

# 40 Days

St. Stephen's of the Valley 2019 Lenten Devotional

The transition from Advent to Lent seems to happen all too soon. We move from the image of three wise men following a star to three nails and a crown of thorns, from a manger scene to three crosses on a hill. During this time, we are reminded of what Jesus went through; the pain he endured, the burden he carried. The road to the cross, the one we travel with Jesus during this season of Lent, isn't an easy one. But it is a road that leads to reflection and contemplation, an understanding and renewal of our faith and commitment to God. It is a time for us to rediscover and return to the words Jesus preached, and to see how he put his faith into action right up to the very end.

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, March 6th. 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 indescribable love Christ had (and still has) for us, as well as the tremendous 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 2019

March 6

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

*“But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

-Matthew 6:3, 4

As hard as it is to believe, in this world of protesting for one's rights to be themselves, shouting slogans to proclaim one's beliefs or posting sad videos of one's dire circumstances, it shouldn't be “all about me”.

Surely the world is filled with unique people, strong beliefs, sorrow, suffering and evil, and these should not be ignored or shoved aside. We as God's people are called to help the helpless, give hope to the hopeless, and comfort the sorrows. But we have to be careful not to call attention to ourselves, but to rather quietly do God's work.

In this reading (which is a part of the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus warns us to “be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others.” (verse 1, NIV) “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (verses 3-4)

In this solemn season of Lent we offer almsgiving with a grateful heart that God has surely blessed us with the greatest gift of all- His Son.

It's not “all about me”. It is all about the greatest love ever given: forgiveness.

-Margi Blair

**Please Read Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16**

*“You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.’”*

-Psalm 91:1, 2

This passage from Psalm 91 is likely to be familiar to most of us. The popular Christian song “On Eagle’s Wings”, written in 1979 by Jan Michael Joncas, is based on these verses. Many of us find comfort in these words. They remind us that God is always with us, lifting us up in difficult times.

This takes me back to a time in high school when I walked a mile and a half home almost every day, usually by myself. On the way I passed an open church and I often stopped in to say a prayer and visit with God. It was very comforting, and I enjoyed the visit. I felt refreshed and ready to take on the rest of the day.

As time went on and high school ended, I continued to visit the church when I was in the area. I didn’t always go to church regularly on Sundays, but I did spend many afternoons at this church over the years. There were times when I was so depressed that I would spend what seemed like hours there, just crying and praying and asking God for help and for peace. One time the pastor nicely told me that I didn’t have to keep reminding God of what I needed. He knew and He was working on it. At the time I didn’t know what to make of that. I just had so much pain, and this was the only place I felt any kind of relief and where I was not judged.

It’s been years since I visited the church I spent so much time in. A lot has happened and much has changed. I still find comfort in Psalm 91, though. I still take all my concerns to God, no matter where I am. God is always with us, in good times and not so good times. He carries us through and lifts our spirits. He provides shelter for us. He is our protector. As long as we have faith and trust in Him, He will carry us through anything.

-Tara McVeigh-Smith

March 8

### **Please Read Exodus 6:1-13**

*“But Moses spoke to the Lord, ‘The Israelites have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh listen to me, poor speaker that I am?’ Thus the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, and gave them orders regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, charging them to free the Israelites from the land of Egypt.”*

-Exodus 6:12, 13

Generally speaking, almost all Christians highly underestimate the significance of the book of Exodus in the Bible. The story it relates of the escape of the Hyksos (wanderer) people from Egypt and their uniting and realizing that they had been “chosen” by a god they called “Yahweh” is literally the taproot of our Christian worship and much of our faith. The book describes the discovery and growing relationship between Moses and Yahweh. It contains the first mention of the Ten Commandments, and it describes the actions that JHWH (the four letter tetragrammaton used to avoid showing disrespect by actually saying God’s name) took to help the people get to the land He told Moses He had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a spectacular story retold every year for centuries in Jewish observances of what we refer to as the Passover. The story relates a historically verifiable event that became literally the touchstone of the Hebrew claim throughout the Old Testament that they are God’s chosen people. And Jesus was a Jew, a Hebrew man celebrating Passover with followers, when He instituted the Eucharist we celebrate as our act of worship every Sunday. That should make it pretty clear that we must value this amazing book, and do everything we can to understand and appreciate the information it contains. Because it is *not* just a story, it is one of the first steps in a long journey that mankind has had to make to find what we celebrate as the Christian faith.

In all honesty, just that alone could easily be the cause and the basis for your meditations in this Lenten season. There is a depth of meaning, however, that one could miss just reading

through the book, and it is a wise and necessary thing to check and be certain to read whatever notations or explanations your Bible has as you go through this important narrative, because this is much more than just a story. The selection we read today describes a transition in the thinking of both the Pharaoh and the Hyksos slaves who were making the bricks for a spectacular building plan the Egyptians were carrying out. Scattered groups of wanderers suddenly became a people when Moses approached Pharaoh, and that meant in their huge numbers they could revolt and overthrow the Egyptian masters. He got scared, and set about making it clear whom the masters were. Moses had had his initial encounters with JHWH and tried to tell the people about Him, but they were not at all ready or able to think of themselves as a single body of “chosen” people gathered from many tribes and families who never had much in common. They were just not capable of understanding the covenant Yahweh wanted with them when He said, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” Even today we have trouble grasping that.

So now we come to the focus verses of this meditation. Moses admits that he had very little success telling the slaves what Yahweh had told him to say. And, as God is want to do in many places in scripture, He tells Moses not to be concerned about his inadequacy and unworthiness. “Not to worry! I will take care of this! Just watch what I am about to do,” God says in the first verse of the reading. How many times have you told God that you were not worthy or capable to accomplish what you felt was what He wanted? Do the words of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Paul come to mind? Yet Yahweh *never* goes looking for someone else. Is it because Moses is wrong about his condition? Are you wrong about your capacities?? Well, the truth is – always is – is that our missions and lives very often are *not about us*. As Moses was shown, they are about *God*. Nobody could “deserve” to know or see God’s face as Moses was told, and nobody deserves to even speak God’s name, let alone speak to or petition Him for their causes. It is *always* a matter of *God’s* grace, goodness and love, not ours! Recognizing that, what else can we say but “Thank you”? What else can we, as did Isaiah and others, say but, “Here am I; send me!” Because it

isn't really about *you*. Of course in my failures and limitations I am inadequate, but with Yahweh, anything and everything is possible. And while it may not be as dramatic as the plagues, once we open to letting Him work *through us*, God does seem to find a way to do important things with us. God's love and grace can overcome any inadequacy or failure except when we refuse to let Him do that. So, like Moses and Aaron, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and even Paul, we say "Thy will be done," and open ourselves to His will, and prepare to be amazed!

-Father Jim Seipel

**Please Read John 12:27-36**

*“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”*

-John 12:27, 28

The journey to the cross is a difficult, and no one has a greater understanding of that than Jesus, for he has been foretelling his death for a while now. But as the hour is drawing ever closer, we see Jesus experience an emotion that we don't normally see that much: fear. He is scared. Jesus is about to take the sins of the world upon his shoulders, suffer greatly, and then die upon a cross. Who wouldn't be afraid of such an undertaking?

It would be all too easy for Jesus to tell God that he wants out, that the journey that has been laid out in front of him is just too much for him to bear. And we wouldn't fault him for it; we know how the story goes. How many of us have taken the easy way out because we were afraid that journey was just too high a price to pay? How many of us have been tempted to give up because we knew the going was too tough? Fear is a very human emotion, and even Jesus isn't immune to it. But he doesn't succumb to it.

Jesus' faith in God, in his Father, is ultimately stronger than his fear. The cross was always the plan; Jesus knew that from the beginning. Despite his fears and worries, Jesus doesn't spend time trying to change God's mind about his fate. Despite carrying the knowledge of his death and resurrection around with him, Jesus never takes a step backward. He continued onward, knowing what he had to endure for us, as well as to glorify God's name.

Following the path God has laid out for us won't always be easy, and again, no one understands that better than his son. I'm not saying to not be afraid, because even Jesus had fears about his journey. I'm saying that your faith has to be bigger than those worries, to trust that God has your back. So what will you say? “Father, save me from this hour” or “Your will be done”?

March 11

**Please Read Psalm 17**

*“As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;  
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.”*

-Psalm 17:15

Psalm 17 is known as “A Prayer of David.” It could also be known as a cry for help. It is a prayer of the heart. David is pouring his heart out to God. He is aware that nothing can transform him except for God. He needs God! He is fearful, anxious, and sinful in a time of trouble, and knows his only consolation is God. It really is a story about the resurrection of his soul. In saying the words, “when I awake,” David believes in the resurrection of the dead. He believes in the hope of waking up to a new life. He desires assurance to live forever in the presence of God. A prayer of the heart will lead us straight to God. Through God’s grace we may see God face to face. During this Lenten season, I pray we pour out our hearts to the Lord.

-Diane Schaeffing

**Please Read Zechariah 3:1-10**

*“Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.”*

*-Zechariah 3:7*

Today’s reading concerns a vision by Zechariah about the High Priest Joshua. In the vision, the Angel of the Lord removed Joshua’s filthy clothes and replaced his clothes with fine garments. The filthy clothes were symbolic of sin, while the fine garments represented being clean, forgiven, and rich.

The Angel of the Lord charged Joshua to walk in obedience, remain faithful and serve the Lord, making sure to keep His commandments. In doing so, Joshua was reassured that he would govern and lead God’s people and that those around him would be at his service.

Do you remember when God forgave you? When He removed your filthy clothes of sin and replaced them with rich garments of forgiveness? Do you remember the charge to walk in obedience, remain faithful, and serve the Lord?

I’ll be the first to admit that I’m not perfect and fall short in following the Lord. But I’m ever grateful that His mercies are renewed every morning and that I can always ask for forgiveness and he will be faithful and just to forgive my unrighteousness.

Today, find peace in the never-ending love of God that continually seeks to forgive and place us in right standing with Him.

*-Barbie Buckner*

March 13

**Please Read Luke 21:34-22:6**

*“Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”*  
-Luke 21:36

It can be very easy to dismiss the idea that Satan is actively seeking a way into our lives. It sounds archaic and antiquated, but the truth is, when we aren't actively pursuing God, evil is actively pursuing us. The first half of this passage is a warning. The second half is what happens if you don't follow the warning.

Judas was a beloved disciple. He had the best teacher, the best pastor, and the best mentor to have ever walked the earth, and even he was lured away by greed and selfishness. The guilt of his decision ate him alive from the inside out until he couldn't take it anymore. When our hearts are weighed down and we are not intentional about our desire to know Jesus more and be closer to Him, we leave the door open for evil motivations to worm their way into our lives. Judas permitted Satan's entrance into his life by not actively pursuing the lessons of his teacher. He was so comfortable in his life that he didn't prioritize what really mattered, and that left him open for the influence of evil.

That influence is everywhere, even today. It manifests in many ways, and while we all may disagree on where and how it appears, the bottom line is that it is there. It always has been, even when the Gospel writers were telling about the life of Jesus. That's why this is here: if we aren't careful, we could end up just like Judas. If we don't actively pursue God and focus on learning about Him and communicating with Him and listening to the things He tells us in the variety of ways He'll tell them, we make ourselves as vulnerable as Judas was.

Jesus is never far away. Every evening he taught on the Mount of Olives. He was always there and always reachable to Judas and to us; we just have to let him in and want him there. We

must fight the forces of evil working in the world to turn us from God every single day. God is always there, but He will not force us to love Him or have faith. Love without option is not real love, and faith by force is not real faith. So if God seems far away, it's time to ask ourselves who moved.

-Carina McVeigh

March 14

## **Please Read Psalm 27**

*“I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord  
in the land of the living.*

*Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the Lord!”*

*-Psalm 27:13, 14*

Seeing the Lord in the land of the living. I don't know about you, but it's pretty hard to see the Lord these days. It's hard when the news is negative, the social media trolls, well, troll, and the way drivers drive, it's really tough not to get caught up in it all.

But here's what I do know: the people of St. Stephen's help me to see the Lord. We recently received our annual report for 2018. Take a good look at it, and you will see the Lord. You will see the Work Day volunteers, and the small group who visits shut-ins. The Souper Bowl of Caring that brought in 310 pounds of food, and those who participated in the AV Crop Hunger Walk that raised over \$780 just from St. Stephen's alone. You will see our Socktober event received over 750 pairs of socks and underwear, and the Community Fund with the \$25/six months where the community can come for assistance for a utility bill, as well as all the education that goes on and off the campus. You will see the Second Sunday Sing-A-Long at the AV Retirement Villa, as well as everything that the Fellowship team does. And you can't forget the serving of meals twice a week at Supper at Six, all the volunteers that it takes to have worship every Sunday, the mission trips of our youth, and the Thanksgiving and Easter food baskets. Wow! And that does not even include what Pastor does day in and day out or the paid staff!

We show God's love in each and every one of these acts. St. Stephen's helps the local community and those around the world. I didn't even mention when an appeal goes out for those affected by natural disasters here in the US and around the world. If that's not

seeing the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, I don't know what is!

I thank God for this community, my church family. We worship together, and together we are God's hands and feet while we wait for the Lord. I can't think of a better way to wait for the Lord than doing what we are doing. I love that, don't you?

-Doretta Rapp

March 15

## **Please Read Philippians 3:17-20**

*“But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

-Philippians 3:20

In varying translations of the Bible, this statement is interpreted in slightly different ways. “But our citizenship is in Heaven” (NIV); “...our conversation is in heaven...” (KJV); “But we are citizens of heaven...” (NLT). They all mean roughly the same thing. We are, to coin a phrase, “Not of This World”.

In a complete contrast to those who focus on things of this world (money, power, celebrity status, greed, sin, etc.), Christians should focus on things of Heaven. That is what sets us apart. That’s where our future lies. It’s really a matter of what is temporary, and what is eternal.

Temporary things of this world are really good at grabbing and keeping our attention, aren’t they? Our favorite TV shows, advertising, our jobs, video games, social media. These, and a host of other things, keep us distracted. They steal our focus. Eternal things, meanwhile, are quietly there in the background, often being ignored. Sharing the gospel. Participating in our church programs and activities. Bible study. Helping those around us who are less fortunate. (Remember, “Feed my sheep”?)

Christians need to focus on things of heaven: joy, love, peace, sacrifice, giving, forgiveness, kindness, and the Word of God. In order to do that, we need to take our focus away from the temporary things of this world. You already know which earthly things probably take a little too much of your focus, and which heavenly things you should probably give a little more focus to.

Making a few small changes to realign our focus, to keep our “conversation in Heaven” is the path toward the future each of us hopes to inherit.

-David Smith

**Please Read Psalm 118:26-29**

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

*We bless you from the house of the Lord.”*

-Psalm 118:26

It would be really scary to hear a knock at the door and “Open up *in the name of the law!* Come out with your hands up!” You’d probably do it because of the law’s authority and the fear you felt.

There is a song called “In the Name of Love” that details the hurts and pain we tolerate when we love someone. We can certainly relate to this if we have children or family.

If you ever heard an announcement made using the words “In the Name of the King”, you would know that anything could be changing in moments if it came from this ruler with a reputation and unquestioned authority.

And of course we’ve heard things like “In the name of common decency”, which demands attention and respect. This sound rather old school, but most of us know it is an appeal to a higher level of ethical and moral behavior.

Here in Psalm 118:26, “God bless the one who comes *in the name of the Lord!* We praise you from here in the house of the Lord.” According to Rabbinical writings, pilgrim caravans were thus welcomed on their arrival at Jerusalem. Such words of welcome were probably spoken by the Levite in charge to the procession that was approaching the gates. These were words used by the multitude that followed Christ as he went into Jerusalem, to eat his last Passover and suffer and die for his people. These words are applied to him, as well as by his disciples. *In the name of the Lord*, by command, a commission from him or for his service and glory. Even meaning for a religious purpose or with pious intentions.

May we praise him from here in the house of the Lord. Christ came in the name of the Lord and did all God the Father required. We can say, “Baruch Haba B’Shem Adonai!” Blessed is he who comes *in the name of the Lord*.

-Valerie Phay

March 18

**Please Read Romans 4:1-12**

*“Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;  
blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.”*  
-Romans 4:7, 8

This week, while studying this passage from Romans, a different pair of metaphorical glasses gave me a new focus. All of my life I've read these words, but never looked up the meaning of the Greek words. Greek became my new glasses. The Greek word for “blessing” is makários (μακάριος), but it's not really the word we think it means. We often think of “blessing” in terms of material things, or something outside of ourselves, but this is not the meaning here.

This change of focus, to Greek, changed how I understood this passage. Many scholars describe makários as “...an interior joy that becomes external...” Further, we learn that, “...happiness is no longer attached to wealth, to having enough, to a good reputation, power, or possessions, but to poverty alone.” Wait. What? Aren't blessings things or actions? What's this “internal joy” thing? My focus blurred as I adjusted to the Greek glasses.

Let's look again at the words from Romans. Let's reword them according to our new view. We find interior joy when our “iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.” We know joy deep inside when we are the people “against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.”

I pray we find internal joy this Lent season, as we realize our iniquities are forgiven.

-Ed Mooney

**Please Read Psalm 105:1-15, 42**

*“Seek the Lord and his strength;  
seek his presence continually.  
Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered...”*  
-Psalm 105:4, 5

Memory is a very interesting thing, don't you think? It is an essential part of who we are and the world in which we live. We must remember how to do tasks at work and at home. We learn things in order to commit them to memory. We study in order to perform well on a test, task, or job. Some people are better at remembering than others. Some people are gifted (or cursed, depending on your view point) with a photographic memory. We mourn and worry over those who have lost their memory due to disease or trauma. How many of us have been affected by Alzheimer's disease or the effects of dementia. My family watched my papa suffer the debilitating effects of Alzheimer's for many years before he finally died. Those are painful and hurtful memories. We all know not all memories are sad or painful, though. The good ones make us smile and often warm our hearts remembering happy times.

The kitchen counter in my parents' house (both the old house and now the new one) elicits smiles and laughter each time I think about it. There are so many memories I have baking with my mom and sister. We create magic and mostly a gigantic mess that my dad is all too happy to clean up because it usually means there's some kind of yummy creation he gets to enjoy later. Seeing snow on mountains reminds me of adventures skiing with my family both as a child and now as an adult. There are some early memories of when I was two, running around the living room of the apartment our family first lived in. I can still describe the entire layout of that home. It had gold shag carpet and I loved it. I remember the smell of my grandparents' basement playroom. It was one of the most welcoming scents next to mom's homemade bread.

There are wonderful memories from preschool and memories from high school that make me proud of who I am. Memories with friends celebrating life as we gather to grieve over one we loved and now miss flood my recent adulthood. Shared stories of things we shouldn't have done that make for laughter filled conversations now.

Memory is a funny thing and to think God created us all, remembering each of us as intimately as a parent remembers their child or a lover recalls another. "Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles and the judgments he has uttered..."

Whether the memory is good or bad, it is a gift. It is a reminder of God's care and attention to the smallest detail about each of us, God's children. Remember the Lord and seek God! Peace to you.

-Megan Hogstad

**Please Read Luke 13:22-31**

*“Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”*

-Luke 13:30

The last will be first, and the first, last. There are times when I encounter Christians, individuals and groups, I see the modern equivalent of the Pharisees. Some felt it was enough to claim descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They looked at others, outsiders and the lower classes of their own people, with disdain and contempt. Jesus turned that upside-down. The inferiors and people you looked down on are going to sit at the banquet with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets, and you will be outside looking in, excluded from the feast.

The last will be first, and the first, last. The oppressors will be ruled by their victims. Leaders of government and industry will be subordinate to the average people they ignored. When Jesus returns, He will rule a “topsy-turvy” kingdom. I hope and pray I’m not on the receiving end.

-Gabe Gabriel

March 21

**Please Read Daniel 3:19-30**

*“Nebuchadnezzar said, ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.’”*

-Daniel 3:28

Many are familiar from Sunday school age of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (hereafter *The Boys*) being put in the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar found in the book of Daniel. The story is used in many ways to portray faithfulness, the power of God, etc. In an age of people worshipping many gods, as the story is set in, *The Boys*’ faith in God shows that a common perception of their day is no longer valid.

During the time of Daniel, it was believed that if a people were conquered, it meant that their gods were not very strong and the conquered must worship the gods of the victors. So, if we beat you, it meant that not only are we stronger than you militarily, but our gods are stronger than yours too (nanny, nanny, boo, boo). Talk about insult to injury! The fiery furnace reminds and shows to the remnants of Israel, now exiled from their lands by Babylon to modern day Iran/Iraq, that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is still powerful and is still willing to aid the faithful. Giving hope that one day Israel will be free and return to the land that was promised, the land that is home.

The way *The Boys* go into the furnace with no cries, weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth show their faithfulness to God and their belief that in whatever happens God will do right by them. Nebuchadnezzar, being a witness to their hoped-for destruction as an example to others so that disobedience will not spread is transformed by the act of faith and God’s intervention. In his exclamation that *The Boys* are “servants of the Most High God” (verse 28) and using a term for God that Israel itself uses for God shows

the depth of Nebuchadnezzar's transformation.

In this season of Lent we are called to return to God and deepen our faith. In reality, not many of us, if any at all, will be called to be thrown in a fiery furnace to prove our faithfulness to God. We do, however, have our own ways of having our faith in God be tested. The good news of great joy for all the people is not only God saving the faithful in Rach, Shach and Benny (thanks Veggie Tales DVD "Heroes of the Bible"), but in transforming those who want nothing to do with God in Nebuchadnezzar. Many of us fall in between those extremes; this story helps to show God's presence with all of us, no matter where our faith is.

-Rev. Chris Hogstad

March 22

## Please Read Psalm 63:1-8

*“Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.  
So I will bless you as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.”*  
-Psalm 63:3, 4

King David wrote this Psalm when he was in the desert of Judah. The first verse reveals the Psalmist’s yearning for God:

*“O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”*

Feeling separated from God is the worst. Without God, there is an emptiness that feels as barren as a wasteland. Trying to fill this God-shaped hole in our soul with other things is a desperate effort that is always made in vain. I have to admit, this feeling is not uncommon to me. Suffering from depression, there is an intense feeling of isolation. It takes over everything and makes even the most enjoyable activity seem like a chore. It even makes me feel like I am living far away from God. When this happens, I understand the thirst that King David writes about here. During those dark times, I always have to remind myself of God’s promise to always be with me. He is the same as He has always been and if I feel separated from Him, it is because I moved, not God, not ever.

It reminds me of the poem, “Footprints in the Sand”. During the worst times, it can seem as if we are being abandoned by God, but in reality, it is in those hopeless moments that God is carrying us. As humans it is in our nature to seek satisfaction outside of our relationship with God. We may be full for a little while, but in the end it always leaves us the same: empty. God’s love is better than the richest foods or any material possession one can acquire.

Isn't it comforting to know that God's love is all we need to feel whole? He gives it to us freely and in abundance.

*Heavenly Father, remind us when we feel empty that you are all we need. Help us to earnestly seek you in times of happiness as well as in those of despair. Let us keep a song of praise on our lips and in our hearts. Thank you for filling us with your love so that we can pour out onto others. We pray all this in your son's name, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

-Juliet Boulett

March 23

## **Please Read Luke 6:43-45**

*“The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”*

-Luke 6:45

Our lives are full of words, speaking several thousand an hour to be exact! Apparently, we could fill a library with all the words we speak in a lifetime. Just imagine what messages we convey to others daily. Some full of hope, praise, forgiveness, and love, others full of anger, sarcasm, negativity, and hate.

In Luke 6 Jesus teaches us that before we look for the sin in others, we must examine our own heart. If we really want a glimpse of our own heart, we need to listen to our words. If you are like me, you may not always be proud of what you hear. Too often we get caught up in a cycle of gossip or complaining, bemoaning every little struggle, and as if that isn't bad enough, we post it all on social media, so it effects exponentially more people! We easily criticize without thinking; unaware of the wounds we are leaving behind. It is amazing how much damage can be caused with “a few choice words”.

Jesus asks us to listen to what is in our heart, and the words that escape our lips. It will reveal the condition of our heart and some of the things that need fixing in order to be a better disciple of Christ. If we regularly evaluate the character and tone of our daily speech and ask for God's help to guard our thoughts and words, we can produce “good fruit”. As a Christ follower it will take a lot of hard work to store up a heart full of good. But all things worthwhile are hard, and the reward will be an inward change that will begin to produce words worthy to be spoken and heard by others.

-Dana Skinner

**Please Read Romans 2:1-11**

*“There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.”*

-Romans 2:9-11

The NRSV says, “There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.”

The Living Bible says, “There will be sorrow and suffering for Jews and Gentiles alike who keep on sinning. But there will be glory and honor and peace from God for all who obey him, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. For God treats everyone the same.”

As I am thinking about this passage, I am struggling. I am a Lutheran who believes I am saved through believing that Jesus Christ died for my sins, and it is *only* through the grace of God I am saved. Regardless of the version of this Romans passage I read, the emphasis seems to be on doing good works. If I sin and fail to do the good works I should, I’m subject to God’s judgment.

In spite of my efforts to do what God wants me to do, I know I often fail miserably. Sometimes I surprise myself to find how easy it is for me to judge someone for something they did. Suddenly, a light bulb goes on, and I see some of the not-so-pleasant parts of *me* that God is looking at. At those times, I am really grateful I worship a God full of patience and second chances. He has a way of lighting up my wrongs that will hopefully lead me to change, to repent.

Romans 13:10 says, “Love does no wrong to anyone. That’s why it fully satisfies all of God’s requirements. It is the only law you need.”

Needless to say, loving is still going to require the grace of God and the power of His Holy Spirit. May we all be filled with the love of God so we can truly reflect His image.

-Fern Jackson

March 26

## **Please Read Psalm 39**

*“And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?  
My hope is in you.”*  
-Psalm 39:7

Some say silence is golden, but for David, choosing to keep his frustrations to himself was anything but golden. In Psalm 39, David remains silent to keep his impatience and uncertainty from causing him to sin. He steps back from the distractions of this world to seek peace and hope in the Lord.

Sometimes, even when our blessings come with challenges or sorrows, finding hope in the Lord is not what we search for. Instead, we may seek relief by sharing our complaints to anyone who will listen; however, this may send the message to others that God cannot take care of us. David knew this and turned to God with a humble plea for help: “But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.”

Praying helps us go through the trial of waiting for God’s answers. Being silent can give us solace and a chance to regain strength. As we depend more on God than our own understanding, prayer eases the uncertainty surrounding us. Like David, remembering that our hope is in the Lord helps us deal with the unexpected events in life and brings us closer to God.

-Kelly Rickert

**Please Read Luke 13:18-21**

*“He said therefore, ‘What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.’”*

-Luke 13:18, 19

In this passage of scripture, Jesus has been asked to describe the Kingdom of Heaven. He uses a familiar image – that of a mustard seed. If you haven’t seen one, a mustard seed is very tiny. But what grows out of it can be something quite large. In the instance of this particular story, Jesus doesn’t just tell the listeners that the tree grown from the seed is a big tree, but he points out that the tree is large enough, and strong enough, for birds to make homes in it. In other words, what grows from this tiny seed, simply scattered onto the soil, becomes a foundation for the lives of those who live within its branches.

What a marvelous parable! Something starting so small producing such big rewards. The application to our lives is obvious: our sharing of the Gospel message with someone, even in a simple conversation with a friend or family member, could blossom and grow into something strong enough to sustain that person’s entire life.

Think about how you first encountered the Gospel. Did someone answer a question you asked once upon a time? Did you notice that someone seemed different than everyone else and you wanted to know why that was? Did you accept a simple invitation to attend a service, participate in an activity, or have a conversation? That was the seed. The beginning. A humble start perhaps, but look what has grown from that.

As we share the Gospel, the kingdom of God grows, and so does our faith. As we nourish that faith with its tiny beginning, we see it grow and grow. In turn, our planting of seeds of faith in other people helps them to grow. They grow. We grow. The Gospel spreads and the kingdom of God grows. We all find shelter in the branches.

All God asks of us is to plant that first, tiny seed.

-Tara McVeigh-Smith

March 28

## **Please Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5**

*“For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”*

-2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Do you ever get irritated when it seems that evildoers prosper? Does it bother you when those who are doing wrong always seem to be the ones to catch the break? Does it frustrate you when it seems life is one step forward and two steps backward?

In today’s read, Paul is admonishing the Corinthians to not grow weary in doing what is right because there is an eternal hope. The same is true of us today. We have an eternal hope!

It is all a matter of perspective. When you have an eternal perspective, it doesn’t matter how difficult the daily grind of life may be. Think about it. As Christians here on this earth in our mortal bodies, this isn’t the end, for we have the reassurance of heaven to look forward to.

Whatever persecutions, whatever trials, whatever illness, whatever struggles that we may face in this life, this is only the beginning. We only have our life here on Earth to deal with such issues and turmoil; our hope is not in our mortal bodies or what is seen, but in the immortal bodies to come and what is presently unseen. It is in the hope of Heaven to come for eternity.

For those who do not know Christ, the same cannot be said for them. Whether they prosper now, seem to be beating the system and have success, their outlook on eternity contains no hope. For them, unless they come to the saving knowledge of Christ, this mortal life they are currently living is as Good as it will ever be for them...for eternity.

Did you get that? For sinners, those who do not come to the saving knowledge of Christ, This *life* is as *good* as it will ever be for them, for eternity.

That's what the Apostle Paul is saying. Don't look at what you can see in this mortal world. Focus on the unseen; be reminded of the hope that is to come.

As Christians, this mortal life is so temporary. And that when you think about the unseen, when you think about heaven, when you think about eternity, what we must endure within this life here on earth is as *bad* as we will *ever* know. Ever. As in forever! Eternity!

And that is a really, really long time!

-Barbie Buckner

March 29

**Please Read Psalm 32**

*“Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.  
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.”*  
-Psalm 32:10, 11

Many of you know that I have worked with a population that could be described as outside the norms of society. Some of these individuals grew up in a loving home and some had a rough start, but all got caught up into a lifestyle that destroys all sense of good and creates a need so great that anything can be justified in order to quell the obsession.

Over a span of a few years I have lived, observed, and most humbly been a part of many people experiencing how God’s love can transform hopelessness into whole, productive, happy human beings. Lives and families are forever changed through recognition of God’s unfailing love. Trusting in God’s forgiveness offers a freedom that hasn’t been felt in a very long time and grants peace to their suffering.

We can rejoice in the miracles God preforms and in the grace we are given every day.

-Margi Blair

**Please Read Luke 15:1-10**

*“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”*

-Luke 15:4

At some point in our lives we have all lost or misplaced something that meant a great deal to us. When it was lost we actively searched for that possession until we found it again, a wave of relief washing over us because it is now safe and sound. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that God does the same with us, going to great lengths to see us safe and sound, brought back into the fold.

In this Parable of the Lost Sheep, the shepherd leaves his entire flock behind to go search the one sheep that has wandered off and gotten lost. Jesus tells this story to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, those who have been grumbling about him eating with sinners and tax collectors, people whom they themselves frowned upon. They did not try to help them, and condemned them for their sins and past mistakes. They thought Jesus came to do the same. The lost were lost, and there was no trying to find them. They saw no value. But Jesus did.

From the very beginning, Jesus was sent here to save those who are lost, who have strayed from the path of God's love and mercy. Every single one of us has value, no matter who we are or what we have done in our lives. God actively searches for us, because if just one of us wanders away from him, he would still do everything in his power to find us again and bring us back to him. He is our shepherd, we are His flock, and He will rejoice when we are found.

This passage reminds me of Audio Adrenaline's song, "Leaving 99". It's an old song, but one that never fails to tug at my heartstrings. Here are just a few of the lyrics:

*Pursue you to the end  
Like a faithful friend  
Nothing in this world will keep me away*

*I'd leave 99,  
Leave them all behind  
To find you*

God will never stop pursuing us, never stop wanting us to know Him, because He knows our value. He knows that we are worth more than we can ever imagine.

-Jennifer Rapp

**Please Read Revelation 19:1-8**

*“And a voice came out of the throne, saying, ‘Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great.’”*

-Revelation 19:5

In this passage of scripture, we’re told that *all* should praise God. However, it’s the last part of this phrase that intrigues me. Who is small, and who is great? I think this is aimed at how we see ourselves, not how God sees us.

Do you consider yourself small, or great? It’s easy to feel “not so great” when we look around. We constantly compare ourselves to others. We see some people as better, or prettier, or smarter, or more accomplished. We define the worth of individuals by their fame, or finances, or notoriety. We even tune in dutifully to the media events that highlight and celebrate these differences.

TV shows in which contestants must survive elimination from the show week after week by being better at something than the rest of the participants. (Or, at least, lobbying successfully for more votes than the others.) There are film and television awards, sports championships, and a seemingly endless list of music awards shows. We focus on how much “greater” someone is because they have a certain number of championship rings or awards on their shelf.

God doesn’t look at us this way. The scriptures are filled with proof of this, but here are a few examples: “So the last will be first, and the first last.” (Matthew 20:16) “For God shows no partiality.” (Romans 2:11) “The rich and the poor meet together; the Lord is the maker of them all.” (Proverbs 22:2)

To our Father in Heaven, no one is greater and no one is lesser. We all appear equal in the eyes of God. Sure, we’re all different and keep the commandments and share our faith in different ways. Some of us are better at math, or music, or sports. But that doesn’t make anyone better than anyone else to God.

So, go ahead. Grab a bowl of popcorn and enjoy your favorite awards show or championship. But in the midst of the glamour and the music and amazing athletic displays, remember this: No one you see is greater in the eyes of God, than you are.

April 2

## Please Read Psalm 53

*“God looks down from heaven on humankind  
to see if there are any who are wise,  
who seek after God.”*  
-Psalm 53:2

I'm *not* good enough for God! Oh, I try. I set aside time every day to read my Bible (then I get busy and forget). I love my neighbor (the one whose kids play loud music at all hours—can't they control their kids?) I tithe and I set aside money for those in need (but first I really, really need that new shirt).

It's foolish to think that I can be good enough for God. Because when I do, I'm putting myself first, acting as if there is no God. I imagine God looking at me and sighing, thinking, “Carrie's doing it again. She must think I don't exist.”

But there's Good News: salvation has come out of Zion. God came to us as a human, Jesus, who understands all my faults. It really is freeing.

I don't need to keep a checkbox of my good deeds, because I have a relationship with Jesus. (When I wander away, he gently nudges me back on track.)

I don't need a perfect understanding of the Bible, because Jesus offers me grace. (All I have to do is embrace it.)

I don't need to “try harder,” because it doesn't work. (In fact, it's when I'm not trying that I might feel God's presence.)

God accepts me just as I am (and I am learning to accept me too).

I need God. We need God. And that's okay.

-Carrie Mooney

**Please Read Luke 9:10-17**

*“And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.”*

-Luke 9:16, 17

Somehow, whether it be politics or technology or sports or religion or whatever, we always seem to end up making the *person* the issue rather than the idea or the event. The story in this reading about Jesus feeding the five thousand is understandably about Jesus' relationship with his twelve apostles and the crowd of followers, but the focus verses speak of the food and the feeding, the miracle. The story is found in differing forms, but it *is* found in all four of the Gospel narrative, so you can bet it was a very important part of the developing faith in Jesus in the early Christian communities. Probably you have heard many sermons on this story, and it is likely that each of us has a somewhat different mental picture of what you would have seen if you were observing this amazing event. The word “miracle” can be awfully easily mixed up with the word “magic”, but our faith is not based on and Jesus was not a practitioner of magic. While miracles are characterized by profound changes in human conditions, magic is exactly what at its best it is called an “illusion”! Your understanding of this event may allow for several variations that are not absolutely stuck to the literal definition of the words used to describe it, but it should *not be* a hang up for you as long as you comprehend the real depth of meaning the story carries.

The setting for the story comes out of earlier verses in the chapter when Jesus tells his apostles that they are to go out and tell people about the Kingdom of God. They are to take *nothing* with them, not even shoes or clothes, and they are to do absolutely nothing that might distract attention away from their message to themselves. They go out to do that, and return with many tales

of healings and successes. Jesus sees their excitement and, in his love for them, wants to have a quiet, intimate time of sharing, so he takes them to a place near Bethsaida. The crowds hear about them, and there goes the quiet time! So Jesus talks to all the people about the Kingdom of God, another demonstration of what he has asked the twelve disciples to do; maybe a “refresher” or review time. But then it starts getting dark, and it’s important for people to eat so they can safely make the return journey to their homes. It is my belief that, as he asked of his friends, what Jesus says about the Kingdom does not include using the pronoun “I”. It was the message, not the person, that was important. This was *not* a grab at personal fame or success or admiration. It was a truly pure effort to communicate the incredible, magnificent love, grace, generosity, and presence of God in the world. An opportunity *every person* had to accept and integrate an awareness and appreciation of that into their very heart and soul, into their life! Jesus *saved us all* because he literally gave *his life* to teach and show us the love and presence of God in *our life*, each one of us!

I do not believe there is any way to describe whatever it was that happened to those loaves and fish; by definition, a miracle cannot be explained, but it must be clear that people like Luke, the Apostles, Paul, and the people who sacrificed their lives for their faith had absolutely no reason to give their lives to a lie. Somehow, whether with the food or in the people, an extraordinary and profound thing happened, and people were *fed*, in any and all ways that that word might be used. There is simply no escaping or explaining that. As Franz Werfel said, “For those who believe, no explanation is necessary; for those who do not believe, no explanation is possible.” Really, that has to be the end of *that* discussion, but it is important to stop here for a minute or two, it seems to me, and look again at how this section of Luke can speak to us. The purity and total commitment that Jesus had in his efforts to put forth a gospel (good news) picture of God unlike what the people had been taught by the priests, scribes, and rabbis is what drew his followers to him. The Kingdom of God message was one of a *personal* experience and recognition of God’s presence, love, grace, forgiveness, and accessibility to each person; the nation might be

God's "chosen people", but each and every one of those people was God's creation and concern, to the point of His being willing to "dwell within them". He cared for them so intimately that He wanted them well, and fed. It was and is an incredibly deeply personal message, even now almost too good to be true! So today you can be reminded of and think about the miracle of the food, of the greatness of Jesus, or of the incredible and utterly amazing message of the Kingdom of God! No way you can go wrong today, my friends!

-Father Jim Seipel

April 4

**Please Read Isaiah 43:1-7**

*“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.”*

-Isaiah 43:2

“It’s *mine!*” I shout to no one in particular. I shout that phrase often; not always out loud, though, sometimes it is meant for everyone within earshot. I frequently use that phrase with God. Do you do that, or is it just me? I want to believe that I can control my situation instead of leaning on God’s understanding. I hear both my kids shout or say “but that’s *mine!*” frequently. I think it is just part of who we are as humans. We need to feel like we have possessions, because if we have possessions, we can control something or someone instead of being the one who is controlled or even manipulated.

On a particularly difficult day in November of my senior year in college, God hit me so gently that it made my head and heart reel. I wanted so badly to believe I had control over my current situation when in reality I had let the situation and another person have control over me. I sat in the weekly chapel service tuning out much of what the pastor said. I was waiting for the music. I needed some healing and music was the only way I was going to get that. It had already been a rough few days and the future didn’t look too bright ahead. The hymn began, it was unfamiliar but I liked the sound of it. I started to sing, but had to stop. Tears filled my eyes and emotions choked my throat. I felt God reach in carefully and convincingly take hold of my aching heart and my broken spirit. I had tried long enough to say, “It’s mine” that I needed the reminder that nothing was really mine. The song I tried to sing was “You Are Mine” (#581 in our hymnal). The chorus says:

*Do not be afraid I am with you.  
I have called you each by name.  
Come and follow me,  
I will bring you home.  
I love you and you are mine.*

Through the words of this hymn and the scripture that inspired it, God, through the prophet Isaiah, reminds the people of Israel that past results are indicative of future performance. God promises the people He will not leave them, forget them, or love them any less as they travel through exile in the wilderness. God has given the people a promise of deliverance regardless of how long their wanderings take.

God makes the same promise to us. God has more invested in our lives that we could ever fathom. We are God's children. We are heirs alongside Jesus. There are times we believe we have control and can say "It's mine!" and others where God ever so gently but convincingly reminds us God is the one ultimately in control and the one who truly says, "You are mine!" I pray that you, like I was, are reminded that God has ahold of you and says, "I will never let you go. I will protect you because I love you and you are my child."

God's peace and love to you.

-Megan Hogstad

April 5

**Please Read Psalm 126**

*“The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.”*

-Psalm 126:3

The word that jumped off the page in this reading for me was “joy”. I knew a wonderful lady whose name was Joy. She delighted in making wonderful quilts that were really a joy to look at. I have one of those quilts, and it reminds me of God’s love in the form of a rainbow. I take it on weekend retreats (Via de Cristo) and also keep it on my bed as a reminder of His unending love for us.

The word “joy” also reminds me of the joy we see in the faces of children on Christmas morning. I also love to see videos of kids seeing their mom or dad returning from an overseas military assignment. Sometimes they are surprised in their classroom when the large dog takes off his costume head and the kids are overtaken with joy to see their mom or dad again after such a long time.

I also think of the disciples on Easter morning upon learning that Jesus had rose from the dead after that horrible Friday on the cross. Their faces must have been beaming with joy to know that their Savior had defeated death.

We too need to have that joy in our hearts, because we know that Jesus has prepared a place in heaven for us after our earthly time has been completed.

*Thank you God for all the things you have done for us through your son Jesus. May we keep that joy in our hearts as we live this life and look forward to spending eternity with you. Amen.*

-Jerry Boulett

**Please Read John 11:45-57**

*“You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.”*

-John 11:50-52

Jesus has recently, as in a very short time ago, showed that death will not have the final word with God as He raised Lazarus from the dead in John 11:43-44. This is the event that has the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders actively look for ways to get rid of Jesus by verse 48. One of the major signs for the coming of the messiah is that the dead would be raised. Why would Caiaphas and the other council leaders want to get rid of Jesus after He gave this sign?

One of the definitions of sin from Martin Luther that makes the most sense to me is sin being the perpetual gaze inward. We continually sin by looking toward ourselves; our own comfort, our wellbeing, our own needs and this is what gets in the way of loving God and our neighbor. Instead of celebrating this new life that Lazarus has, what new possibilities Lazarus has to share what God in Christ has done with, through, and for him and Jesus is conspired against for giving new life to what was dead?!

Without knowing it, Caiaphas, the new High Priest, the one who actively leads the conspiracy against Jesus, encapsulates the good news for all the people when he states that, “it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50). How right Caiaphas was, but how can he see that? We as post-Easter people can see how God turns what was meant selfishly into something blessed, but how can we know this in the moment?

It is through our experiences that we get a clearer picture of how God is active in our life. As we hear the stories of God’s

faithfulness and know how that faithfulness has been shown to us in our past, we carry those experiences forward into the future that is unknown and live in the hope that God's past results will be an indicator of God's future endeavors. Much of that notion is what Lent is all about. We do the selfish, sinful deed and God takes what we have done or who we are in that moment to do something blessed with it. Many times over, we do not expect the blessing because we cannot see past ourselves.

God gives us life and life abundant in Christ Jesus and we called into that new life each and every day. No matter the season of our lives, Lent or Easter, spring or winter, we are called into new life as children of God.

-Rev. Chris Hogstad

## Please Read Hebrews 10:19-25

*“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

-Hebrews 10:24, 25

This reading is such an important one in this season of the church year, known as Lent. On the surface, it says not to give up. Okay, that’s simple enough right? But if we really dive into this reading, it is so much more than that. It tells us that we can’t “not give up” alone.

In Lent, we prepare our hearts and minds for the death and resurrection of Jesus, the most fundamental belief of Christianity. For me, it has always felt like a reset button in my theological journey. It serves as a reminder of what I’m doing, and why. I, like many, get caught up in the pragmatics of Christianity: How does it apply to my life as it is? How can it be used? In reality, the death and resurrection of Jesus is its own definitive event. It isn’t “How does the resurrection apply to my life?” but “How can I apply my life to the resurrection?” We need to live in a way that reflects Jesus’ sacrifice every day, not just look for what it can do for us in that time.

There is a song somewhere in the deep recesses of my brain, I couldn’t tell you where I first heard it, which goes, “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” Sometimes the most effective evangelism one can partake in is simply kindness toward your neighbor (and your enemies) and being an example of love in a broken world. In verses 24-25, it reads, “let us consider how we may spur one another toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together...but encouraging one another.” We must continue to encourage each other to be the best reflection of Christ’s sacrifice we can be. We must continue to meet and hold each other accountable for the ways we reflect God in our every day lives to

people who may know nothing of Him, and be certain that our actions honor the sacrifice. When things are hard, we must continue to lift each other up. Only then, by shifting from an inward focus to an outward focus, from my life to our lives, can we truly be God's light to the world around us.

-Carina McVeigh

## Please Read Psalm 20

*“Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,  
but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.”*

-Psalm 20:7

Ever have one of those days, one of those months, or maybe one of those years. Those times that are really tough. Maybe it was a divorce, or a diagnosis, or maybe you became unemployed. Psalm 20 is a psalm of David and is a prayer for victory. King David fought many battles, most of them on the battlefield. Like David, we have all faced many battles. Most of our battles are not on the battlefield, but in our lives. Battles against sin, disease, loneliness, addiction, under-employment, cancer...the list goes on and on. Each of us has our own personal list of battles we have fought.

Some battles are hard, really hard. Chariots and horses are tools of the war and were often paraded around to show off the military might of a king. Chariots and horses were formidable on the battlefield and the weapons of David's foes. David put his trust in God, not in his tools of war, and he had great success on the battlefield.

David's psalm reminds us not to rely on our own abilities, out of pride, but to call upon God when times are tough. It is important to remember that even our own abilities are gifts from God. We must always be mindful of where our own abilities come from and remember without God, we are but dust. Trust in God gives us confidence and strength to face the battles of our lives, even when the enemy is mighty. Trust in God is where true peace lies. Battles in our lives are as inevitable as night following day...where are you going to place your trust?

-Wayne Kalliomaa

April 10

**Please Read Luke 18:31-34**

*“But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.”*

-Luke 18:34

Jesus knew what was coming that Passover. And, of course, His disciples didn't have a clue. Have you ever thought about putting yourself in Jesus' sandals? What would it be like if you knew the day, the hour, that you were to be executed?

I haven't heard it personally, but I know there are people who ask, “Who killed Jesus?” And the finger of blame is usually pointed at the Jews. These finger-pointers forget, or ignore, that when you point your finger, three of them are pointing back at you.

So, who killed Jesus? Nobody. And everybody.

Nobody, because Jesus went to the cross willingly, knowing it was going to happen. Everybody, because He died for us, and continues to die everyday through our disobedience. I'm not going to say that's okay, but Jesus also knew this would happen because of our human weakness and frailty. *Selah*. Pause, and consider.

-Gabe Gabriel

**Please Read Psalm 31:9-16**

*“But I trust in you, O Lord;  
I say, ‘You are my God.’  
My times are in your hand;  
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.  
Let your face shine upon your servant;  
save me in your steadfast love.”*  
-Psalm 31:14-16

Most of us, if not all of us, at some point in our lives have felt betrayed or abandoned, alone, trapped, or in a situation where we have been wrongly accused of something or attacked. What better psalm to turn to during conflict and who better to turn to than the one who experienced this first hand, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Who better to trust? Whose hands are better to place our concerns into? Who better to save us from our enemies?

This Psalm should serve as a reminder that Jesus not only gave his life so that we may have eternal life, but he also suffered through the same trials and tribulations as us, so He knows what it is that we feel during these times. Our eternal life after death is the ultimate gift. There is no greater gift or greater expression of love for his people than eternal life, but Jesus takes it one step further. He suffers persecution, abandonment, and slander so that we would and could turn to him, knowing that he knows what we are going through in this life, and to also trust Him to take care of us and protect us from our enemies. That in itself is just sometimes so hard to wrap our minds around.

So I ask again, who better to trust when we are under attack or abandoned and alone, than he who made the ultimate sacrifice and then some?

-Dawna Vargas

April 12

## Please Read Hebrews 2:10-18

*“Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.”*

-Hebrews 2:18

Wow, there is a lot going on in this Bible reading. Jesus having to become human so he could share our humanity, dying so we are no longer slaves to the fear of death. He came specifically to save Abraham’s descendants, us. Not angels, but you and me, so he could be our high priest, the one who can enter into God’s presence on our behalf and plead our case because he’s “been there, done that”, so to speak. He is able to help those being tempted because he also suffered when he was tempted.

I find a lot of comfort in those words. Who would I want to intercede for me other than Jesus! As much as I find comfort in these words, it is also really hard for me to imagine what Jesus gave up to become human. It was just December not too long ago, and we were all excited for the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” to arrive, but what did he leave exactly? He willingly left his Father, his comfort, all that he knew to become like me. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.

For Jesus to become human probably was enough suffering, compared to what he left behind. Yet, he suffered through temptation and ultimately the cross, all so we not only could have eternal life, but also have an intermediary. How well thought out, how generous.

So the next time your feeling low, or under attack, remember Jesus has your back! He understands your situation. Who else would you want to intercede for you?

-Doretta Rapp

**Please Read Luke 22:1-13**

*“Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Pass-over, was near. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people.”*

-Luke 22:1, 2

The betrayal of Jesus is also told in Mark 14:1-2, 10-11 and in Matthew 26:1-5. Since it appears in three of the gospels, you know it must be an important story to convey.

In Matthew’s description of the events it states, “When Jesus had finished this talk with his disciples, he told them, ‘As you know, the Passover celebration begins in two days, and I shall be betrayed and crucified.’” (Living Bible, Matt. 26:1-2) He is predicting his own death. He knows what is coming.

Have you ever felt like you were going to be betrayed, thrown under the bus, by friends or co-workers whom you cared about? What a sinking feeling that is, especially when you know you can’t stop the avalanche that’s about to hit you.

Passover was a celebration commemorating the Lord saving the people of Israel from the angel of death and then bringing them out of the land of Egypt, freeing them from slavery after nearly four centuries of oppression in Egypt. In Exodus 12:7,13 it states, “[the lamb’s] blood shall be placed on the two side-frames of the door of every home and on the panel above the door... when I see the blood I will pass over you and I will not destroy your firstborn children when I smite the land of Egypt.”

Now, many years later, Jesus – the Lamb of God – is about to be crucified. Isn’t it ironic that the feast was to celebrate God, and God incarnate is preparing to sacrifice Himself to save the souls of his people to give them eternal salvation?

-Sandra Lebo

April 15

**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

There are many different ways to lavish love on someone. For some it could be breakfast served in bed. For others, it may be a surprise road trip or a night on the town. Whatever it might be, for it to be meaningful, you need to know the persons' desire. When I think about lavishing love on someone, the last place I would think about is washing someone's dirty, smelly feet.

While Jesus isn't *just* someone, you get the drift. Yet, this is Mary's act of devotion and love. She heard what the disciples heard, but didn't get. Jesus would be leaving them. Mary saves her expensive perfume just for this purpose. The perfume was costly, and this extravagant gift was worth almost a year's wages. I have never smelled a perfume that expensive by those standards. But just as music can take you back to a certain memory, so can certain aromas. I can almost smell it permeating the whole house.

Mary's act of devotion did not go unnoticed to Jesus, and neither did Judas' scolding of her. Jesus knew his deception. What a contrast to Mary's love. How much are you willing to give extravagantly in your devotion to Jesus? Do you love Jesus lavishly? Be like Mary.

-Diane Schaeffing

**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

When Jesus says “very truly” we should sit up and pay attention because what comes next is important. Jesus is speaking to Philip and Andrew, saying, “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

What does he mean by this? Jesus is that grain of wheat. He knew the time was coming for his death and that his sacrifice was needed, so his purpose of coming to earth would be fulfilled. His sacrifice would bring out the best in his disciples, leading them to share his love, mercy, and saving grace with many others.

The grain of wheat cannot do anything on its own. It must die and be buried in the ground. When it grows it produces many more seeds. Those seeds or grains can then be ground into flour and be useful for many things. We are like that grain of wheat. We must die to self and our sinful ways. Once we recognize ourselves for who we truly are, only then can we be transformed. Just like the grain of wheat is transformed into something useful, we are transformed for use by God to further his kingdom by sharing his love, mercy, and saving grace with others.

-Cheryl duBois

April 17

**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

As the disciples are gathered together, Judas is about to betray Jesus. However, Jesus does not talk about Judas betraying him. Jesus does not explain how this act will lead to his crucifixion. Jesus focuses on glorifying God.

Jesus knows that Judas’s betrayal will lead to his death. Although Jesus knew what was going to happen, he chose to continue loving Judas. Along with the disciples, Jesus loves each of us unconditionally.

Today it seems people are quick to judge others or make assumptions based on something posted on social media. When we face challenging times or find ourselves in an unfortunate situation, it is easy to blame others or lose focus on God. If Jesus chose to focus on God rather than his imminent crucifixion, surely we too can focus on the glory of God when we find ourselves in difficult times.

-Garrett Rickert

**Please Read John 13 1-17, 31-35**

*“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 these verses, John is giving us the story of the last supper where Jesus is preparing his disciples for the events leading up to his betrayal, crucifixion, and return to the father. Even more important than those events, He was teaching them by example how He wanted them to support one another like He supported them. And in the verses mentioned above, He gave them, and us, if you will, marching orders. He has set you an example, that you also do as He has done to you. So go out and spread the good news that Jesus came to save everyone. Blessings to you all.

-Mike duBois

April 19

## 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?”*  
-Psalm 22:1

How can one read this first verse and not think of Jesus uttering those words from the cross? David, the Psalmist, is pleading with God, using the very same words Jesus did. If you read the entire Psalm, you will read about a man who is in trouble. Danger is all around him. In the midst of all this, he is praising God. I am sure a lot of us have felt this way. Bad things are happening and we cry out to God, but nothing changes. Sometimes it can feel as if God just is not listening and that we are completely alone. It is difficult not to feel completely abandoned, but we are not. The Lord never leaves us. It is repeated over and over in the Bible, “He will not leave or forsake us.” My favorite is Deuteronomy 31, verse 8:

*“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”*

It is in the darkest of times that we need the Lord the most. Heavenly Father, help us to always remember that You never leave us. Amen.

-Juliet Boulett

**Please Read Romans 6:3-11**

*“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 6:5, 6

After the deaths of my husband and a dear friend this past year, I've once again been reminded there are no guarantees in this life on Earth. When I received the email indicating these were the Bible verses I was assigned to write about, the word “hope” came to mind. In June, it will be three years since Allen, my husband, was diagnosed with a rare brain aneurysm. Following three procedures and several imaging tests over the course of two years, it was determined he was coming home with hospice care. So many times over the course of the past three years I have held on to hope; hope that each procedure might be “the fix” for the aneurysm. Needless to say, there was no fix; however, I am still holding on to hope; the hope that Easter brings for all of us. The hope in knowing that we, too, will be united with God and will be made new. That is the only guarantee I need. I know Allen is walking now. To God be the glory!

-Joanne Hill

























