? How do you live them in your daily living?

Let us pray.

God you have created a world in which there are sufficient and abundant resources for all of your children. Teach us to desire only for daily bread. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Monday March 30

Psalm 36: 5 – 11

You're a fountain of cascading light, and you open our eyes to light.

Psalm 36: 9
The Message Bible

Within you is the spring of life. In your light, we see light.

Psalm 36: 9
Common English Bible

Many of us are familiar with the hypothesized climatic effect that is known as nuclear winter. It is hypothesized that following a nuclear war or a cataclysmic natural disaster such as the eruption of a super volcano or the direct hit of a large asteroid into the planet, the atmosphere will be filled with smoke and debris blocking sunlight from the earth. The temperature will plummet and the earth will experience another ice age. According to the hypothesis, life as we know it will end. Death and devastation will become the norm.

If our planet is to flourish and support life, it must experience the warmth of the sun. Similarly, the



psalm states that if we are to flourish and experience abundant life we must experience the light of God. God is identified as our life source as essential for our life as sunlight is for the life of the earth. Consider those aspects of your life that facilitate an encounter with God, prayer, study of scripture, worship, and service of others.

Take some time and consider the smoke and debris that blocks the light of God from your life. This might include, but is not limited to, the following: lack of time to practice the spiritual disciplines, an attitude of entitlement or servitude rather than servanthood, losing sight of the blessings of God, and the inability to differentiate between our wants and needs.

Psalm 36 does not fit neatly into one of the categories typically used to characterize the psalms. The passage we are focusing on today has qualities of a hymn of praise. In these verses, God is praised for his love and righteousness. Today, consider the blessings and wondrous acts of God in your life. Give thanks and let the light of God shine upon you and through you.

Let us pray.

God, give me the wisdom to clear the debris from my life so that I may live in your light and flourish as your child. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Tuesday March 31

Psalm 71: 1 -14

Like idiots, while I stretch out, reaching for you, and daily add praise to praise.

Psalm 71: 14
The Message Bible

But me? I will hope. Always. I will add to all your praise.

Psalm 71: 14
Common English Bible

The speaker of Psalm 71 is looking ahead to old age. The psalm begins with statement of deep trust in the faithfulness of God. Based on that trust, the speaker asks God for protection and deliverance. Our focus verse is a vow that the speaker will praise God. A vow that the speaker knows he will be unable to keep unless God answers his prayer.

Like any phase in life, growing old has both good points and bad points. There are many jokes about the negative aspects of age. And, there is the truth that ageism can be a reality in our broken world. Yet, with age there is also a freedom and an opportunity that no other time in life can offer. It can be a time of productivity and purpose. Joan Chittister writes: "The is a special period of life…. To live these years well, we need to look at every one of the fears and hopes… Life is not about age, about the length of years we manage to eke out of it. It is about aging, about living into the values offered in every stage of life. As E.M. Forster states, "We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us."[31]

Regardless of your age, take a few minutes to consider what engages you in life. When do you feel connected to others? What do you find meaningful in life? What are you looking forward to? What are you afraid of? Are there circumstances in your life you are angry about? What do you want to ask/ tell God?

Let us pray.

Gracious God, my hope is in your presence in my life. I trust that you are guiding me towards what is best and what will bring wholeness in my life. Help me to let go of what needs to be as I accept the gift of the life in this moment. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

[31] *Joan Chittister, The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully (New York, NY BlueBridge, 2008) Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 71 of 1972.*

Wednesday April 1

Psalm 70

Let those on the hunt for you sing and celebrate. Let all who love your saving way say over and over, "God is mighty!"

But I've lost it. I'm wasted. God—quickly, quickly! Quick to my side, quick to my rescue! God, don't lose a minute.

But let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you, and let those who love your saving help say again and again: "God is great!"

Psalm 70: 4 – 5
The Message Bible

But me? I'm poor and needy. Hurry to me, God! You are my helper and my deliverer. Oh, Lord, don't delay!

Psalm 70: 4 -5
Common English Bible

Psalm 70 may be read with Psalm 71 as a single unit. In this psalm, the righteous rejoice and praise God while the wicked oppose God.

Reread Psalms 70 and 71 together. What do you notice as you consider them as a single unit?

In the song *I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry* we sing, "I'll be there to guide you through the night, complete what I've begun." These words provide us with the assurance that God is present, working to bring completion and wholeness in our lives. With many similarities to Psalm 40: 14–1, Psalm 70 is a brief prayer of lament in which the speaker trusts that the evil he is experiencing will be reversed. The psalmist knows that God will complete what God has begun.

Today, take a few moments and write a prayer of lament using the model provided by the psalm. Begin by directly addressing God. Next, be specific in your complaints or concerned. What difficulty are you experiencing in life? What seems unfair or unjust? Next, name how God has answered your prayers in the past, identify where you have experienced the power of God in your life. End with statements of praise and thanksgiving.



Let us pray.

God you are my strength and my salvation. I will trust in you and listen for your direction in my life. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Thursday April 2
Maundy Thursday

John 13: 1 – 17, 31b – 35

Then he said, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Master,' and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do. I'm only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn't give orders to the employer. If you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.

John 13: 14 – 17
The Message Bible

If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do. I assure you, servants aren't greater than their master, nor are those who are sent greater than the one who sent them. Since you know these things, you will be happy if you do them.

John 13: 14 – 17
Common English Bible

Jesus has set his sights on Jerusalem. Now, as the time of Passover, the time of remembering and celebrating liberation draws near, Jesus has gathered with his disciples. And love becomes his central theme. Taking the role of a servant, Jesus washes the feet of his followers. He shows them a central aspect of what it means to love.

The disciples understand that Jesus is Lord and teacher. Yet in these verses, Jesus clarifies that this understanding is incomplete. One cannot follow Jesus until one learns that discipleship is the call to servanthood. Kenneth Haugk, the founder of the Stephen Ministries, a one-to-one care ministry for lay people, identifies four characteristics of servanthood.

- Empathy – the ability to relate to what another person is feeling while maintaining one's own identity and objectivity.
- Genuineness - the ability to be oneself owning one's own strengths and weaknesses, triumphs and wounds.
- Ability to differentiate between needs and wants which allows one to speak the truth in love both comforting and challenging others as necessary.
- Intentionaly or choosing to be in a caring relationship rather than leaving it up to chance.

It is the ability to care for another that flows from our own relationship with Jesus and the realization of his love and care for us. True servanthood requires the humility that helps us recognize who we are in light of who God is.

Today, practice kindness in all that you do. Provide an act of service for another. Humble yourself before God in prayer.



Rev. Dr. Beth Rupe, Senior Minister First Christian Church, Moline, Ill., and the Rev Dr. Christal Williams, Associate Regional Minister Christian Church in Illionis/Wisconsin at the altar of Golgotha in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Let us pray.

Lord, give me a servant's heart so that I may live with compassion and care for others. Raise me up when I devalue my worth and take away my pride when I exaggerate my worth. I pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen.

Friday April 3
Good Friday

John 18: 1 - 19: 42

The young woman who was the doorkeeper said to Peter, "Aren't you one of this Man's disciples?" He said, "No, I'm not."

Psalm 18: 7
The Message Bible

The servant woman stationed at the gate asked Peter, "Aren't you one of this man's disciples?"

John 18: 17
Common English Bible

Peter's response to the servant girl in the courtyard is dramatically different than the response of Jesus, and his own, in the Garden of Gethsemane. There, Peter had demonstrated sword yielding bravado. There he was willing to take up arms and fight for Jesus. He was willing to meet force with force. In the face of threat and power of the Empire, Jesus responded, "Yes I am." His way of nonviolence was not one that Peter had expected or desired. Now unable or unready to follow Jesus' way, in the face of threat Peter responds, "No, I am not."

In defining the Nguni concept of Ubuntu, Desmond Tutu states, "Ubuntu speaks of being human." It is to say my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. We belong in a bundle of life… It is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather "I am human because I belong. I participate. I share. A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has proper self-assurance that comes from knowing he or she belongs to a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are."[32]

We also face the power of the Empire and the principalities of the world. Will we face these with Ubuntu? Each day, we stand in a courtyard of our world and are being asked, "Are you a follower of Jesus Christ." Will you be willing to follow Jesus' way? Will you answer, "Yes, I am"?

At the end of the day, reflect back on the happenings of the day. What "yeses" do you see? What "noes" stand out? Seek forgiveness and God's help for tomorrow.

Let us pray.

God, I confess that to often I want things my own way rather than seeking to discern your way. Help, me to follow the path of righteousness even when it seems threatening or the outcome seems uncertain. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen.

Saturday April 4
Holy Saturday

I Peter 4: 1 – 8

Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything.

I Peter 4: 8
The Message Bible

Above all, show sincere love to each other, because love brings about the forgiveness of many sins.

I Peter 4: 8
Common English Bible

Today, we join the earliest disciples of Jesus in vigil. For the first followers of Jesus, it was a vigil of despair. Having experienced the passion and the death of Jesus, they sat in grief and fear, uncertainty and confusion. For they would not be able to begin to comprehend what they had experienced until the light of dawn came on the first day of the week. In the light of the Resurrection, new understanding and new clarity would come.

The community who receives Peter is also keeping a vigil. They believe they are living in the time when all things will end, but also in a time when the prospect of judgment is growing more distant. And so as the letter draws to an end, the writer encourages unity and community in light of current persecution. He gives them advice for the long journey. He admonishes that unity comes from shared worship and shared mission. It is shown through love, hospitality and service.

Christine D. Pohl suggests that hospitality begins with worship when we recognize God's grace and generosity. Then from a grateful heart, hospitality emerges as a response and an extension of God's love. The goal is to cultivate hospitality like a habit as we welcome others creating time and space for genuine and intentional relationships.[33]

Today, we keep vigil. However, unlike the first disciples we have experienced Resurrection. We have seen the light. The question for us today is what is our understanding of that event? Is it merely a historical event we commemorate once a year? Or, is it the pivotal event through which we experience all of life? Does the light of the new dawn of creation illuminate our daily living as we live in love to welcome and serve others?

Consider what God is calling you

[32] *Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness (new York, NY: Doubleday, 1999 http://youtu.be/Cxw7nNuCLSk) Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 432 of 3864*

to do as you prepare for worship on Easter morning and all the days that follow as by the grace of God you live lives that testify to the worthiness and glory of God.

Let us pray.

God may this Lenten journey be a symbol of my desire to live each day in fellowship with you. Continue to write the instructions for abundant living in my heart, O God so that I may see the possibilities and live in the hope of the new reality that is made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray.

Amen.

Sunday, April 5
Easter/Resurrection Sunday

Luke 24:13-49

He went on to open their understanding of the Word of God, showing them how to read their Bibles this way. He said, "You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations—starting from here, from Jerusalem! You're the first to hear and see it. You're the witnesses. What comes next is very important: I am sending what my Father promised to you, so stay here in the city until he arrives, until you're equipped with power from on high."

Luke 24: 46 - 49
The Message Bible

He said to them, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Look, I'm sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power."

Luke 24: 46 - 49
Common English Bible

As the women make their way to the tomb, two disciples begin the journey to Emmaus. All are focusing on the past - what has happened with Jesus. They have little understanding of what these events would mean for their current and future lives and the future of the world. We have also concluded our journey to Jerusalem. We have experienced the love of God as seen in the events of Holy Week. We have kept vigil. And, now we turn our focus on what Jesus' resurrection and presence with us means for our current and future lives and the future of the world.

How do we shift our focus from what was to what will be in light of the Resurrected Christ? For the women it was an encounter with an empty tomb. It was a message that Jesus was not to be found among the dead. For the travelers on the Emmaus Road it was an encounter with Jesus facilitated by the breaking of bread and sharing of cup and an opening of scriptures. For all it was a reorientation from what had been to what was and what could be because of what God had and is doing through Jesus Christ. For all it was a present and ongoing relationship with the Living One. On Easter, we are all reoriented from what has been to what will be. God's glorious "yes" heralds the day of wholeness and shalom.

One of my favorite songs from camp is Sydney Carter's Lord Of The Dance. Consider these words:

I danced in the morning when the world was young
I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun
I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth
At Bethlehem I had my birth

Dance, dance, wherever you may be
I am the lord of the dance, said he
And I lead you all, wherever you may be
And I lead you all in the dance, said he

I danced for the scribes and the Pharisees
They wouldn't dance, they wouldn't follow me
I danced for the fishermen James and John
They came with me so the dance went on

Dance, dance, wherever you may be
I am the lord of the dance, said he
And I lead you all, wherever you may be
And I lead you all in the dance, said he

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame
The holy people said it was a shame
They ripped, they stripped, they hung me high
Left me there on the cross to die

Dance, dance, wherever you may be
I am the lord of the dance, said he
And I lead you all, wherever you may be
And I lead you all in the dance, said he

I danced on a Friday when the world turned black
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back
They buried my body, they thought I was gone
But I am the dance, and the dance goes on

Dance, dance, wherever you may be
I am the lord of the dance, said he
And I lead you all, wherever you may be
And I lead you all in the dance, said he

They cut me down and I leapt up high
I am the life that will never, never die
I'll live in you if you'll live in me
I am the Lord of the dance, said he

Dance, dance, wherever you may be
I am the lord of the dance, said he
And I lead you all, wherever you may be
And I lead you all in the dance, said he

Today, we are once more invited to leap with joy and dance. It is a dance in which the Lord leads and we follow. May we all dance, for Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

[33]*Christine D. Pohl, Making Room for Hospitality (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) Kindle Electronic Edition Location 1912 - 2045.*



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