

40 Days

St. Stephen's of the Valley 2018 Lenten Devotional

Lent always has a way of sneaking up on us. Wasn't it just yesterday that we took down our Christmas lights and packed away our decorations? It's amazing how quickly the scene changes from a lowly manger to a crown of thorns and a cross. It's as if we didn't get to spend enough time with him, that the story of his death and resurrection comes too soon after the story of his birth. But it's a story worth telling nonetheless, a story of a man who made the ultimate sacrifice, for us all, all because he loved us. This time of Lent is a journey, a reflection of who God is, a reminder of all that Jesus said and did, and a renewal of our own faith in Him.

To get the most out of your Lenten experience, we are offering a daily devotional, written by members and friends of St. Stephen's of the Valley. This year, the first day of Lent begins on Wednesday, February 14th. There will be 40 devotions in total, one for each day leading up to Easter Sunday. Sundays will **not** be included in those 40 days, as Sundays are always celebrations of the resurrection.

Before starting your devotion each day, please open in prayer. Move onto reading the scripture lesson on which the daily devotion is based, then, follow up with reading the devotion itself. Close your devotion time with prayer.

As you use this devotional, may God fully bless you as you prepare for Jesus' death and resurrection, and may you truly be able to experience the greater kind of love Christ had (and still has) for us, and the overwhelming joy that came that fateful Easter morning.

Your brothers and sister in Christ of
St. Stephen's of the Valley Lutheran Church
Palmdale, California
Lent 2018

February 14

Please Read Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

-Matthew 6:1

In social media, I often see the verse “For I am not ashamed of the gospel...” sometimes just the first part, excluding “because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” (Romans 1:16) I often feel a momentary twinge of guilt if I don’t want to pass it on.

But what is the focus of this verse? God, or me? If I feel compelled to declare that I’m a Christian because otherwise I might be seen as “ashamed,” I may be doing it for the wrong reasons. Personally, I prefer to talk about my faith one-on-one with my friends, when the time is right. When I’ve been praying, God always leaves openings.

Christians, let your light shine... just not on yourself. God has entrusted us with His light, and he wants us to hold it so all the world will see Him. But if you have a flashlight and you point it at yourself, how can you see? You might stumble! Be careful to shine the light on God, not on yourself. Allow God’s glory to shine, and He *will* reward you.

-Carrie Mooney

Please Read Psalm 25:1-10

*“Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.”*
-Psalm 25:4, 5

In the beginning of this Psalm, the writer is asking to be saved from the shame of defeat. But in the next phrase it says, “Defeat does not come to those who trust in you, but to those who are quick to rebel against you.” (vs. 3)

Wow! This really hits home for me. For a couple years I had felt defeated after a relationship ended, yet could not give in to everyone’s comments to just “walk away,” “He is evil,” and “He will never repay the money he owes you.” No matter what promises he broke and the cheating he did, I prayed to God that this person would find his own way back to God and do the right thing. I trusted in God, prayed daily for this person, and like in verse 5, I asked God to teach me to live correctly, according to His truth! I feel I have lived according God’s truth since this relationship ended. And recently this person repaid the money he owed me. I was determined not to be defeated; I trusted that God would give me an outcome, even if it wasn’t what I wanted.

Later in this Psalm, the writer asks for forgiveness of his sins as a youth. I admit that I did some things during this relationship that were not healthy and were sinful. I have and will continue to ask God for forgiveness of my past sins (as well as my current and future sins), and I ask that he will lead me on the correct path and teach me to obey his commandments during these present and tempting times to stray from the His word.

-Lori Ann McLaren

February 16

Please Read 2 Timothy 4:1-5

“Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”

-2 Timothy 4:2

What awesome verses to be able to ponder. It seems to me many people use verse 1 as a reason to not come to church because none of us want to be judged. And at the end of the verse, Paul says, “I give you this charge” so many people stop there and think they have been given charge to judge.

This is so interesting to me to know that since the beginning of time, we have all struggled to make people happy with our words and/or actions. I love the “keep your head,” “endure hardship,” and “do the work of an evangelist”; when all else fails turn to the Bible, it will help guide our actions/behavior.

Paul wrote this letter to Timothy who was ministering to the church in Ephesus. Mostly to encourage him to carry on the ministry and faithfully guard the gospel. Isn't that the same struggle we have today? How do we carry on our ministry? How do we faithfully guard the gospel? I think our focus verse helps keep our brains focused on those things we can do here at this time, in our little worlds.

There is so much to the second verse. Preach the word... most of us don't like the sound of that, which is why the first part of the verse is so important: *be prepared*. How do we prepare? Prayerfully consider the day before us. Ask for God's guidance in all that we do. Read and meditate on the Bible, read devotions, and surround ourselves with Christian community that we can learn from. Know our personal stories and be ready to share them when opportunity presents itself.

The second half of the verse talks about correcting, rebuking and encouraging... with *great* patience and *careful* instruction. Seems to me there are so many Christians willing and even thriv-

ing on the correcting and rebuking other Christians and people in general. Then there are those who won't do any of that at all. But how awesome is it when someone does it with *great* patience and *careful* instruction? Then and only then can it be very encouraging. As we prepare for Easter let it be with *great* patience and *careful* instruction.

-HM McKinsey

February 17

Please Read Matthew 9:2-13

“As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.”

-Matthew 9:9

When I was in high school I worked at McDonald’s. I suppose many kids in high school share that experience. It was a good early job to have. There were opportunities to learn new things, earn money, and work with many kinds of people... employees and customers alike.

One lesson that I learned during those years was taught to me by my manager. I was rather ambitious and was usually looking for something I could do or learn to “move up the ranks” and get good performance reviews. I just thought that was what everyone would want to do. Not so. Many of my co-workers were content to waste time and do the minimum amount of anything they were told to do (and as an adult I’ve noticed the same thing at every work place). My manager had a motto: “If you have time to lean, you have time to clean.” The point being even when there were no customers you could keep busy cleaning something. Many co-workers would stand around talking. I would be busy being busy and my manager would come up and give me another assignment. He’d say, “I see how hard you work. Now I have something I want you to do.” How unfair!

I asked him why he didn’t ask one of the “slackers” to do the task. He told me, “If you want something done, ask a busy person.” He believed there were people who would get things done, and people who wouldn’t. He was right. We see that very same principle in action when we look at how Jesus called his disciples. He didn’t call idle people. He called busy people, usually while they were in the middle of doing something. Like doing their job catching fish. Or in the case of Matthew in this scripture verse, do-

ing his job collecting taxes. These people stopped what they were already doing to follow Jesus.

Have you noticed that Satan is drawn to the idle? Christ is drawn to people who get things done. Rather than waiting for something to happen, for God to reach out and ask us to do something, perhaps it's better for each of us to seek out something to do. It sharpens our skills and makes us the kind of people God can really use. Busy beats bored.

Keep busy doing good works. There are plenty of opportunities. As for me, I'm still doing my best so that one day I can get a "good performance review" from my Heavenly Father. I'm actually hoping in the next life God will say to me, "I see how hard you work. Now I have something I want you to do." How cool would *that* be?!

-David Smith

February 19

Please Read Psalm 77

*“I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.
Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?”*
-Psalm 77:12, 13

It's the middle of the night tossing and turning that gets me. You know, the kind where your brain comes up with everything you didn't do that day that you should have done? It also brings up all the big stuff you haven't taken care of like the bill you need to call about that came two weeks ago; the cleaning you haven't done; the card you haven't sent yet; the phone call you haven't made yet that you're dreading. It's the fear in your head that weasels its way into your heart and smothers the peace you are trying so desperately to protect. It's all the “should haves” and the “must dos” that become “I haven't yet” and “I just can't.” It is paralyzing isn't it? The fear of overwhelming expectations that you feel like you can't live up to. The feeling of being inadequate because of expectations placed upon you. You wonder if you're just not good enough to measure up to God's standards.

My dear friend, I have something you need to hear, and if we're being honest, it's something I need to tell myself too. It's easier said than done. That fear, that feeling that you will never measure up to such high standards or expectations. That's not God talking; that's the evil one. Satan is sneaky and conniving. He convinces you that all those things you haven't done and all those jobs you haven't finished make you a bad person and less lovable, to others and especially to God. Have you experienced this? It's hard to face alone and to come out of on your own. Psalm 77 reads like a modern day cry from any regular person. We cry out and wonder if God is even there. This fear can seem like a constant companion. It won't go away. When I need answers and I am afraid, I quit asking for help and in my heart I tell God, “I can't fix this and I need you to give me the answers.” God works in the background while

I try my best not to worry and fret over it. I take my hands off of it. Then God speak my language and gives me an answer in the form of a song. God puts a song in place of my fear. Zach Williams wrote a song recently called "Fear is a Liar." The chorus says:

*Fear he is a liar.
He will take your breath.
Stop you in your steps.
Fear he is a liar.
He will rob your rest,
Steal your happiness.
Cast your fear in the fire
'Cause fear he is a liar.*

Take your fear and throw it to God because God's fire will consume it and in place of it God *does and will*, if we're open to it. Put back the peace you so desperately try to protect.

-Megan Hogstad

February 20

Please Read 1 Peter 3:8-18a

“Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.”

-1 Peter 3:9

This verse reminded me of a Disney cartoon from many years ago. It was about Goofy being a quiet, calm guy at home and then when he got in his car behind the wheel, he became really agitated and drove like a madman. I would suspect that there are a lot of folks on the road that are kind of like Goofy. I was driving north on 50th East one day behind several cars that were going about 50 miles per hour. The guy behind me just kept honking his horn for several miles. I wanted to do something, but anything I would have done would just have made him angrier. Instead I thought he was probably having a very bad day, and looking back I probably should have prayed for peace in his life.

Being able to forgive someone is really hard. Not forgiving someone just weighs you down, and the person you are upset with never even knows. I have worked with a youth prison ministry called Epiphany, which is for teenagers and young adults, ages ranging from 16-24. One of the things we do on the weekend retreat is the forgiveness series. We ask these young adults to think of people that they need to forgive, and have them write the names on rice paper, which are then all nailed to a cross. On Sunday morning these pieces of paper are taken down from the cross and burned, to remind them that Christ died for us to be able to forgive one another. It is very emotional event, and there are usually tears from both the kids and the adults there.

Jesus, help us to not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. Let us forgive others the same way you forgave those who crucified you. Amen.

-Jerry Boulett

Please Read Matthew 4:1-11

“Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written,
‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

-Matthew 4:10

This story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is read at least once every year on Sunday morning, regardless of which lectionary cycle we are in. It is, indeed, an amazing and incredibly important part of our understanding of who Jesus was as a man, and how he made the move into becoming a publicly recognized and feared Messianic leader in Israel. It is also, however, one of the most clearly recognized portions of the New Testament that has meaning much deeper than the story as told really communicates. There have been hours of sermons and pages and chapters and whole books written about these eleven verses! Indeed, you could spend *all* of Lent just contemplating these words of Matthew!

For today though, let’s look at aspects of this that may not have been noted or wondered about previously; there are at least six things deserving of your attention and serious thought. 1) Notice that Jesus, at the close of chapter 3, has just been baptized, been blest by the touch of the Spirit of God (the dove), and heard (or at least *somebody* heard) God say, “This is my Beloved Son...” And from *that* He goes directly to the wilderness! 2) Note that Matthew says it is *the spirit* that leads Him to the wilderness, literally *to be tempted* for that specific purpose! Yes, He fasts and certainly must have contemplated what He was headed for and why He was so determined to do it, but *part* of what had to happen there was the temptations—the testing—to see if there was any real chance or reason to go on.

The temptations themselves provide numbers 3, 4, and 5, but let us make a couple of important points about temptation itself before we get to that. It is important to notice that it is really only in His being baptized and in His being tempted that you and I find

our similarity and, if you will, brotherhood, with Jesus. The land, the time, the culture, the language, etc... everything else about His life is unlike our life, but his *humanity* is verified and proven... and we are *like* Him, *connected* to Him... in baptism and temptation. We notice also that temptations are *not* sins; they are part of the human condition. So when that thought or idea appears in your head and you are horrified that such a choice even appeared in your mind, remember that is just temptation; the sin comes when you ACT on the idea. The humanity of Jesus is vital to our understanding of His mission because, as one much wiser has written, "What He did not assume, He cannot save!" and only one who is fully human can be our great high priest in the sacrifice that procures our Salvation!

In the Modern version of The Lord's Prayer we say, "Do not bring us to the test," and that is really what Jesus' (and *our*) temptations are, *tests* to show just *who* we choose to give our utmost and deepest love to: our *selves*, or our Creator. Jesus' first temptation is a test of Himself; will he use His power and position to take care of *Himself*, to feed his hunger, and, by implication, to go out and attract the masses by feeding *them*, appealing to their physical needs rather than their eternal ones? Will He use a trick or a gimmick to gain their love and allegiance? The second temptation is a test of God the Father. Will Jesus believe the words at His Baptism or will he check and test to see if God really meant it? Will His determination and commitment to His mission come from His faith and His Love of the Father, or will it need to be certified by some external magic or miracle that *proves* He is doing God's will? And, finally, the test of Jesus' true *purpose*; is he after something for *Himself*, power, possessions, reputation, wealth, or is it really *all* for *God's* purposes and what *he* wants to accomplish? If you know yourself at all, I am certain you can easily relate to exactly these kinds of tests in different forms in *your* life and *your* efforts to be a true Lover of Jesus and follower of His Gospel message. A test, a choice of what benefits and satisfies *you*, or the love and sacrifice, the repentance and forgiveness, the powerful *love* of God the Father! A choice, a test every day in the most obvious *and* the subtlest of situations! Which do you choose?

And we come to number 6. We know what Jesus chose, and verse 10 sums it up. A slight modification of the ages old Jewish Shemah, “You shall love God, and serve only Him!” It is the oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism, and Jesus was a Jew. It is *the* great answer to *all* temptations or tests in Jesus’ life and in ours; it is the litmus paper that *shows* what we really are, how we are really doing at following Jesus and being the kind of person we want to be. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might!” You can read it yourself in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and *remember* all you and Jesus have in common, of how He is your Brother, *and* your Savior!

-Father Jim Seipel

February 22

Please Read Romans 3:21-31

“Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

-Romans 3:27, 28

I love quotes, quips, and words of wisdom. I wouldn't say that I collect them as much as I scribble them down when I hear something that I relate to, and so my books and odd pieces of papers tend to get filled with these sayings. A recent addition to my obsession was added to my worksheet from the book study I'm attending and it goes, "Salvation isn't a one-time thing." Love that. To me it speaks to the fact that I, as a believer, need to embrace my faith not just take it for granted and wear it like I do my gold cross. Even though I am forgiven by God's grace and Christ being crucified, I continue to sin. I'm human. Therefore, I need to remember that I am saved, everyday.

In the book of Romans, Paul is declaring the Good News. Our sins are forgiven; everyone's, not just a chosen few. I believe this as truth, so by faith I am made right with God and faith allows me to be open to the whole glory of grace that was given so freely. I need to continue to follow God's word with all the grace He has given me. Therefore, may my actions reflect the glory of God and not be a badge of my own "goodness". I need to "remember Who's I am", not who I am.

-Margi Blair

Please Read Psalm 22:23-31

*“For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.”*

-Psalm 22:24

Rachel has just spent the last two minutes searching through the house to find her daddy “hidden” behind the bed, half-way under a blanket. Now it’s her time to hide. Dad counts loudly to 25 and announces, “Ready or not, here I come.” While it’s obvious that she is standing against the windows hiding behind the curtains, you search and search. “Rachel, Rachel,” you exclaim as you go from room to room trying to find her. Even as you hear her try to quietly laugh, you continue to seek. Picking up the newspaper, moving the cushions around on the couch, opening the front door. After a few minutes he becomes “frustrated” with her excellent hiding skills and plops down on the couch. “Rachel I don’t know where you are! I can’t find you!” He whimpers and almost starts to cry as Rachel comes bolting from behind the curtain, “I’m right here daddy.”

Ever felt like you were playing hide and seek with God? I have. Sometimes I’ve been the one doing the hiding, which really makes no sense. God is all knowing. There is nothing I can do, no place I can go, that I could escape Him. But that doesn’t stop us from hiding behind a curtain thinking we’re getting away with whatever... all the time our feet are showing and God is “letting us hide.”

Other times, I’ve felt like God has been hidden from me and I was the one doing the seeking. A pink slip, a bad doctor’s report, friends talking behind your back with unfounded accusations, or the guilt from poor choices making me feel like I don’t deserve to be in His presence.

Psalm 22:24 reminds us that regardless of what we have

gone through, He has always been there. He has never let us down. He has never looked away. Even when we are the ones trying to hide, we can rest assured that our all-knowing God knows exactly where we are and what we are doing. And in His perfect time, He will be found.

-Barbie Buckner

Please Read Mark 8:27-30

“He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’”

-Mark 8:29

“Who do you say that I am?” a very pointed question from Jesus to the disciples when the question arises of what gossip is being spread about Jesus. Many do not think about names today other than they work well or are in honor of a cherished loved one. Names in biblical times had a deep and intimate meaning. Your name gave others insight into your character, destiny, or circumstances that would have an ongoing effect upon your life.

Abraham’s name means, “father of nations” and how many ancestors come from him through faith; Isaac’s meaning of “you who laughs”, reminding Sarah of her own laughter when overhearing the holy ones sharing that she and Abraham will have a son (Isaac) when they meet again the following year; Moses’ meaning of “drawn from the water”, echoing how he was saved from Pharaoh’s purge in a reed basket; Israel itself meaning “you who struggle with God” and how stubborn the nation is in desiring to do their own thing as they walk alongside God and the covenant. Peter meaning “the rock” in which the Christian church draws its lineage from. In asking the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Jesus is asking them for more than information; He is asking if they know Him personally, His character and destiny. Something not asked lightly in that day and age. I can imagine the open mouths and blank stares as the disciples ponder what their answer would be.

Simon Peter, probably without much forethought, pipes up to say, “You are the Messiah (or Christ).” Messiah means, “anointed one”; Peter is stating that Jesus is God’s chosen and He will bring peace and salvation to God’s chosen people. How would we answer Jesus? Many of us would be like the disciples and not be sure or want to say the right thing so badly that we say nothing at all. Sometimes in not overthinking or overdoing and getting out

of our own way, the right path becomes clear. Peter stops to think as Jesus begins to teach immediately after this confession and he is dead wrong about what Jesus is saying so much that Jesus calls Peter's way of thinking Satan. Talk about going from one extreme to the other!

On many occasions we want to over explain what we believe God through Christ is up to. We want to show others how much we know about faith, hope, and love. Sometimes the simplest answer is best. Jesus is the chosen one, the Son of God. Let others work out for themselves what that means for them as Jesus meets them where they are at. Who do you say Jesus is? He is who He is.

-Rev. Chris Hogstad

Read Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

*“O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.”*

-Psalm 105:1, 2

Psalm 105 is a beautiful psalm of praise. It is a long psalm, but the first two verses provide us with the duties to which we are called by God. Put simply, be grateful, pray, and tell every one of the wonderful things God has done.

It is easy to be thankful for the good things in our lives, but 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” It is much more difficult to be grateful for our trials, but they strengthen us, bring us closer together, and draw us closer to God.

I know I often find myself calling out to God for help when I am at my wit’s end, when I don’t know what else to do, and sometimes as a last resort. Wouldn’t life be easier if we invited God into all of our issues before they became big problems? If we included Him in every decision we made? If we merely asked Him for wisdom? I think often times we forget. I wrote myself a reminder Haiku to put on the wall:

*always remember
whatever the matter is
take it to God first*

This next one is tricky. Why is it that it is so much more difficult for us to witness for our Lord and savior about the amazing things He has done in our lives than it is to write a glowing review about a fantastic restaurant experience on Yelp? Is it because we are afraid of how it will be received by others? It can only do good. Here is a challenge: instead of being silent about the wonder-

ful things God has done and is doing in us and for us, share it with others. Tell people and see how it changes your life and theirs.

This psalm goes on to say how loving and faithful God is. We all know people that are as good as their word, but there is always that human factor. Things that are out of our control might keep us from being able to keep our promises. I have a good friend who always says, "I will be there, God willing." We never know what may happen, but God does. He will always keep His promises. He is truly deserving of our praise.

Thank you Heavenly Father for our blessings as well as our trials. Remind us to come to you first before we make a mess of things. Give us the courage to share with people, wherever we go, the wondrous acts you have done. Thank you for your faithfulness. Amen.

-Juliet Boulett

Please Read Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-19

“By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”

-Hebrews 11:3

This passage says that “the worlds were prepared”. It does not use a singular noun ‘world’, but plural “worlds”. Look at all the worlds we are a part of, but really don’t notice on a daily basis. All the unseen forces we are in relationship with every day: gravitation and magnetic attraction, motion and friction, genetic, neurological, and physiological mechanisms, and the hydrological cycle. All these things, these worlds, were prepared “by the word of God”.

Water is amazing. It runs over the earth, under the earth, floats through the air, and passes through organisms. Water’s ability to dissolve nutrients and chemicals and transport them is critical to life. Humans cannot create more water. We know its components are H₂O, but cannot manufacture more. All the water we have today has been around since the beginning. An amazing hydrological cycle is in place to keep it in motion as it takes the form of a liquid, vapor or ice for our continued use and reuse throughout time.

We see water every day. But if you look at a drop of pond water under the microscope, it reveals a whole other world filled with microscopic organisms: ciliates, mastigote, amoebas, algae, bacteria, diatoms and tardigrades. Ciliates generally oval in shape are covered with layers of tiny hairs (cilia) that help propel them and ingest food. Mastigote or flagellate have spherical to elongated shapes with a whip, flagella, protruding from the front or rear that moves rapidly and propels the organism through the water and draws in food. The blob-type amoebas have no head, no brain, no arms, no legs – just feet and protoplasm, but they are alive and moving and really amazing to see. Tardigrades, also called water-bears or moss-piglets, are eight-legged, segmented micro-animals that are among the toughest creatures on earth. Some tardigrade

species can survive extreme temperatures, radiation, dehydration, and being in outer space (12 days on the outside of the capsule).

When you think about what you are looking at under the microscope, all those creatures in one little drop of water, and realize all the bodies of water all over the world with millions and millions of gallons of water and each drop is teeming with life such as you are seeing under the microscope, well, the amount of life is staggering, and yet it's a whole world not visible to the naked eye. What an amazing world we are apart of.

Hebrews 11 references many acts of faith (by Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses). Some of them did not receive what they had hoped for, but they hung on to their faith. They had a steadfast belief in God's Word and hope for better days in God's Kingdom. Our faith is not to be based on what appears or on that which can be reasoned out. I believe this passage is saying if God made the vast universe from things not visible, but "by the word of God", and if you have faith in that declaration, then by faith you realize that there is nothing that He does not have the ample power to do.

-Sandra Lebo

Please Read Luke 12:36-43

“... be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.”

-Luke 12:36

Through the decades of my walk with Jesus, I've heard a number of religious leaders use verse 36 to predict the Second Coming of Christ. According to their own interpreted Biblical “hidden code,” or inspiration from their own divine source, Jesus will return on some specific date on our calendar. I didn't put a date in this paragraph out of fear that some zealous person yet unborn might discover this material in a century and use this as part of their argument for the next round of “Jesus predictions.”

It may shock you, but I don't believe this verse truly applies to the scenario of the Second Coming. Follow my logic here – I am a servant of God, a follower of Jesus Christ. I must be ready to perform tasks in His name at any time. Notice the task mentioned is a relatively minor one for people like me – opening a door. What struck me about this passage is that whatever service I might provide may seem unimportant to me, but could prove to be very powerful to our Lord.

So, if I see a man in need of food, as I did the other night while leaving a restaurant, his need may seem trivial to me, but it is critical to him. After all, I had just eaten. Taking this one step further, the need of this man is just as important as my own, if I believe God loves us equally. I realized I was God's servant at that moment – meaning he was asking me to do something trivial (for me), like opening a door for someone returning from a wedding.

As I looked at him, his face seemed to plead for help. I can still see his eyebrows, furrowed up in the middle. When he said, “It's not about money, I'm really hungry,” I knew what my Master would have me do. I walked with him into the restaurant and handed a small amount of money to the cashier, asking for a meal

for this man. What amazed me was how grateful he was.

I believe that how I treat others is how I treat Jesus. I also believe that this proverbial door needs to be “opened” at any hour, day and night, for anyone God sends to our doorway, our path in life.

Can you see the need of another human being as an opportunity to serve our master, Jesus, no matter how trivial the task may seem? Remember, the knock on the door can come at any time, in any place. I wonder if, perhaps, we often hear door knocks and fail to respond.

-Ed Mooney

Please Read 1 Peter 2:4-10

*“Once you were not a people,
but now you are God’s people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.”*

-1 Peter 2:10

This section of 1 Peter talks a lot about stones. Stones are what buildings are built from. The cornerstone is a stone that joins two walls. It is also a foundation for what is believed. Stones in your way can make you trip and fall. Peter says when we stumble it is because we have disobeyed the Word.

Peter calls Jesus a “Living Stone” who was rejected by the builders (the religious leaders in Jerusalem), but chosen and precious to God. He says we are living stones of which the church is built. The Living Stone becomes the cornerstone and whoever believes “will not be put to shame.” (1 Peter 2:6)

The ancient Hebrews were God’s chosen people. They alone had a covenant with God that said they would be his people and he would be their God. But, with the coming of Jesus, the Living Stone, all of humanity are allowed to be God’s people. We are inheritors of God’s kingdom and we receive unending love and mercy from Him. What a wonderful gift!

It is through Jesus’s death and resurrection that we can receive such a gift. As we travel through the Lenten season, reflect on that gift and how Jesus became the cornerstone of our faith and church community.

-Deb Moisio

March 2

Please Read Psalm 19

*“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”*
-Psalm 19:14

This prayer from David is so radical in a quiet, humble way. God has been preparing David’s heart. This transformation is nothing short of a miracle. Examining his past, David desires God’s will. His desire is not to please others or himself, but to please God. He has had a glimpse of salvation. He knows God is his rock. He has rescued him from sin and redeemed him. We don’t always need to see the full picture to move closer to God.

Many times when the Bible speaks of the heart, it is referring to thoughts, feelings, the mind. What you say affects your heart. Words matter. Words are powerful. They can cause joy and happiness, or sadness and despair. They can encourage or destroy. When we pray to God in humility, we are expressing our faith, believing God has the power to transform us. God is our *rock*.

I read something recently that explains this perfectly. Our hearts need to be repaired daily with the word, not just on Sunday. In all situations, all the time... at church, at home, at play, socially, volunteering. You get the picture. *All* the time. God has control over our words and thoughts through the spiritual discipline of prayer. Easter season is the time to get your heart right with God.

-Diane Schaeffing

Please Read Mark 9:2-8

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.”

-Mark 9:2, 3

The transfiguration is a spectacular scene that is almost Hollywood-like with the climb up the mountain, the blinding whiteness, meeting Old Testament stars, the booming voice of God, and then it all goes back to normal. Hollywood, however, would have done it in downtown Jerusalem, in front of everyone. This was played out for an audience of three. I ponder why the transfiguration was done for the three Apostles who probably least needed convincing of Jesus' divinity. Imagine everything Peter, James, and John witnessed in their time with Jesus... walking on water, calming the storm, feeding the 5,000, curing lepers and the blind, raising the dead, not to mention all of His teachings. How could they not already know, to the depth of their core, that Jesus was the Son of God? Then, they observe the transfiguration. If the dazzling white and Moses and Elijah weren't enough, God's voice booms down and tells them "This is my Son".

In part, I think Jesus was preparing them to help create his Church. They had to believe, really believe, for them to dedicate the rest of their lives, at great peril, to the task of building His Church. Just as important, it was done for you and me. It was witnessed so it could be recorded to be read thousands of years later. Those of us living today have never directly heard Jesus teach or observed any of his miracles. Nevertheless, the Church is still here, 2,000 years later, because Jesus carefully planned for it. He planned to have everything witnessed and written down so the New Testament could come into existence. He planned Apostles that would help create His Church after He ascended. Don't you love it when a plan comes together?

-Wayne Kalliomaa

March 5

Please Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

-1 Corinthians 3:11

What comes to mind are the 10 Commandments (the Law) and all the other laws Paul’s audience is under. But Jesus changed that to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29b-31) This was Jesus’ answer to the question of which commandment is the most important one.

Paul is writing about divisions in the church, but he could just as well be writing to us today about the divisions in our society right now. The hate. The anger. Many people on edge, hesitant to give an opinion, afraid of the reaction they may get. Is it just me, or is it almost palpable? For me, I’ve noticed that I am quicker to be annoyed, if not downright self-righteous much of the time. I really don’t like that part of me.

So what does Jesus say? Love God with all you’ve got. Deeply, with all of your soul and all of your strength. What does that look like to you? Daily devotions? Reading through the Bible in a year? A weekly Bible/book study? Listening to Pastor Chris’ sermon on our website? Going to church once a week? All of these? None of these? I’m not calling anybody out, believe me. Maybe you do something not even mentioned here and it connects you to God. That’s great!

For me, the harder commandment is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Some days I don’t love myself, some days I have to drag myself out of bed because I don’t want to face the day. Those days it’s hard to love anyone, especially myself, let alone my neighbor. On those days, sometimes I just muddle through my day, or I pray, “More of You and less of me.” The bottom line is that it is hard. If it were easy, everyone would do it, right? And if every-

one would love their neighbor as their selves, what would *that* look like?

Jesus laid the foundation to love God with all you've got and to love your neighbor as yourself. Look what he did for us, the ultimate gift of Love. He laid down his life for you and me so we could have eternal life without sin and without pain. What a gift. What a foundation.

-Doretta Rapp

March 6

Please Read Hebrews 9:23-28

“For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

-Hebrews 9:24

The Christmas season is barely over, and the decorations were just put away. It is hard to believe that the joyous celebration of a newborn king is replaced in our thoughts by that same baby, now a man of 33, who must suffer and die as a sacrifice for all mankind. The birth of a baby brings excitement, joy, and love, but even the thought of death brings a cold chill to our spine.

No one wants to think about death. It is something we push to the back of our minds, to deal with later. But the author of Hebrews is reminding us that there is no escape from death, or the judgment that comes afterward. We are all destined to die once as a consequence of sin, just as Christ died once as the perfect sacrifice for all sin. After death, we must face judgment as it is written in the scriptures.

But all is not lost. We have nothing to fear. Jesus will be there. He has entered heaven itself to appear for us before God. If our trust is in Christ alone, we will escape judgment! The verdict: Righteous and forgiven in the blood of Christ. Christ interceded for us sinners resulting in the tremendous good news of God’s complete and everlasting forgiveness.

It is not good works, or religious heritage, or righteousness, or our own adherence to some religious system; it is Christ alone! It is the end of our futile attempts to deal with guilt. We can heave a big sigh of relief. Because of Christ’s once and for all sacrifice for our sins, we can look forward to salvation when he returns, not judgment. Praise the Lord, come Lord Jesus.

-Dana Skinner

Please Read Mark 11:15-19

“Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.”

-Mark 11:15, 16

We've all been angry; there's just no way to get through this life without experiencing that emotion, and more often than not we feel justified for being angry. So when we come upon this reading and look at his actions, we immediately assume that Jesus is angry. Why would he overturn those tables and drive those people out of the temple if he wasn't angry? These traders were abusing his father's house and exploiting the poor for their own selfish purposes. In our minds, these actions signify anger, and it seems perfectly justified. But that is not the point Jesus was trying to make.

Before Jesus' painful journey to the cross, the temple had stood for the presence of God and his relationship to his people. In Mark's gospel, this scene takes place after Palm Sunday, the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. With his sacrifice, a new temple was created. Because of his love, a new relationship between God and us came into existence. A new covenant was formed through his suffering and death on the cross, and the old covenant—the temple—is no longer needed.

So when Jesus drove those merchants and traders from the temple and not letting them take anything with them, he was showing people that they no longer needed to sacrifice animals to earn God's favor and forgiveness, that there would only be one death sufficient enough to do that: his own. Jesus offered up his life so that every person from every nation would have access to God's love. One sacrifice to replace many.

It is never explicitly stated that Jesus was, in fact, angry in

this scene in any of the four gospels. We don't actually know how Jesus felt in this scene. Was there a hint of anger? It's possible. But there was also love. Everything Jesus did was so that we could always experience that love.

-Jennifer Rapp

Please Read Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

*“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.”*

-Psalm 107:1

We are all surrounded by things that are worn out, outdated, in need of repair, broken, or have died, whether they are material possessions or human relationships. Some of us may be wandering, feeling lost, bitter, angry, or restless. Others may be discouraged, hopeless, or even possibly “at the end of his/her rope”. Just as God redeemed His people from many different places and situations, we too, as Christians, have the promise that God is faithful whether we have experienced broken promises or difficult life situations. For that we can give thanks. Thanks because God is good! He is steadfast. Just as the Psalmist proclaimed in Psalm 89:1-2, “... I declare your steadfast love is established forever.” God is and will always be there for us with unconditional love that fits any difficult situation we may find ourselves in – no strings attached! We can rejoice and give thanks for that kind of love.

-Joanne Hill

March 9

Please Read Ephesians 1:7-14

“In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.”

-Ephesians 1:11, 12

It is an aspect of human nature that we consistently “miss the point” of what someone has said or written. I see it most often when people wax eloquent about a single verse of scripture, or even one word, without considering what was written before and after it. I try to avoid that, but not this time.

Predestined, from verse eleven. There has been a scholarly debate since the middle ages over whether we truly have a free will, or, since God is omniscient, our lives are locked on a specific path. This debate “misses the point” of what God has told us through all of scripture.

All of the pagan, polytheistic religions held the idea that humans were the tools and playthings of the gods. One of the radical ideas Judaism introduced is that God made us to be in relationship, with Him and each other. For any relationship to be genuine, to work, each partner must intentionally decide to be a part of it. If any member is forced or controlled, there is no relationship. God has chosen us. We need to return the compliment.

-Gabe Gabriel

Please Read John 3:1-13

“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

-John 3:7, 8

The first time Nicodemus is mentioned in the Gospels is in this passage. John places this meeting shortly after the cleansing of the temple, that famous passage in which Jesus shows his humanness and flips the tables of merchants who have defiled his Father’s house with their actions. This is also linked to the signs Jesus performs in Jerusalem during the Passover feast, as those signs are what inspires Nicodemus to seek out Jesus in the first place.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and the Pharisees have a poor reputation in the biblical history. They are the strict followers of Jewish traditional (spoken) and written law. They were the Biblical scholars of the time. They are also often described as self-righteous and hypocritical. Nicodemus, however, breaks this trend by coming to Jesus and accepting that he must be connected to God, and asking for his teaching.

Nicodemus is an older man. He is a religious academic, but an academic nonetheless. Yet in this verse he has the humility to admit what he does not know and ask a younger man for his advice on the Kingdom of Heaven. And when Jesus answers, Nicodemus does not understand, and continues to ask questions so that he *can* understand. He approaches this as a scholar would, but not the way a believer would. So, while he gets some credit for abandoning the traditional Pharisee stance and accepting Jesus as sent from God, he still falls into the category of “ye of little faith.” So Jesus does not beat around the bush: to enter the kingdom of God, one must be reborn in the Spirit. When Nicodemus continues to misunderstand, Jesus calls him out: “Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things?” (vs. 10) and “If I have told you earthly things,

and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?” (vs. 12) Nicodemus only took Jesus seriously after he saw the signs and miracles, which is the opposite of having faith.

This verse’s meaning has two parts: this first is to never be too educated to learn. Nicodemus, as smart as he was, still could not fathom what Jesus meant when he said one must have a spiritual rebirth. He had studied his entire life; he has likely trained for this position since he was a child. Yet he did not understand what a seemingly young and inexperienced man had to share. That leads to the second part: no one is unqualified for God to speak through them. In 1 Timothy 4:12, it is written, “Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.” Jesus is the son of God and for that, of course, he has authority, but Jesus came from the most unexpected place at the most unexpected time and from the most unexpected source. God’s truth can come from anywhere, and we are meant to always be open to it.

-Carina McVeigh

Please Read Hebrews 3:1-6

“Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God’s house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.”

-Hebrews 3:5, 6

The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of those where the source or author is not clear. It is considered by most to be Paul, but there is more than a little evidence it was someone else. Paul declared most vehemently that he was fully and completely a Jew, even though he was a Roman citizen, and for that reason tradition has had it that he wrote this Epistle, but there are reasons and some serious questions as to that fact now. Regardless, it is an epistle aimed at those who were speaking and teaching a faith in which Jesus was just part of the story of salvation, and the author wanted it clear that the Gospel is about *Jesus*... and no one and nobody and nothing else! God, the Almighty, sent His Son and *through* His Son accomplished our salvation and opportunity for eternal life. Period. So all of the wonderful and great history and truth of Judaism is still wonderful and true, but now it is not wonderful simply for itself, but for the way it points to, leads to Jesus, the Savior!

The truth is, you really should not read this appointed selection without first reading the last four verses of chapter 2, which says that what we call the *incarnation* was God taking flesh and blood and the complete *nature* of humanness so that in dying He could destroy death and deliver or “save” those held in bondage because of their *fear* of death. Jesus the Christ is our *great high priest* in the sacrament/sacrifice that produces our Salvation, and, as has been written elsewhere, “What He did not assume, He cannot save.” So, while all the other great and holy men and women were messengers leading to salvation, Jesus is both the Messenger *and* the Message, the one whose life and death and resurrection produces and results in our Salvation!

It is a real human problem that often the greatest enemy of excellent is good. However, it is not a dismissal of the greatness of Moses or David or any of the Prophets or leaders of Israel to speak of Jesus being greater than them; it really is just that *He* is the absolute epitome of God's action to save us. (You have to be reminded of the presently popular slogan about a certain truck brand that says, "It doesn't just raise the bar, it is the bar!") The problem becomes one being willing to take the next step and let go of what is good to grab hold of what is *best* and that was a very difficult thing for those raised with the deepest respect and appreciation of knowing themselves and their history as being God's *chosen* people for hundreds and even thousands of years.

So we come to these final verses of the selection that try to say that Moses is/was indeed chosen by God and a great leader. He was faithful to what Yahweh/God called him to do, and so was Jesus faithful to what God called *him* to do. The call to worship Jesus is not a criticism or demotion of Moses, but a recognition that Moses' position was as a *servant* in the house of the Lord while Jesus' position is as the Son and heir of the house of the Lord. Yahweh/God is the builder and *source* of the house and Jesus is the Son and Master of the house in that analogy. It should not be too great a jump for us in our time to see this truth as a lesson in how we deal with the world's other great religions, *especially* Judaism! There is no dismissal or disrespect of Mohammed or Buddha or others who led great movements helping humankind to see that there is *one* God, and no lording it over those who follow those movements, just an understanding and a theology that knows Jesus is the Master of the House.

If you think about it, perhaps it is as if our lives are a long and great journey that eventually concludes with an important trip on a bus or other vehicle. *Good people* of every sort and condition and practice and faith, *loving* and unselfish people, are given seats on that bus. The bus takes all to their eventual destination in the eternity of God, but, while the others are simply travelers and passengers on that bus, Christians know the bus driver... Jesus! So they have a comfort and confidence that the others may not have because they *know* who is driving the bus. They know what He

has already done so they can trust what he is going to do, where He is taking the bus. Perhaps an image like this meets the demands of Jesus' words in another place when he says, "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." (John 14:6) As the driver of the bus, that would certainly be true for all who were traveling; they all get to where the Driver takes them. Yahweh/God is the source of all, of everything, and we are just one, so very small and insignificant. We cannot dismiss or disregard His love for all of His creation, *His* world, *His* universe, *His* people, *His* plants and animals, *His* galaxies, all of it, *His!* And He sent His son! Wow! Let *that* sink in for a few minutes!

-Father Jim Seipel

March 13

Please Read 1 Corinthians 10:6-13

“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

-1 Corinthians 10:13

In times when we are under intense pressure from a myriad of things, perhaps you might have heard someone say or even you've said it yourself, “God doesn't give me anything more than what I can handle.” I myself have even followed that up with, “it says it somewhere in the Bible.” Well, that's what 1 Corinthians 10:13 seems to say, but does it really?

If you step back a bit and examine what Paul is talking about, you will find that he is actually talking about temptation and being prepared to resist it. Paul was writing to the believers in Corinth to encourage them to be disciplined in their behavior and not fall into a life of moral depravity like their ancestors had. He was referring to the times when the Israelites made a golden calf and worshiped it and engaged in sexual immorality, gluttony, and a host of other bad stuff. He wanted the believers in Corinth to remember God so they didn't repeat the errors of those that went before them.

In our culture today, there is plenty of sin-inducing pressure that would lead us away from God. But Paul reminds us that 1) temptation is universal and real; 2) everyone has temptations, you are not the only one to experience them; 3) others have resisted temptation and you can too; 4) any temptation that comes our way, no matter how great, can be resisted because God will provide a way out of it. So how do we find that way out? If we look to God, he will help us recognize those people and situations that might give us problems. In response to that, we should run from anything or any thoughts that we know are wrong and choose to do what is right instead. We should seek people and friends that love God and

can help us resist the temptations that come our way. Above all, we should pray for God's help in all things.

God doesn't really promise that he won't give us more than we can handle, but what he does promise is that He will be there for us and reach out to us so that we can be surrounded by his strength that helps us resist the temptations that come our way.

-Cheryl duBois

March 14

Please Read John 8:12-20

“Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’”

-John 8:12

As time goes by, this world seems to be getting darker, and it seems the more it goes without light, humans adjust to the darkness and the darkness becomes acceptable and normal. As I was driving home from work recently, darkness had already fallen. As I exited the freeway and turned onto my country road, heading home, I nearly hit a deer that I did not see standing in my lane until I was almost right on it. I applied my brakes hard and came to a complete stop about 5-7 feet from it. The deer then proceeded to calmly walk off the road. Needless to say my heart was pounding, as I said to myself, “Why didn’t you have your brights on?” I definitely would have seen the deer a lot sooner, but I had just become accustomed to seeing just enough to hopefully not hit a deer.

Where there is darkness, there is fear, worry, and anxiety. If we move around in a dark room, we know we have a greater chance of running into or tripping over something. Yet fear, worry, and anxiety seem to be the norm these days. But God knew all of this and sent His Son to be the light of this world and those that follow Him will have the light of life. The more we follow Him, the brighter and lighter this world will become. His light shines through us as followers and brightens the lives of others, and then they too want to be in the light and will start to follow. We as followers must reflect Christ’s light and spread it around so others see that light within us. During my darkest days as I had to prepare to send my oldest daughter on to heaven before me, His light was the only thing that got me through the darkness. When I received this focus verse I immediately thought of my fondest childhood Sunday school song, “This Little Light of Mine,” and it brought such a warm feeling back to me. I know it is known by all, but here are

the lyrics again as a reminder to let His light shine through us to others.

*This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine,
Let it shine,
Let it shine.*

Jesus *is* the light of the world. With Him we can see things clearly. With Him lighting our way, we do not need to fear, worry, or be anxious. Following Him gives us the light of life. Sharing Him with others spreads that light. Let it shine!

-Dawna Vargas

March 15

Please Read Isaiah 30:15-18

*“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you;
therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.
For the Lord is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him.”*
-Isaiah 30:18

This passage is basically about patience. God has it and we need it. But what is He waiting for? Why doesn't he act right away when we pray for something? Maybe He doesn't answer a particular prayer right away so that we may learn something. Perhaps it is repentance. Perhaps it is faith. Perhaps he's waiting for us to “get it right”, whatever “it” is. He longs to come to our rescue, but only when the time is right. We need to have patience and faith if we are to receive the blessings God so much wants to give to us.

While our attitude should be the same as God's, peaceful and patient, it is more often just the opposite. We need to have a little self-discipline and know that God's grace is coming. We must trust Him.

This reminds me of my great aunt. When my mother was a young girl, my aunt had a special prayer request. She never told anyone what it was for. She just asked people to pray for her special intention. Years later, when my mother was an adult, she asked the aunt if the prayer for her special intention was ever answered. She said it had not been answered yet, but asked if my mom would keep praying for it.

Our aunt was always such a spiritual person. Always prayed and went to church and was very patient and steadfast in her Christianity. I always admired her for that. No one ever found out what her prayer was, but no matter what happened, she always had faith, up until her last day on earth.

I must admit I have prayed for certain things and have waited and waited, fully expecting God would eventually answer the prayer. Sometimes I became very impatient and tried to take

matters into my own hands to speed up the process – anything to get rid of the pain. Eventually I realized that I had no control and reluctantly moved on, still praying but living. Things happened, but not always in the way I'd expected. I learned that sometimes the answer to certain prayers is “No.” Even so, different things happened to make that “No” acceptable, because without a “No” answer to one prayer, life wouldn't have taken on a direction to offer the answer to another. I thank God that He had the patience to wait for me to move in a positive direction so that He could bestow an even richer, more wonderful blessing upon me, bringing me even closer to God.

Don't be discouraged. Wait as patiently on God as He waits patiently for you, for “blessed are all those who wait for Him.”

-Tara McVeigh-Smith

March 16

Please Read Hebrews 4:14-5:4

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

-Hebrews 4:15, 16

Sometimes it’s hard for me to believe that Jesus understands my pain, my struggles. After all, He is God. Then, of course, I realize that He came to us and was born as a baby, just like you and me. Jesus grew up, walked the desert, experienced hunger, thirst, and pain just like we do. Ultimately, He took on the weight of the sins of all of us, and paid the price for those sins so we could live.

Knowing Jesus did all that for me, how can I possibly think that He will ignore my prayers? When He was on Earth as a man, Jesus showed compassion and healed the sick, fed the hungry, and even brought the dead back to life. As Jesus said in Luke 11 verses 9-12:

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

And in John 16:23b-24, he said:

“Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my

name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”

The same Jesus who walked the Earth is now in Heaven interceding for me. I know Jesus cares about the day-to-day obstacles I face and desires to help me. I may not be relieved of my pain today or tomorrow, but I know the Lord has heard my prayers for relief. I will continue to persist and pray that He will heal me and take away my pain. When the time is perfectly right, He will.

Meanwhile, I am able to empathize with others who suffer. I can put myself in their shoes, and share what God has done for me, and what He can do for them. Without the experience of my struggles, I would not be able to relate to them. God has a purpose for all of my misery. I reach out to Him more when I'm hurting than when everything is going well.

Lord Jesus, thank you for my pain and weakness. Continue to use me be a blessing to others who are suffering. When the time is right, please heal me. Keep me close to you in the good times as well as the bad. Amen.

-Fern Jackson

March 17

Please Read Psalm 51:1-12

*“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.”*
-Psalm 51:10, 11

As we read through the verses of David’s psalm, it becomes perfectly clear how tormented he is as he reflects on the things he has done in his life. Then, as we read through the laundry list he is confessing to our Lord, it might be easy to sit back and comfort ourselves thinking we’re not that bad! But we need to remember that God does not differentiate one sin from another like we might be tempted to do. He sees all sin the same! The one thing He asks us to do about our sin is to be truthful to ourselves and confess them to Him and ourselves, and then like David in verse 10 we can also ask him to “create in [us] a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within [us].” He promised David and He promises us that with our confession we are forgiven. And we should know down deep inside that God always keeps his promises.

*Gracious and loving God help me to confess all my sins
and lay them at your feet knowing that I am forgiven. Amen.*

-Mike duBois

Please Read 2 Corinthians 3:4-11

“Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

-2 Corinthians 3:5, 6

I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "The letter of the law versus the spirit of the law." We understand this means there is a difference between what is said in words, and what the intent or meaning of the words is. We often get so caught up in the actual words that we completely miss the meaning behind them.

Parents are tasked with setting up rules for their children. Wear your seat belt in the car, or your helmet when riding your bike. Get to bed at a certain time every night. For each of these rules there is a bigger, more important meaning. After all, nothing magical or strange that happens ten minutes after bedtime. It's not the time that's important. What's important is getting a consistently good and appropriate night's sleep. The meaning behind the obedience makes a big difference.

Rules and laws can help teach us as well as increase safety in our world. The Old Testament is filled with laws. However, in the New Testament something changes. We are introduced to *the Spirit*. The Spirit also teaches and helps us be safe in our walk through this world. Laws written by humankind are external. They come at us from the outside. When we obey because we are motivated simply by the laws on the outside, we may be feeling on the inside we don't want to be obeying them at all. Take dieting for example. "They say eat more vegetables. I'll eat them, but I hate them anyway." That kind of attitude will lead to failure, and probably won't get you to your weight loss goal.

Conversely the Spirit motivates us from the inside. In our dieting example, it's like having an attitude that says, "I've discovered new ways to prepare vegetables and I really enjoy them." That's the kind of diet that has a much better chance of success.

Written words can change what you do. The Spirit changes why you do it.

Take an inventory of what motivates your obedience to God's laws. Are you doing what you must do, or doing what you want to do? They're not the same. Strive to lean less on the words of the law and more on the spirit. Learn the meaning behind obedience to God. It will make a big difference.

-David Smith

Please Read Psalm 119:9-16

*“I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.”*
-Psalm 119:15, 16

Wow! Psalm 119 is quite the doozy of a Psalm! A total of 176 verses – yikes! Overwhelming? Yes, but fortunately for this devotion, the focus is on 2 short verses.

In my study Bible, it gives quite the explanation of this Psalm. The “Cliffs Notes” version is this: it’s a devotional on the word of God. It was written by an Israelite who was devoted to the word of God passionately, humbly acknowledged that they were a sinner, knew the pain but also the fruits of God’s corrective discipline, and has been ridiculed for their beliefs. In other words, it’s a devotion inside a devotion. You could say that’s ironic, but that’s God for you.

Are you able to meditate on God’s word? What does that look like in your life? Is it in the music you listen to? Do you time set aside for Bible study? Do you refer to certain sections of the Bible to get you through your day? Or maybe you go outside and sit in nature. Or you have a favorite author, or, or, or...

Is your answer any better than any body else’s? I’d say no. Your path, your way to meditate on God’s word, is best for you and you alone. That’s the thing that is so awesome about God; he meets you where you are at and loves you the way you are.

Some of God’s word is hard, such as loving your neighbor, tithe, praying for your enemies, having no other gods...the list goes on and on. Yet the Psalmist says, “I delight in your decrees.” Are you kidding me? “Delight” in praying for my enemies! Love my neighbor? Yeah, right. But that is what we are expected to do. It’s part of the deal; it’s part of being a Christ follower, and Jesus never said it would be easy.

Meditating on God's word, delighting in God's word, not neglecting God's word, all we are called to do all of those things. Sometimes doing any one of those three things can be a cinch, easy as pie. Other times it's just a struggle, isn't it? Man, if we weren't so human! But we are. The good news is that God knows that. His understanding is why He gave us devotions and Psalmists; He knows us. Carve out some time to meditate on God's word. Embrace the hard stuff, and lean into God; that's what he wants. He wants you. Forever.

-Doretta Rapp

Please Read John 12:34-50

“I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.”

-John 12:46, 47

I love light, any kind of light (just not direct sun, but that's for later). I feel so much better on the days when the curtains and blinds are open and I can have the doors open to feel the breeze.

When I was younger I had a deep fear of the dark. Not really because there were monsters (although that's part of it), but because I couldn't clearly see what was around me. I couldn't make out what exactly was in front of me. I couldn't sleep without some kind of light. Even now I need to have some kind of light in order to feel safe and comfortable. When Chris and I were first married it was difficult to explain this need for some kind of light because he was used to sleeping in total darkness. Trying to explain my fear without sounding silly was challenging; after all, it wasn't monsters I was afraid of but the lack of sight, the unknown dark.

Think about when you're driving somewhere in the dark and you're looking for the house number trying to figure out where you're going. It is much easier to see the houses that have lights on the outside. Yes, there are shadows, but you can still see with some light to read or see your surroundings. The frustrating thing is, light only goes so far. The truth is there will always be that dark corner. There's always a place where light just seems to be absent, where shadows seem to be overwhelming. That's when we have to say we can't just make light happen, that we need others to help bring light. Jesus promised that He would be that light. Jesus would be the one who would cast no shadow. Jesus would be the all encompassing light that we could reach for in order to light the dark corners where light seems to be imperceptible and the darkness seems

to consume everything.

Here's an experiment to try. Light a match in a completely dark room. Try to find the shadow of the flame... Let me know what you find. In the meantime, go be someone's light so that their dark corners know someone cares.

-Megan Hogstad

Please Read Philippians 2:1-11

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

-Philippians 2:3, 4

I think the word “humble” has gotten a bad rap. To most, and I confess that I also held this view, being humble is to be weak. Not a great goal in life, to lower yourself to become subservient to others. It kind of brings up a feeling of righteous indignation. Why would I lower myself?

In the recovery world, becoming humble is one of the first steps to a life of sobriety. You need to get out of your own way and understand that the world is not all about you. Being humble is not a weakness; being humble is letting go of the struggle to maintain a prideful life. Trying to make the world all about you is an unending and futile battle. The three legs of recovery involve unity, recovery, and service. Service to others is vital to maintaining recovery. Humbling yourself to serve others is key. Helping another helps you. The main tenants of AA are taken straight from the Bible, and they work.

Paul’s letter is in part outlining how to live a Christ-like life. Be humble, don’t be prideful or arrogant, honor others, and don’t be interested in only your own life. Service to others gets us out of ourselves. It allows us to serve God by serving our fellow man. It’s a way to recover and rediscover God’s grace in us. What a peaceful, fulfilling way to live.

-Margi Blair

March 23

Please Read Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

*“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.”*
-Psalm 118:22-24

Give thanks! We all want to give thanks, right? We know we *should* be thankful. God is good and worthy of praise. After all, He’s given us everything we have.

But what if you’re unable to feel thankful? What if you try, and it just doesn’t come? What if you’re grieving? What if you suffer from chronic pain or illness, and you just can’t find it in yourself to thank God for the life He’s given you?

What if gratitude has never come easy? What if something—or someone—in your life is standing in your way, or past trauma is keeping you from feeling the joy you know God wants you to have? What if depression or anxiety has taken hold? Even neurological issues such as bipolar disorder can keep the most resolute person from feeling grateful.

Some days we find it easy to praise God. Others, not so much. And for people who suffer from an illness such as chronic anxiety or depression, praising God might seem to be just too much effort.

All my life, I’ve dealt with clinical depression and anxiety. In the past, I used to wonder if there was something wrong with me. I wasn’t “joyful.” I didn’t have enough faith. I wasn’t godly enough. God didn’t love me.

As one who was rejected by those who should most accept him, Jesus understands those of us who feel like we’re on the outside looking in.

If you don’t feel gratitude, what can you do?

Be realistic. Don't expect to feel thankful all the time. We're not wired that way.

Be honest. Express your sadness. It's okay. We know that David had times of deep depression as well as soaring joy. In many of the Psalms, he expressed his despair. He felt anguish, loneliness, fear, and remorse.

Don't isolate yourself. Sometimes you just have to have faith in someone else's faith. Find some people you trust; friends, your pastor, or a counselor, and let them know how you feel.

Change what you can. If something is standing in the way of your joy, change it. Don't suffer needlessly. And don't be ashamed to seek psychological help if necessary.

Let it go. I believe it's possible to be thankful even in the midst of depression. I've had fleeting moments of joy that have kept me "alive." I am always hopeful.

Be kind to yourself. Thanking God is an obligation, but it shouldn't be a heavy weight.

Focus outward. Supporting others can be a great way to forget your own troubles for a while.

Refocus and return. It helps me to think of thankfulness as a habit, not a feeling. If you fall into despair, turn back to God, as many times as you have to. He always forgives.

-Carrie Mooney

March 24

Please Read Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

“... saying, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.’”

-Mark 10:33, 34

This is the third time Jesus predicts his death. The first time is Mark 8:31 when Peter gets rebuked. The second time is Mark 9:31. This time the Apostles did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Mark 10:32 is the third time and the reaction of the Apostles is not recorded, although it is clear from the rest of the Easter story that they still did not understand. Didn't they know that Jesus is just 18 verses, or so, away from entering Jerusalem, and a mere 4 chapters from being betrayed? Time is growing short! Why weren't the Apostles trying to understand? The Easter story is the story of our salvation, our forgiveness, our eternal life. This is important! Why weren't the Apostles trying to understand?

Okay, I am being a little unfair to the Apostles. If they really understood, of course their part of the Easter story would have been different. If they knew Jesus' time on the earth was growing short, I am sure they would have asked Him more questions. However, the Apostles didn't know and perhaps took for granted that Jesus would always be here. I can be the same way. I have always regretted I did not ask my father about his time in Vietnam as an Army Chaplain, or his time growing up as the son of immigrants, or why he chose to become an ordained pastor. I took for granted that he would always be here, and that wasn't the case. Unlike Jesus, we do not know the how much time we have on this Earth or how long we have with those who are special to us. Please, take time, now, to tell them the things you need to say. Tomorrow may be too late.

-Wayne Kalliomaa

Please Read John 12:1-11

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

-John 12:7, 8

Death... something we all face that none of us want to go through. Many of us put off planning our own funeral; the music, scriptures, meal, etc., because if we plan our funeral that means it is coming soon. Jesus is in the midst of that very situation in John 12. He is less than a week from Calvary and crucifixion, a few days from His death. Mary performs an act of love toward Jesus in His final week. How often do we wish for one more moment to share love with one who is close to us? Too many times during ministry, one of the regrets people share with me is they wish for an opportunity to say, do, or be with someone they loved that has died.

Jesus recognizes the love Mary is showing Him. He accepts the gesture for what it is and lets nothing stand in the way of what Mary is doing. So often, we let the calendar, money, and our own expectations of what death should be get in the way of sharing the love we have for one another. One of the best qualities Jesus shows us is not only how to show love to one another, but more importantly how to accept love from someone else. Mary is chastised, belittled, and ridiculed for what she gives to Jesus. He defends her by reminding the disciples of His soon-to-be death. The poor (in wealth and/or spirit) will always be with us. Jesus' example is to show and share the love He received from Mary during His final days.

We, as Christians, are much more comfortable sharing love than receiving love. Being loved is as important as loving one another. Receiving love is sometimes the only gift someone can give. We think of death as finality, which is why we struggle with our own mortality and the death of those whom we love. Part of the

mystery of faith is the notion that death is *not* the ultimate end, but a new beginning. Jesus already knew that sitting in the home of His friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We do not have that luxury to know what comes after, but we do have trust and hope in the One who has risen from the dead; the One who does gives us new life. He shows us not only how to love, but how to receive love.

-Rev. Chris Hogstad

Please Read John 12:20-36

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

-John 12:24

We are very blessed in America that for the most part we are able to freely worship without oppression. There is not much sacrifice required to be a “Christian” as there might be in other parts of the world. Getting up early every Sunday morning, giving of tithes and offering, and bringing in food or socks for the less fortunate is about the extent of “sacrifice.”

In 1956, Jim Elliott and four other missionaries became martyrs for the cause of Christ as they were killed while attempting to evangelize the Huaorani people of Ecuador.

In John 12:24 Jesus points out that it is in dying that we are capable of producing much grain. There is reason to pause and contemplate our commitment to Christ especially in this day and time.

As Christians, when we die we gain the reward of heaven... that’s a total win. But I think that there is more to it than that. I think that it’s not just that we have to be willing to die for Christ, but we have to be willing to *live* for him.

The true sacrifice for today’s Christian is dying to self.

It’s sharing the love of Christ to others, even when they have done you wrong.

It’s giving to the less fortunate knowing that you will receive nothing in return. It’s teaching a Sunday school class or volunteering as a greeter.

It’s being willing to tell your co-workers and friends you’d rather not hear that inappropriate joke, see that scantily clad photo on the web, or the list goes on.

It’s in dying to our selfish needs and desires that allows us to be set apart and to live our life as a witness for others.

It’s being willing to live for Him in such a way that it makes

others see the difference that Christ has made in us and have the desire to have that same change within their own lives.

“He is no fool, who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” – Jim Elliott

-Barbie Buckner

Please Read John 13:21-32

“When he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.’”

-John 13:31, 32

The word glorified (or glory) appears five times in these two lines of verses. These are words spoken by Jesus right after he has sent Judas out on his mission of betrayal. Jesus isn't sitting there contemplating the agony he's about to endure; he's announcing victory for God.

Jesus was obeying God's will. He is fully aware that he will be put to death on the cross and he has accepted that fact. And he seems to be saying that because the will of God is being done, it brings glory to the Son of Man and God, which are one.

In John 13:26-27 we further realize that Jesus not only accepted this fate, but that he was in charge of the circumstances as well. Jesus was in control of the events, having set them in motion by giving Judas the bread and allowing Satan to enter into Judas. These verses are another indicator or sign that Jesus is unlike any other man or prophet; that he is the divine Son of God.

The disciples don't know what is about to happen; what has been set in motion. But Jesus knows what events were about to take place and he speaks these words, “God has been glorified”. The words “has been” imply it's already been done. Jesus seems to be foretelling the future and announcing to the disciplines that God's plan is going to triumph. The great love and saving power of God is going to be known forever. The disciples don't realize the fulfillment of this mission will mean the salvation of the world and Jesus is foretelling its success. Jesus' final words of triumph also seem to be indicating that at the very moment when his death on the cross is complete, he, the Son of Man, is at one with God in his glory.

-Sandra Lebo

March 29

Please Read John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

-John 13:14, 15

In my relationships with other people, I can’t imagine many acts of service as being more demeaning, more selfless and more unpleasant than washing someone else’s feet. Remember, back in the days of Jesus’ walk on Earth, people didn’t wear Nike or New Balance shoes. They wore rough leather sandals – if they could afford footwear at all. At the end of a day, their feet were caked over with mud, dust, debris, and maybe animal droppings from the road or field.

To wash someone else’s feet, you have to go down on your knees and allow the mud, dirt, and debris to come into contact with your hands. There’s the critical point – we must come into contact with the unpleasant parts of someone else’s life, like dirty feet, to come to know them. In my heart I believe God is calling us to not recoil from the pain and flaws of others, as is our tendency (at least it’s mine), but to reach out and connect with the pain.

When I read that we should do this as He did for us, I realized that Jesus, who is one with the Father, walked among us, with our pain, our problems, our fears, and the mud on our feet. He didn’t have to walk with us, for His sake; He came to us – for us. Now he asks us to do the same for others.

The concept of intimacy means that I can be who I truly am before my friends, and my God, without fear of rejection. To allow someone else to see my dirty feet, with scars, a bent toe and a broken toenail, is to show who I truly am. To wash someone else’s feet means I accept the other person’s dirt, scars and bent toes. Salvation, to me, means I am not alone in this life. Someone accepts my scars, my weaknesses, and my fears; that person does not reject me. As God has done for me, I should do for others.

Have you noticed that God has seen and accepted your pains, weaknesses, and flaws, and still loves you? Do you do the same for others?

-Ed Mooney

March 30

Please Read 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?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.”*

-Psalm 22:1, 2

This Psalm is often referred to as the “Psalm of the Cross”. I must admit that as important this is, it makes me cry... every time. It begins with the most gut-wrenching cry. The imagery of Christ suffering in agony is brutal. Pain, anguish, mocking, rejection, abandonment, desertion, all for us, and he is all alone. He takes the wrath of all, but just can't comprehend God has forsaken him. The physical pain he is enduring is nothing compared to God turning away from him. This is in stark contrast of the glorious redemption to follow.

Christ was forsaken for a time so we would not be forsaken forever. This reading illustrates the brutal reality of human suffering. He took that on for us. He loved us *that* much. Yet, in the midst of his suffering, he still cries out to God. To sacrifice is to give all we can and then some. I read a quote that said, “To sacrifice is to give till it hurts.” All the sins of the world were put upon him. Even though he was without sin, he took on all of our sins. Christ endured the cross, and His Spirit makes us new.

-Diane Schaeffing

Please Read Romans 6:3-11

“Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”

-Romans 6:4-6

When I was a kid, during Lent we got pictures to take home and color. I remember one in particular. It was two children looking at a picture of Jesus on the cross and they were crying. The message (I don't remember if it was written, or told to me by an adult) was that Jesus suffered and died so that we might be saved. There was something else that I felt, which was whenever I sinned, it was another burden Jesus felt while on the cross. So I caused Jesus pain with every sin I did.

It took me a long time to realize that Jesus *had* to die on the cross for us. To be raised from the dead, he had to die for us. He had to be the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. And with his death our sins died with him. Here is a quote from Martin Luther that says it in a different way. “Be a sinner, and let your *sins* be strong (*sin boldly*), but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over *sin*, death, and the world.” So, we will always be sinners, but God, who is full of mercy, forgives those sins because we are “marked with the cross of Christ forever” through our baptism.

When I was a young mother, I would often wake up in the middle of the night and realize I was going to die one day. That would send me into a panic. Looking back, maybe it was because I was afraid of leaving my baby, but it was also a feeling of nothingness, and not knowing what is on the other side. Now, my faith has grown, and I am certain I will spend eternity with God, and that

nothing I do or have done will change that.

Lent is often thought of as a time to give up something “sinful” like chocolate or alcohol. It is also a time of fasting and repentance. We should use the time to reflect on Jesus’s great sacrifice and what it means to our lives today. We try to follow Jesus, and do good works, or at least not do bad ones. But we can be secure that we all will spend eternity with God, because he sent his only son so that we might have eternal life.

-Deb Moisio