

40 Days

St. Stephen's of the Valley 2020 Lenten Devotional

How quickly this season of Lent comes upon us, when we trade in pine needles for palm fronds, and the hymns change from “O Holy Night” to “Were You There”. How rapidly the scene shifts from a lowly manger to a rolled-away stone. It is a time for us to travel down the path Jesus paved, taking everything in. Seeing his moments of healing. Sitting and listening to his many parables and teachings. Hearing the voices of “Hosanna!” change to “Crucify him!” The journey that Lent takes us on, the road to the cross, isn't easy by any stretch of the imagination. But it is a journey that causes reflection and understanding, a renewal of our faith and commitment to God.

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 26th. 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 sisters in Christ of
St. Stephen's of the Valley Lutheran Church
Palmdale, California
Lent 2020

February 26

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

You have heard the saying, “holier than thou”. This means having an attitude of moral superiority. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day followed the Old Testament Law to the letter, and definitely had an attitude of moral superiority. But, they were not sinless. In this chapter of Matthew, Jesus advises the Jews to not “show off” their piety, but to give alms and pray in secret. He tells them not to be hypocritical when they fast by acting like a martyr. He says God in Heaven will see all the good the person does in secret and will reward them.

Most of us don’t pray out loud on the street corners, or brag about how much we donate to the church. But, do we sometimes have a “holier than thou” attitude? It’s easy to listen to someone talk about their spiritual beliefs or lack of beliefs and think to oneself, “They don’t believe what I believe or worship the way my church does. They must be sinners and are wrong-headed.” Or maybe we think, “I don’t go to church because those people are hypocrites.” Or, maybe we look down on other religions because they don’t believe in Jesus.

Christianity has gotten a bad reputation in our society because of that “holier than thou” attitude. Christians are seen as judgmental, hypocritical, and sometimes down right mean. It is difficult to see Jesus in some Christians’ words and actions.

I don’t think Jesus is telling us to keep our beliefs to ourselves, but rather, don’t boast about how good we are because we believe. We can share how our faith directs our actions, and not judge others who don’t share our faith. If we truly “practice what we preach” without being self-righteous, others will come to know God through our example.

-Deb Moisio

Please Read Psalm 51

*“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.”*

-Psalm 51:10

King David. Beloved Monarch. Gifted Psalmist. Military leader and subduer of Saul. And he messed up big time.

This is actually typical of the heroes recorded in Scripture. Abraham in his wanderings repeatedly tried to pass off his wife, Sarah, as his sister. Moses, a fugitive murderer, came up with excuses at the burning bush to avoid the mission God called him to. Samson, a Nazirite from birth dedicated to God. There isn't enough space here to detail his stupidity; I'm sorry, there is no other way to describe it. Paul, a persecutor of the fledgling church.

I have a list sent to my e-mail of Christian one-liners. My favorite, “God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called.” That means there is hope for all of us. We have been called to a mission. It could be parenthood. It could be a dockworker. It could be a patent clerk. It could be...

Maybe you are terrified of what it might be. I know I am. But I am also confident that God will make it work out. In spite of our best efforts to screw it up.

-Gabe Gabriel

February 28

Please Read Romans 1:8-17

“For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

-Romans 1:11, 12

Paul is probably the most well-known apostle in the scriptures thanks to his dedication to missionary work and sharing the Gospel of Jesus. His letters helped to spread Christianity throughout the world after his conversion on the road to Damascus. This letter to the Romans is the longest and last writing Paul completed before his final missionary journey in Rome, shortly after which it is believed he was beheaded during the reign of Emperor Nero.

As we know, Paul wasn’t one of the original twelve disciples; he was initially named Saul and was a persecutor of early Christians. That’s what makes his story, and these verses, so much more ironic, astounding, and meaningful.

Paul says he wants to see the people of Rome to help make them strong, and in turn be encouraged. He is saying, “I want to see you so I can help you. I want to be in relationship with you. I want us to support each other.” It doesn’t matter that they are from a different place than him, with different histories, different levels of intelligence, and different jobs and experiences; they can all support each other in the faith. When we remember how fundamentally connected, we are, everything we do becomes important, and teamwork becomes unavoidable. Paul knew this: he was one of the most active missionaries and did tremendous amounts of work on behalf of Jesus, yet still longed to be in community with the people in Rome so he could again be strong and encouraged for his ministry.

Christianity is impossible without community. Faith louder than lions is unsustainable if you are not in relationship with other people, having dialogue and sharing the faith and leaning on each other during both the good and the bad. It can be easy to isolate ourselves or think that there’s no way we can possibly be good

enough to share the word of Jesus, but leaders are not the only witnesses.

One of Martin Luther's oft overlooked beliefs during the Protestant Reformation is something known as "the priesthood of all believers". Martin Luther believed that "this word priest should become as common as the word Christian" because all Christians are priests. In a modern context, this means that any job, any vocation, any hobby, can be a ministry if you make it one. Paul and Martin Luther have one very large thing in common: they wanted the word of God to be in the hands of the people of God. They wanted the world to have direct access to Jesus Christ, no matter who they were or their background. They both knew they couldn't do it alone and empowered others to share Jesus too.

In 2020, we are fortunate enough to have access to the word of God, in our language, whenever we want it. We are not in the shadows awaiting the news, and we are not limited to them whims of those who claim to be "above us". We all have a calling to the priesthood. What's yours?

-Carina McVeigh

February 29

Please Read Matthew 18:1-7

“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

-Matthew 18:4

For some people, status is everything. Being the greatest or in the highest-ranking position are of the utmost importance in their minds and nothing else matters. Not that we shouldn't aspire to achieve such a position, but more so the status that comes with it means more than what you would do with such a position, knowing that you're top dog.

Here's where the disciples come in. At this point, Jesus has already told them twice in previous chapters in Matthew about the suffering and death that awaits him in Jerusalem, and that to follow him they need to *deny themselves* and take up the cross. And yet here they are, in chapter 18, asking Jesus who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Insert face-palm here.

I get this funny picture in my mind of the disciples standing before Jesus, each one pointing at himself or trying to look more respectable to try and convince Jesus to pick them. Because there's no greater honor than being the top dog in heaven, right?

Jesus could have easily enough just pointed to himself and said, “Guys, it's me. Duh. Have you not been paying attention?” But instead he calls a child over to show the disciples what he wants not only themselves, but also everyone around them, to emulate. Now children back then were at the very bottom in terms of status, regarded more as property than people. Jesus humbled himself in identifying with a child, one who has no power or status. And I'm not sure that's the answer the disciples were expecting.

It's not in our nature to want to take such a low place. We want to be near the top, we want that recognition. But Jesus, well, he didn't care about any of that. Status didn't matter to him. Jesus didn't have to be the center of attention. It's not about our status; it's about our nature. Not who we are, but how we act. And if Jesus Himself, the Son of God, was humble like a little child, who are we to aspire to be anything more than that?

-Jennifer Rapp

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

God’s love for us was never more apparent than when he sent his only Son, Jesus, to replace both the High Priest and the actual blood sacrifice. In the Old Testament, before Christ, atonement or reconciliation with God was only appeased by a blood sacrifice from an unblemished perfect animal, and the sacrifice had to be offered up by a High Priest appointed by God. But that was only a temporary fix. God demanded that this process be repeated over and over again because man kept sinning.

The solution was provided by God in His Son. Jesus was both God and human simultaneously. He became the perfect blood sacrifice that God demanded in payment for our sins. Jesus didn’t need a High Priest to make the offering. He willingly submitted himself to the torture of being beaten, whipped, and nailed to the cross. He was the last “lamb” that needed to be sacrificed. Once and for all, our sins were taken care of in that ultimate act of love. You’ve probably heard some version of the simple definition of justification. “God looks through the blood of Jesus and sees us just as if we had never sinned.” What a precious gift!

“Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

-Romans 8:34 (NIV)

“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

-Hebrews 7:25 (NIV)

Jesus knows what we are going through because of his own temptation and suffering. We cannot ask for a better intercessor than that.

-Fern Jackson

March 3

Please Read Psalm 32

*“Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”*
-Psalm 32:5

My first husband and I had a complicated relationship. Like the girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead, when it was good it was very, very good, and when it was bad... well, you get the idea. And at the end of the marriage it was very bad indeed! After we had been separated for some time, I got a call from my son letting me know that his dad was in the hospital and that the doctors didn't expect him to be with us much longer. It was suggested that family come to say their goodbyes. His alcoholism had caused his vital organs to shut down and it was only a matter of time before he would die. I packed my bags and headed to Arizona.

When we went to the hospital, I asked our two boys if I could have a little time with their dad alone. When I entered the hospital room, it was abundantly clear that he was very ill. His abdomen was extended and his eyes and skin were a terrible shade of yellow. I was grateful that we had these last few moments. I wanted him to know how sorry I was for my part in the breakup of our marriage, and that I didn't hold any anger or hard feelings toward him. We spoke for about a half hour, shedding a few tears and sharing hugs and then the boys came in. I returned home shortly after that.

A day later I received a call from my son with news that I hadn't expected. His dad, who just days before the doctors has declared was on his deathbed, was released from the hospital and was home! What a miracle. He lived another seven years and we restored the friendship and love that we had started with although the marriage would be dissolved. He did eventually lose his battle with the bottle, but I am forever grateful for the bonus time we shared.

I don't know if my asking for and giving forgiveness helped heal him. I do know that God was there giving me the words that were needed and doing what the doctors couldn't. During our talk I saw him physically relax, and I know that I left that hospital room lighter and more at peace. Miracles happen. Confession and forgiveness are powerful.

*Dear God, thank you for those miracles grand and unseen.
Thank you for your son and the greatest gift of all: our salvation.*

-Margi Blair

March 4

Please Read Matthew 18:10-14

“What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?”

-Matthew 18:12

This parable can be read hand in hand with the Parable of the Lost Son. There are similarities in how the father and the shepherd rejoice in the return of their lost one. This time, though, Jesus wanted to add in a very important message for the lost in verse 12. Sheep is a common theme found in many Bible stories. Many owned sheep and understood their behavior, and that is why this parable focused on the sheep and shepherd instead of father and son. Sheep, when separated from the flock, don't always come back. In fact, most of the time they will stand still and just cry; they won't go looking for the herd, they stand still and do nothing. Filled with fear and anxiety from being away from the safety of their flock.

More often than not, a flock would have multiple shepherds working it so that one may always leave to find a sheep or even multiple sheep that were separated from the flock. Either way, the shepherd's job is to keep the sheep together and safe. The shepherd would never leave one behind. So this entire parable was very specifically worded to relate to the people of Jesus' day. God will always come look for the lost sheep. He will never stop trying to reach you to bring you back to the flock where lies your family and safety.

In today's world, this message is still very relevant and needed. While we all don't understand the hardships of herding sheep, we often fear being alone much like a sheep. Social media was meant to bring us closer to each other, but it often leaves us feeling alone. Dating websites and apps were made to try and quickly find our mate, another attempt to run from fear of being alone. We all are very much the crying sheep away from its flock. We don't know what or who or where our flock is and sometimes

run farther from our flock trying to find it. In reality, though, we are never alone; God is always looking over us and searching for us. Ready to bring us back to the flock, the flock that will welcome us back with open arms and rejoice for our return.

Whether you are the flock or the sheep, know that God is looking over you equally. God loves you equally, and if you are ever the lost sheep, God will always come to find you, welcoming you back with open arms.

-Katie Havens

March 5

Please Read 2 Timothy 1:3-7

“...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

-2 Timothy 1:7

Last December I made a long weekend trip home to celebrate the life of a very dear friend and former teacher. She was my choir teacher all four years of high school and over time she became a good friend. I look back on our time spent fondly, but it wasn't always like that. She was a strong, smart woman and a force to be reckoned with. She was unforgettable! Her smile beamed with pride and her glare would melt steel. She could play piano and direct at the same time all while making sure your eyes never strayed from hers. When you walked on stage for a concert you didn't move unless you were directed to do so. You didn't fidget or mess with your hair and if she caught you moving you got “the look” and you straightened up immediately! She was a lover of music and freely shared her knowledge and experience with many.

She started teaching on the harbor right around the time I was born (maybe before) and stayed there until she died. She taught in the district for nearly 30 years. She and her husband never had children of their own, but she considered her choir kids “her kids”. We were fondly known as “Pat's kids.” At first I didn't understand her. I thought she was strict and demanding. I had my own ideas of how I wanted to be in choir and quickly found out those ideas didn't match hers. We butted heads a bit (okay, more than a bit), and she won more often than I can count. In fact, I don't think I won any battle with her. Admittedly, she was right more often than I was, but I wasn't going to tell her that! She pushed me in ways I didn't understand, and she often demanded of me more than I thought I could give. She challenged me to look at music differently and taught me more than I ever could have imagined was possible. She and I didn't agree on who the “stars” of the choir were. I thought I was just as good as the others she

picked. I would come home frustrated and only see failure. My mom listened to countless rants about how I was just as good and why didn't I get the recognition that I thought I deserved!

What I didn't know at the time was that I was learning a far more valuable lesson. I was learning how to be in community. I was learning from a great teacher, a lover of faith, music, and spirit. She knew how to challenge, demand, and push you to be the best. She knew how to make you a better person. Growth hurts sometimes, but she knew how to turn the growth into something beautiful. Pat was a real teacher, who could see the value in a person and lift them up to be their best. She knew not every kid was capable of greatness, but she knew every kid could be great and figured out how to pull the greatness out of every kid. At her celebration we shared stories and laughed. We came together as her kids to tell her how great of a teacher she truly was. She left a legacy of thousands of kids who knew just how to thrive under pressure and get along with many different personalities in one big group. We sat together, shared drinks, held hands and cried as we said good-bye to a faithful teacher. She taught with integrity, honesty, and most of all, love. She poured her heart into each of us, and I am a better person for having been taught by her.

-Megan Hogstad

March 6

Please Read Psalm 121

*“I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.”*

-Psalm 121:1, 2

Where does your help come from? You would get a variety of different answers if you asked this question to your average person. My spouse, my parents, my kids, my family, my doctors, support groups, or simply, “I get by with a little help from my friends”. All true, but if you asked a Christian, I think ultimately they would say that their help comes from God. Not just because God put all of those people in their lives, but because there is something God can provide us with that we can not get anywhere else. I am referring to God’s peace, his strength, his clarity, his wisdom, and his discernment. All we need to do is ask.

Seems simple enough, but for many of us, it is the last thing we do. I don’t know if it is pride, thinking we don’t need help, or if it is a matter of wanting to be in control. Maybe we forget. We are so used to doing everything ourselves, we actually forgot God is always there for us. Sometimes I will suffer through a problem for so long, and then suddenly realize that I never took it to God. When I bring my worries to God, it always eases my mind. Just knowing that they are now in the hands of the one who made everything allows me to see that things will turn out exactly the way they are supposed to. I have also had the experience that once I surrendered these matters to God, the situation became clear and a solution presented itself. What a load off my mind.

Heavenly Father, thank you for always giving me peace, strength, clarity, wisdom and discernment. Thank you for never leaving my side. Lord, as I give you all of my concerns, help me leave them with you as well. Amen.

-Juliet Boulett

Please Read Luke 7:1-10

“And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, ‘Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.’”

Luke 7:6, 7

The three Gospel approaches of Matthew, Mark, and Luke have much in common because scholars tell us they each came originally from the same sources. Mark would be the oldest of the three, then Matthew, and finally, about 60 A.D., came the Gospel of Luke. It is possible to buy a book that sets these three “Synoptic” Gospels side by side, paralleling each step as the story progresses and leaving blank spaces where Matthew, for instance, adds material that was uniquely of interest to his audience or that he had access to and Mark did not; or something that Luke, who traditionally is understood to have had a special relationship with Mary, Jesus’ mother, knew about or had available to him that the others did not. We know that the author of Luke’s Gospel is also the author of the book of Acts, and, since we are pretty comfortable with the date of 62 A.D. for that book, it seems in or around 60 A.D. is pretty reliable for this Gospel.

Today’s story, as familiar as it may seem, however, is unique among the various stories in the Gospels about Jesus’ ability to heal. This story is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus heals a person he never touches or even sees! There are several points in this story that you may miss if you are not reading carefully. The Centurion has a slave that he *values* highly, not loves, and in Luke’s telling of the story, Jesus never sees him *or* the slave. He *sends* people to talk to Jesus, and, when Jesus is coming to the house to see the slave, he sends people again to say that it is not necessary for Him to come to the house because Jesus need only “speak the word” and the servant will be healed! *That* is the degree of faith about which Jesus is speaking when he says, “Never, not in

Israel, have I seen such faith!” It is an extraordinary example both of Jesus’ ability to heal by faith, speaking the words (just as Yahweh/God in Genesis created the world by fiat, simply saying the words), and of the way the Centurion had been convinced by his Jewish friends that Jesus was a unique and powerful Holy man.

The story, however, also presents you and me with some special and important considerations related to our faith in and/or relationship with Jesus. The healing *is* a miracle (it could even be seen as almost *magic*). Whenever we find ourselves using prayer as a way to get what *we* want, there has to be some consideration of the possibility that our *love* of God or Jesus is perhaps tainted by our desire to personally benefit. Say perhaps, for example, “Jesus, help me win the prize!” instead of “Help me do my best!” It can really be a test of the depth of our relationship with God *and* with each other. When somehow it gets connected to some level of satisfying or benefiting *us*, that changes caring to a sort of manipulation or strategy, *not* the real deep appreciation and *love* that God asks of us. Perhaps today the words “Help me to love you *more* and *deeper*” could take the place of “Speak the word only, and my servant will be healed.” One way or the other, we must always be clear that Jesus is *not* doing “magic”, but is performing miracles borne of His obedience to the will of our *loving God*. We want to be loving too, so *we* must be constant in our awareness of our own self-interest, making sure that it is not a driving force in the way and the reason we connect to God. Without significant awareness, in both our human and our heavenly relationships, it is too easy for the sin of self-interest to sneak in in the disguise of Love. God does not “value us highly,” He *loves* us, and, following the example of Jesus, we must do the same for Him!

-Father Jim Seipel

Please Read Hebrews 3:1-6

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also ‘was faithful to all God’s house’”.

-Hebrews 3:1, 2

People make all kinds of New Year’s resolutions. Some of the more popular ones are to lose weight, quit smoking, get out of debt, eat healthier or learn something new. By the time the season of Lent arrives, most of our resolutions have been broken or are long forgotten.

Why do we fail year after year with our resolutions? Internal weakness? External temptation?

Perhaps it is simply that we don’t *consider* what it would take to actually accomplish the task set forth in the resolution. We utter the words, “This year I will _____.” But do we think carefully about doing the ‘thing’ before declaring the resolution? Most of our New Year’s resolutions are centered on old or bad habits that we hope to break. So have we considered what steps we need to take to succeed? Have we considered which behaviors, habits, and desires pull us away from our goal? Have we considered what little decisions we must make each day and what plans we will need to set in place to keep us focused? If we do, then, we will move closer to the goal. If not, it is likely that we fall back in our old habits and retreat to the familiar lifestyle.

In this passage, we are being asked to *consider* Jesus. Consider Jesus “the apostle and high priest of our confession”: so he’s the ultimate ambassador to God. He represents us before God and He represents God the Father to us. Jesus learned firsthand about human temptations and sufferings, so he can represent us compassionately to God. And, as God, he had the power to remove the barrier of sin between God and humans through his death on the cross.

Because of Jesus, we no longer have to approach God

through a priest as the Israelites did. God is available to all of us who believe in Jesus. In verse 6 it states “we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.” God does not dwell in some far off place or in an eloquently designed temple; His spirit is in us. In fact, we are, “brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling.” (vs. 1)

So during this season of Lent, let us consider what steps we need to take to hear the Holy Spirit within us. Let us consider what behaviors, habits, and desires take us away from our relationship with God. Let us consider the little decisions and daily plans that we can make in order to keep our focus on the one who created us as well as the entire universe.

We have full and free access to God through Jesus. Building up that relationship is our heavenly calling.

-Sandra Lebo

Please Read Psalm 128

*“Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,
who walks in his ways.”*

-Psalm 128:1

Psalm 128, titled A Song of Ascents, begins by using a phrase, and specifically a word we hear often in the scriptures. It’s a phrase and a *word* that confuses people because on its surface it doesn’t seem to make sense. “Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways.” (NIV)

Are we to be afraid of God? This doesn’t sound like a particularly positive attitude you would want to have in your relationship with your Heavenly Father. After all, He’s supposed to love us and care for us. “Fear” doesn’t seem to fit here. However, that’s only because of our English translation.

The Hebrew word translated into English as “fear” is *Yirah*. It has several meanings. In this context, it means wonder, amazement, mystery, astonishment, gratitude, admiration, and even worship. Imagine the feeling you might have looking out at a particularly colorful sunset over a large canyon with a beautiful river flowing beneath. Or perhaps upon seeing endless fields of wildflowers under a clear blue sky, stretching out and covering all the hills within your view.

One of those moments of overwhelming feelings happens to me when I’m far away from city lights and I look up into the sky on a perfectly clear summer night. It’s as though I can see into eternity.

When you put that emotion into the phrase “fear of the Lord,” you begin to realize the glory and beauty of God. You acknowledge His worth. It’s easy to understand why the scriptures say, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.” (Proverbs 9:10, NIV)

So, feel free to fear the Lord. It’s not about being afraid at all. It’s about embracing and respecting the majesty that is our Heavenly Father.

-David Smith

March 11

Please Read John 7:53-8:10

“When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’”

-John 8:7

Roman law prohibits Jewish leaders from using the death penalty, but the law does call for death of adulterers. The pivotal part of this story is that the religious leaders are using this woman to trap Jesus. The woman was dragged in, probably half naked, to face Jesus of Nazareth. Sheer humiliation. Imagine being surrounded by people in this situation. Her accusers wanted the death penalty. So besides being humiliated, she probably is frightened. At this point, death might have been easier than what she was going through. When it seems like all is lost, Jesus makes a statement that changes everything. “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And, one by one, they all leave. It doesn’t say the woman was repentant. Not sure that that matters as God knows what is in every heart.

We judge others for many kinds of reasons. Sometimes it is unconsciously that we assess someone. The way they dress, their behavior, too loud, too quiet, fat-shaming, who they hang out with, who they vote for, and on and on. Some studies I’ve read state that when you look at a complete stranger, it only takes about three seconds for us to make judgments. Yikes!

Now add sin to judging someone. Sometimes I think people judge another’s sin so theirs doesn’t seem so bad; in other words, to feel better about themselves. Maybe judgment is more about us than the person we are judging. Maybe we sit so long with our own sin that it is familiar, a part of us. We become immune to it.

Instead of assessing someone in those three seconds, smile at him or her instead. Instead of judging, observe. Jesus did a lot of that, and I think that is where compassion begins. God’s redemption offers grace and truth. In this Lenten season let God’s grace work for you and in you.

-Diane Schaeffing

Please Read Psalm 95

*“O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!”*

-Psalm 95:6

The first half of Psalm 95 is a call to praise and worship the Lord of the universe. The Creator of what we know as our earth. Our Father, the One who loves us no matter what, is worthy of our praise and worship.

The second half of this Psalm, well, it turns to the people of Israel and their disobedience. Words like “hardened hearts”, “your fathers tested and tried me” doesn’t bode well.

Let’s face it, isn’t this part of the Psalm about you and me? I know I’ve hardened my heart against God, against some of those I love and against some of those I’m supposed to love. It’s hard to admit. I am one of those people who will say I’m “all right” when I know I’m not. It’s all “okay” when asked, “How’s it going?” Is that you too?

It’s hard not to have a hard heart. Too much news media, too much social media, too much desensitizing to, well, almost everything, really. Then there is what goes on in your own “world”, am I right? The bills, the drivers, the home repairs, the one thing after another that causes anger, frustration, and maybe, just maybe, causes the outburst of “Why me, God?”

But what saves me, literally, is walking into church, bowing down as I worship, kneeling during our time of confession before my Lord and Maker, and have my heart softened. I need that supernatural power of God to wash over me, to fill me, to understand me, so I can attempt to be the person God knows I can be.

As this Lenten season comes upon us, we can come together to worship as one. Worship our Lord and Maker and have our hard hearts softened by His forgiveness and grace. Amen!

-Doretta Rapp

March 13

Please Read Ephesians 2:11-22

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

-Ephesians 2:19, 20

There is always much discussion around who Jesus loves, those who follow Him or everyone? In this season of Lent we are asked to return to God, which begs the question of how do we return to someone/thing we cannot see/touch/taste/smell/hear? This passage from Ephesians helps to answer that wondering. Jesus has reconciled all people and made amends for all our transgressions, whether we thought so or not.

This is the good news of the Gospel! That we are citizens with all those who came before us and all who come after because of Jesus. Being accepted into the household of God has *nothing* to do with us or what we have done, but because God in Christ Jesus loves us. We can stand upon what Jesus has done to have hope for a future that God is a part of and deeply desire to be a part of.

All the ways we try to categorize life on Earth fails when it comes to how God views us. In Jesus we are made holy to go out and do the things we are called to do; not out of duty or to make God approve, but out of thanks and because of the peace that passes all understanding. We are joined together in Christ, because of Christ, and do all that we do in His name.

-Rev. Chris Hogstad

Please Read Exodus 16:27-35

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions?’”

-Exodus: 16:28

I can't begin to imagine taking a trip that last 40 years. The longest trip I have ever been on was a cross-country trip that lasted for 17 days. I balk at thinking it would take 9 months just to get astronauts to Mars.

A major concern of any long trip is making sure you have the supplies necessary to survive, one of those being food. When I traveled cross, I didn't pack all the supplies I needed. I made several stops along the way to stock the cooler (I love Walmart) or to have a meal (McDonald's restaurants are everywhere). But for the Children of Israel, the supply options are totally different although the need still existed. Where do you find *food* to feed a *nation* in the middle of the desert? And it is not just food, it is water and shoes and clothes and...*but God!* Leave it to the creator of the universe to show up with a miracle and supply it for your journey.

Manna was out and available every day of the week, except the Sabbath. They were to collect what they needed for one day, except for the day before Sabbath. On the Sabbath they were to rest and keep it holy. But being a bit stubborn, some would try to gather for more than one day that was not the Sabbath and it would spoil. Some would get up on the morning of the Sabbath to find that there was no manna to gather. In verse 28, God questions their continuation of refusing to follow his commandments and instructions.

This is a faithful God who shows up day in and day out. Faithful with manna, with water, with clothes and shoes that don't wear out, and yet they continue to challenge his directions. Are we the same? Difficulties in life show up, God provides a way out, and in time we go back to challenging his directions, his commands, his instructions.

Take some time today to reflect on the commands and instructions that God has given you. Rejoice in the many ways that God has provided for you in life and pray that you will always be faithful to remember and follow his commands and instructions.

-Barbie Buckner

March 16

Please Read 2 John 1-13

“And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.”

-2 John 6

In this fast-paced world, where we are all accustomed to sped-up service, it is hard to remember to live by love. This can be especially true when we are interacting with people outside our family and friends circle. For we usually are good at showing and treating our family and friends in a loving way, but it becomes harder for some to show this same love to the people they interact with outside their circle. We've all seen it, or been guilty of it. Talking to an employee in a less than loving manner. Or perhaps someone that is different from you is around, and the reaction you carry towards that person is not a loving one. It is part of being the imperfect human beings that we are. However, we called to love others, to walk in love and live by love. By acknowledging this imperfect side of ourselves, we can strive to live by love, walk by love, talk by love, and be by love. Jesus died for us because of his overflowing love He has for you and I. So let's live by love, as we are called to do.

-Marlena Chandler

Please Read Psalm 81

*“O that my people would listen to me,
that Israel would walk in my ways!”*

-Psalm 81:13

God has always wanted to bless His people, to have them follow Him and to shield them from their enemies. However, His people usually had ideas of their own that did not include Him. His pleas fell on deaf ears, as the people of Israel would not listen to Him. They wanted to go their own way and would not follow the ways of God, despite his promises of peace and prosperity. Because of this, God gave them up and they were not protected. This was not done lightly, but they continually sinned against him, despite the fact that He had delivered them from Egypt. God did not want to abandon them, but he could not bless these people who were so disobedient and had to leave them to their own devices. Eventually, they became captives again.

Several hundred years later, Jesus encountered this same issue during his travels. Many of the people of Jerusalem did not accept Jesus. Although word of raising Lazarus from the dead traveled quickly, just a week later, only a few Christians remained. When He cured the ten lepers, only one came back to thank Him. Even Peter denied Him when he was put to the test.

Not much has changed in these modern times. Many of us do not want to listen to God or obey the rules, even though they are not very hard rules to follow. We want to be free to do what we please. We don't want to answer to anybody, and we don't want any restrictions. We want to do what we want when we want. We only call on God when we need Him, and we want Him to fix everything right now, regardless of timing or if it's His will or not. Just give us what we ask for and go away. Don't tell us what to do.

Sound familiar? If you can relate to any of this, perhaps this Lenten season is the perfect time to reflect on your life and your relationship with God. Take time to re-evaluate your obedience to God's commandments. Perhaps we all need a wake-up call in this regard. God truly does want to bless us. Let's stop fighting Him and start living the life we are meant to live and enjoying God's richest blessings.

-Tara McVeigh-Smith

March 18

John 7:14-31, 37-39

“Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him.”

-John 7:18

When Jesus was teaching in the temple at the Festival of Shelters, he was being hunted by the Jewish authorities. When they found him, they mocked him saying “How does this man know so much when he has never been to school?” Jesus answered that his teaching comes from God, not himself, and people who do what God wants will know this.

To me, these verses mean several things. We must follow God’s Law. Study God’s word and you will know when someone is speaking God’s truth. Be leery of those who “appear” to speak the truth; they are out to gain for themselves. Know that Jesus is God’s son and God sent him to feel as we do, and to teach God’s word.

In verses 37 - 39 of chapter 7, Jesus said, “Whoever is thirsty should come to me, and whoever believes in me should drink.” As the scripture says, “Streams of life-giving water will pour out from his side.” I think in today’s world, “thirsty” means wanting knowledge about Jesus, and “drink” is participating in God’s word, ultimately believing in God and taking part in communion. The “streams of life-giving water” is God’s word.

-Lori Ann McLaren

Please Read Ephesians 4:25-32

“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

-Ephesians 4:31, 32

We are always looking for ways to better ourselves, changes in our routines and behaviors to improve our quality of life. Eating healthier. Practicing yoga or meditation. Exercising more. Now a lot of these are easier said than done, but with a renewed and refreshed mindset, these goals can be accomplished.

In this section of Ephesians, Paul is calling us to discard the “old self” and put on a “new self”, and with this list of do’s and don’ts, we’ll be on our way to our new and improved selves. Put away falsehood and speak the truth. Be angry but don’t sin. Stop stealing and work. Do not slander others, but speak words that build others up. Forgive one another. I don’t know about you, but some days that seems like a tall order to carry out. Again, easier said than done.

When first looking this list over, it feels like Paul is asking a lot from us. Surely maybe one or two things perhaps seem doable, but the rest are asking too much. However, it’s that last bit of verse 32 that should be a wake-up call. “...as God in Christ has forgiven you.” In other translations, it reads “for Christ’s sake.” *For Christ’s sake*. Jesus suffered greatly and died upon the cross *for our sake*; who are we to not try and better the people around us as well as ourselves because of his sacrifice?

God does not blow up at us when we make a mistake. God does not belittle us when we do something wrong. He responds with kindness and compassion, and he wants us to do the same. During this season of Lent, remember Jesus and how much love he had for every single one of us. And when we look upon this list again with fresh minds, renewed hearts, and a new perspective, it doesn’t seem as insurmountable. *For the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

-Jennifer Rapp

March 20

Please Read Psalm 23

*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.”*
-Psalm 23:4

Life is full of highs and lows, mountains and valleys, and God never promised us as believers that we would have no troubles because we believe. But, He does promise to be with us through our valleys of darkness. During the darkest valley of my lifetime, thus far, was a “shadow of death”, the physical death of my daughter. And He was indeed there to comfort me in my sorrow, for He too had to watch His own son die to fulfill His ultimate promise of our salvation. He understands my pain. And due to His suffering to bring us into salvation, He also brought me peace in that my daughter now has everlasting life because she was a believer. No matter how dark our valleys are He is with us; we truly have nothing to fear not even death itself for He has provided eternal life.

Thank you, Father, for being our Great Shepherd and leading us, your sheep, through our darkest valleys. Thank you for your eternal protection and guidance until our final days here and into our eternal life with you.

-Dawna Vargas

Please Read John 1:1-9

“...in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

-John 1:4, 5

How many times have you heard a young child say, “I’m afraid of the dark”? It often takes just a little amount of light to ease their fear. It’s amazing how a simple night-light and a few reassuring words calms a child’s imagination. Or, think of the fun kids have with a glow stick. A quick snap, and instant light and happiness.

Jesus is our true light. We need to trust in Jesus to light our path. Each of us has fears and things in life we worry about. Whether it’s financial concerns, an illness, or whatever it may be that you are experiencing, following God’s light will give you the strength and comfort to get through it.

With Jesus, you are not alone in darkness. He will light the way and always be beside you.

-Garrett Rickert

March 23

Please Read Acts 9:1-20

“So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’”

-Acts 9:17

Saul’s conversion story flips everything human beings instinctually believe, which is why it’s so important to remember. First, Saul is literally described as murderous yet becomes the greatest proclaimer for Jesus Christ history has seen. Ananias was a disciple, one of those Saul was hunting, and was called to throw his own safety to the wind for God’s greater purpose. There are no rules. Saul and Ananias are foils for each other in this story. They are two sides of the same coin. Both men are examples of God’s plan, and how it will prevail.

It wasn’t that Saul hadn’t heard the Gospel. I would wager that he definitely did considering how much time he spent with Christ followers in the process of arresting them. Saul probably had many opportunities to change his ways, and simply chose not to. God says in the scripture that Saul is God’s chosen instrument to proclaim God’s name to the Gentiles, their kings, and the people of Israel. Saul avoided and avoided as much as he could, but in the end saw the light (pun intended). It could have been much easier for Saul if he had just listened at his first opportunity, but would he then have been such a champion for the cause? Would he have felt so empowered and impassioned had he not experienced a miracle leading to his conversion?

Ananias, on the other hand, was already a follower of God. When God tells Ananias the plan, that he is to lay hands on Saul and restore his sight, Ananias is reasonably hesitant thanks to Saul’s past, but ultimately trusts the instructions God has given. This story of two men, one digging his heels against God, and one following loyally despite his doubts, had to unfold the way it did for Saul/Paul to spread the Gospel.

Was it God's plan that Saul avoids the truth until that fateful journey to Damascus? Or was it God's plan that Saul become a missionary, and Saul's free will dictated the way it unfolded? Does God have an overarching plan? Does God focus on the details or simply the outcome? Is God simply just a force toward good at all times with no real hand in the day to day? Does it happen the same way for every person? I don't think we'll ever truly get to know while we're on earth. But rest assured, as much as we try to fight it, God's will is ultimately the champion.

-Carina McVeigh

March 24

Please Read Psalm 146

*“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever...”*
-Psalm 146:5, 6

“Princes among men often fail, but God never disappoints the one who hopes in Him. The Psalmist has abruptly transitioned from negative to positive. ‘His negative teaching, if it stood alone, would be a gospel of despair, the reduction of life to a torturing cheat; but taken as the prelude to the revelation of One whom it is safe to trust, there is nothing sad in it.’” (Maclaren)

“We have here a statement which we have personally tried and proved: resting in the Lord, we know a happiness which is beyond description, beyond comparison, beyond conception.” (Spurgeon)

I borrowed words for this, but God is so great, sometimes we need more than words. We need our actions to reflect the love that God has for us. After all, he sent us the greatest gift of his Son. We can never be worthy, but that is God’s grace in action.

Father, thank you for this great gift. We are not worthy but we are thankful. Be with us during this Lenten time. In your Son’s name we pray. Amen.

-Jerry Boulett

Please Read Matthew 9:27-34

“When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you.’”

-Matthew 9:28, 29

At a seminar on meditation we were asked to mentally go to the part of our body that was most important to us, not the brain. I had started down to my legs because I was so sure being able to get around was vitally important to my life, when it stunned me to think of the necessity I felt to be able to *see* whenever I got to the place I was getting around to. There was no comparison; my *eyes* were the most important. I have little doubt that many people, perhaps most all people, would feel pretty much the same.

So the two blind men in today’s reading immediately draw our sympathy as they *follow* Jesus as he walks to someone’s home. Then they even approach him in the house! What is absolutely fascinating is Jesus’ question responding to their request that he heal them and return their sight, “Do you really believe I can do that?” Wow! Do they really?

Their reply, of course, is yes, and then Jesus frames his response in a most interesting way, “Be it done according to your faith!” (Or, as the author of the transliteration *The Message* puts it, “Become what you believe!”) Such a powerful way of Jesus saying, “...this is an interaction between God and you; God’s power through *me* accomplishes as much as *your* faith and conviction believes that He *can* heal your blindness.” I am reminded here of the basic rule of communication, that it demands both a good sender *and* a good receiver! The absence or limitation of either minimizes the possibility of communicating! What God can and is willing to do for us is often stopped by our inability to receive it, and, too often perhaps, our blindness to even see that it is something we need.

The term “blindness” can be a symbolic allegory for many

different limitations, all of which are blocks to our being able to know or accomplish something. Too many times our awareness of circumstances or situations is skewed by our inability to consider aspects we are not cognizant of or prepared for. “Help me to see” should be a part of almost all of our prayers as we attempt to discover and accomplish God’s will, because all of us have “blind spots” that limit our ability to understand and deal with certain aspects or demands of life. As the blind men repeatedly called out, “Have mercy on us,” so too must we recognize “How Great is Our God!” and how much we need help so we can see the realities that hurt and limit the lives of those around us.

Perhaps the question for us is the same as in the story; do you believe that God *can* help or do what you ask? *And*, perhaps the declaration of Jesus fits too; may it be done for or to you according to your faith. Maybe *that* is what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of how faith can move mountains; that if your faith is deep, sincere, and strong enough, God’s power is certainly great enough, and there is no limit to what you might be able to accomplish with the God of the Universe working through you! Maybe this Lent could literally be a revolutionary time if we asked for new sight or insight and then truly and deeply believed that God *can* do it, and loves us enough *to* do it!

-Father Jim Seipel

Please Read Psalm 130

*“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!”*
-Psalm 130:1, 2

Imagine what the world would be like if we treated each other with mercy. Look at the news! Every morning it is filled with stories of someone being hurt or killed in a domestic violence incident, or a gang member attempting to get revenge on another gang. Then there are the horrible things that occur due to road rage, child abuse, hit and run accidents...the list goes on and on.

Mercy needs to prevail over the need to get even. Think and pray about that the next time you are seething and want to make sure the person who wronged you gets what he or she deserves. You may not get the satisfaction of seeing it, but God will take care of the wrongdoers.

*“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever
you sow.”*
-Galatians 6:7 (NRSV)

Since at times, I am one of those wrongdoers, I thank God that when I repent and ask for forgiveness, He lavishes His grace and mercy on me.

*Lord, thank you for never failing to pay attention to my cry
for mercy. May I show mercy to others the way You lavish it on me.*
-Fern Jackson

March 27

Please Read Revelation 11:15-19

*“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying,
‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.’”*
-Revelation 11:15

As we enter this Lenten season, we are reminded of the sacrifice our Lord Jesus Christ paid for our sin, His death on the cross and His resurrection three days later. If we accept His gift of ultimate love, then we too will resurrect on the day of His return. Death will be no more!

Revelation 11:15 tells us that when the seventh angel sounds the trumpet, that signals it is God’s time to reign over the earth. God will reclaim the earth from the evil one, and Jesus will receive his inheritance as ruler of the earth and all nations.

The angels in heaven, and the living and the dead will rejoice and cry out in thanksgiving and praise. The King has come to save His people! There will be no more brokenness, lawlessness, or injustice. He will be their God, and they will be His people. The earth we know will be made new, and the prayer our Lord taught us will come to pass, “Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

-Dana Skinner

Please Read Luke 24:44-53

“...and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’”

-Luke 24:46, 47

I love this passage. During His ministry, the disciples consistently misunderstood or misinterpreted what Jesus was trying to tell them. Here, at the end, they *finally* “get it”. Maybe.

In my Scripture it reads, “Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” Translation: Knowing He was about to leave them, Jesus finally lost His patience and gave the disciples a swift kick in the...well, you know.

I’m sorry to say, this is a typical male behavior. Sometimes it takes a 2 x 4 upside the head or a kick in the pants to get our attention. I had to fall off the roof of the Fellowship Hall to *convince* me that I’m not 25, or 50, anymore. I am so thankful that God is tolerant with our foibles. I do, sometimes, get the feeling He is counting to ten in order to maintain His composure. It can’t last. I pray I’m not around when He loses it.

By the way, my doctor put me on notice to stay away from high places and keep both feet on the ground. This stubborn German hasn’t decided whether he’s going to comply.

-Gabe Gabriel

March 30

Please Read Psalm 143

*“Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning,
for in you I put my trust.
Teach me the way I should go,
for to you I lift up my soul.”*
-Psalm 143:8

The psalmist seems to be pleading with God from the depths of despair, plagued by his enemies and enveloped by darkness. I know that despair. I have felt it. I haven't always surrounded myself with good, decent, and loving people. For a time, because of poor judgment, low self-esteem, and dependency on drugs, I found myself in places that no good person should ever be, with people that I would describe as wicked, hateful, abusive and corrupt. I felt an all-consuming sense of anguish all of the time.

It is during moments like these, our darkest times, that a lot of people, believers and nonbelievers alike, call upon the Lord for help. Fortunately for us, he is always listening. I think most of the time it is us who need to be listening. When I finally cried out to God at my absolute lowest point, this is what I heard, “When you can't tell your friends from your enemies, it's time to go.” Actually, I think I heard it in a movie, but it was definitely coming from God and it hit me like a ton of bricks. He was saying to me, “Get out of there! You are better than this, you're my most precious daughter, I love you and you should be around people who love you as I do.”

It was up to me to put my trust in the Lord, for He was going to show me the way and I was going to need to follow. Obviously, this story has a happy ending. I heard, I listened, I followed. I emerged from that situation, a stronger, more devoted Christian than I had ever been and I now obey the Lord – most of the time – no questions asked.

Heavenly father, I entrust you with my life. Thank you for your faithfulness and your unfailing love. Thank you for delivering me from my enemies, rescuing me and bringing me to safety. Thank you for making my path clear and for the amazing people you have put in my life. In Jesus' name I pray this. Amen.

-Juliet Boulett

Please Read Ephesians 2:1-10

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

-Ephesians 2:8, 9

Leave it to Paul to call ‘em as he sees ‘em. All in three verses. Three. Verses. You were dead in sin. Why? Because you followed the ruler of the air that is at work *now* among those who are disobedient. *All* of us once lived among them; we were by nature children of wrath. (Emphasis mine.) The good news is he uses past tense. That is very good news!

I can’t say it any better than he does. “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” We were like dead men walking. Not zombies, for they are brainless creatures, but we were walking around with no hope.

Hope. That is one special four-letter word. I don’t think there is a word that can bring a smile to my face more than hope. It can urge me on. It can be that “light at the end of the tunnel”. It can keep me going. How about you?

Then Paul continues, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing.” He got that right! If I take an honest look at “my own doing,” I mess up a lot and because the people around me love me, they show me grace. And I like the last part of this verse very much. “...it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” It’s a gift, not something you work for, not something that if I do enough of “X” I will be saved. Nope, that’s not how it works. You and I can never do enough, feed the hungry, clothe the poor, get clean water to those that don’t have any, none of that will set you free from sin. It’s all great stuff to do, don’t get me wrong, but that’s not how God operates. Man operates that way; that’s why Paul adds so that no one can boast. That way we are all the same; it doesn’t matter about your status, money, who you know, none of that. Period.

It's a gift. Plain and simple. Go back to the fifth verse.
“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which
he loved us.” God loves us so much, he wants us to be with him.
He loves us so much, Jesus died for us. For me. For you. It's a gift.
Plain and simple.

-Doretta Rapp

Please Read Matthew 22:23-33

“And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.”

-Matthew 22:31, 32

Matthew’s gospel assumes quite a few things from the reader. The first and foremost is an understanding of the Hebrew culture and religion that Jesus Himself grew up in. The question Jesus is given in Matthew 22 is not an unusual one for a rabbi/teacher as Jesus is referred to in that day and age. His answer, of course, is not one that is expected.

What the Sadducees wanted or expected was to nail Jesus down on one side or the other; that His selection of whose wife the woman is would go a long way to denouncing Jesus as not whom people are saying He is. Jesus blows up whatever they are thinking in His first words to them, “You are wrong because you neither know the scriptures nor the power of God.” (22:29) In the Sadducees’ focus on the dead or their desire to uphold the traditions of old, they forget how God is known to the Hebrew people, as Jesus states, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” (22:32) This means that God is alive and is focused on the living rather than upholding the traditions of the past. God desires for the here and now, not what has gone before or what the future may bring, but what is going on in the hearts and minds of the people *right now*.

Too often we focus too heavily on the mistakes we made in the past or the events that did not go the way we wished they had. God doesn’t care as much as we fear of what took place in our past. That is over and done with. God wants us in the here and now to be reminded of our God who lives and loves in the person of Jesus Christ.

-Rev. Chris Hogstad

April 2

Please Read Philippians 1:1-11

“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

-Philippians 1:9-11

There are some people described in the Bible that I wouldn't care to meet. Paul is not one of them. In high school we had a slang term, “good people”. It meant he is good people. He is legit, the real deal. You can trust him. Paul is good people.

Paul's letters serve as a template for living out a Christ-filled life. He thanks the church prays for them and wants them to grow in abundant love. Paul prays for a life that is abounding in love. Wow. What would our world look like if we were all abounding in love? Love is not just a feeling, but also an action verb.

As I'm writing this, Valentine's Day was just yesterday. Ours was special, but Valentine's Day is just once a year. It is fun to celebrate, but love is every day. It is in the small moments, tough days and friendships that you continue to grow in your love. It is intentional. Paul prays for the church to grow their love. He is confident that if we begin a good work, we will be able to grow the church. What if we looked at others, the way God looks at us, with love?

Sometimes I get stuck in my spiritual growth and feel like I am not making progress. Paul reassures us and is confident that God will continue to work in us. God will not give up on us. We are all a work in progress. Because of God's love, we were uniquely made to love. Not for a moment, but forever.

-Diane Schaeffing

Please Read Psalm 31:9-16

*“But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, ‘You are my God.’”*
-Psalm 31:14

The title of chapter 31 is “A Prayer of Trust in God”. This chapter starts off by asking God for protection and keeping us safe. Then it describes being in trouble, crying, being weak and wasting away; enemies and neighbors treating us as worthless; friends are afraid of us and run the other way; they treat us like we’re dead, or plan to kill us.

I can’t help but feel this is exactly how the victims of the coronavirus are feeling now. And also those people of Asian descent who are being accused of having the virus when they have *never* been to China. The victims and the world need to trust God, pray to God to save them, protect them, comfort them.

This is a great lesson of how we all should “stop behaving badly”! We should pray, trust that God will carry us through the bad times, comfort us during the sad times, and bless us with good times.

-Lori Ann McLaren

April 4

Please Read Mark 10:32-34

“...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

Jesus and His disciples leave Galilee, cross the Jordan River into Jericho, and make their way towards Jerusalem. On the way, Jesus gathers them together and prepares them for what is going to happen to Him. He tells them of His betrayal, arrest, condemnation, torture, and eventual execution.

This was not the first or even the second time Jesus spoke to them about this prediction. It was actually the third. Each time, the disciples refused to believe it. It was too ugly, too violent, too unbelievable to accept, even though they were also told of the resurrection. Perhaps they desired a strong and powerful leader who would conquer their oppressors rather than one who would endure so much suffering or who could be thought of as weak. Whatever the case, it was just unfathomable to them, so they dismissed it. James and John even asked to sit at the right and left of Jesus. He reminds them that the goal is to be of service, not power, but they missed the point.

Things are really no different today. Although we believe, worship, and accept Jesus, we sometimes fail to see what He is trying to show us. There are things we don't want to do or things we refuse to give up. We see the world through rose-colored glasses because it is too hard or too painful or even too scary to take them off and see things as they really are.

Mark tells the story of a blind man, Bartimaeus, who Jesus meets in Jericho as he passes through on his way to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus calls out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus heals him, and after regaining his sight, Bartimaeus follows Jesus.

This story not only shows the power of Jesus to perform

miracles, but also of Bartimaeus' incredible faith. What kept the disciples from having this kind of faith? What keeps us from having it? Lack of patience? Timing? Fear? What would happen if we just put our trust in God and really prayed, focused on Him and really listened to what he was saying, even if it's scary? Wouldn't He be there with us in any circumstance, helping us get through it and supporting us in every way? If a blind man can have such extraordinary faith in God, why can't we?

In these times when everything is so uncertain, we need to avoid distraction and get out of our own way. We need to open our eyes and our hearts and truly put our trust in God and allow him to guide us, protect us, and bless us.

-Tara McVeigh-Smith

April 6

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

You may be familiar with the story told in this scripture reading. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he stops at the home of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Yes, the same Lazarus who Jesus has just recently raised from the dead. These siblings lived in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem. During His visit, Mary does something unique.

She anoints the feet of Jesus with spikenard (sometimes referred to as nard). Then she wipes it with her hair. Judas, the disciple who will soon betray the Lord, complains that this spice was expensive, and it shouldn't be wasted in such a way. He would have liked it to be sold for a great deal of money, and that money put into the collection for the poor. (This would have made it possible for Judas to steal some of it. He wasn't really thinking about the poor at all.)

But Jesus replies to Judas, “Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always.” (NIV)

Let's take a look at some of the details. Nard was expensive. It is estimated that the amount she poured on the feet of Jesus was equivalent to approximately the average wage paid for a *year* of work in that time and place. Expensive indeed. Nard is from India, so it wasn't grown locally. It's red rose-colored (like blood?) and the scent is earthy and musky (like the smell of a tomb?) Each of the elements of this story foreshadows the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus, which would happen in just over a week's time from this event.

Through the act of acquiring such expensive oil, anointing the feet of Jesus, and wiping them with her hair, Mary shows very deep affection and humility. Her actions are recorded in scripture

so that each of us can know what this type of humble service looks like.

As if to reinforce this message, in less than a week Jesus would wrap a towel around his waist and wash the feet of his disciples. Our Heavenly Father highly values humility and love.

During this season of Lent, may we all look for opportunities to demonstrate our love for Jesus and our humility through service to the people around us. As Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40, NIV)

-David Smith

April 7

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

“Why does this have to be so hard? What am I doing wrong to make this so difficult? I can’t do this! It’s too hard! I’m frustrated that this is not working the way I thought it would.” Words said over and over again by anyone who has ever tried something new and failed. Have you ever watched a person doing something and wondered how they made it look so easy? Did you think to yourself, “What do they have that I don’t have?”

Jesus’ words in John 12 don’t help us either. He says in John 12:24, “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.” Jesus knows death is hard; he’s already grieved over Lazarus (then raised him from the dead to prove a point). So why doesn’t Jesus have more comforting words regarding change or death? Come on Jesus, can’t you help us out?

A friend of mine shared a quote attributed to Confucius a while back; “A seed grows with no sound but a tree falls with huge noise. Destruction has noise but creation is quiet. This is the power of silence... Grow silently.” At first I agreed wholeheartedly with the quote, but then I thought about it more. Is growth always silent? Is destruction always noisy? Why can’t it be the other way around and still be good?

Anyone who has had or been around children knows growth is rarely silent and destruction can be silent. As I continued to ponder the previous quote, I was talking with another mom whose daughter recently participated in a contest and didn’t receive the marks she expected to receive. We talked about how even though her daughter was disappointed, she continued to hold her head high and cheer on the other competitors. The mother said she talked to her daughter frequently about how “we can do hard

things". Those five short words shook me completely!

Yes, we can do hard things and we can grow stronger as we do them. We can learn from the deaths we encounter. Not the physical death of a loved one, though often there are things to learn from that, but the death that comes when our situations change, when our lives take a completely different direction than we expected. Change is difficult and can often hurt. Death is hard and I haven't known any death that doesn't cause some kind of pain. Jesus' words take on a new meaning when we choose to embrace change or death knowing it makes us a stronger and we learn to do hard things even through pain or disappointment. No, it's not easy, but it is worth it. I pray as you journey through Lent when you encounter hard things you remind yourself that *you can do hard things*.

-Megan Hogstad

April 8

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 Christians, the story of the Lord’s Supper is very familiar. We celebrate communion each Sunday humbly accepting the body and blood of Christ, confessing our sins and giving glory to God for the forgiveness of them. The account of Jesus and his apostles at the last supper in the Gospel of John is a different take than what is in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, and it poses an interesting perspective. Although Jesus knew who among his trusted followers would betray him, he was troubled. Perhaps he was anxious to have things set into motion, or perhaps he was saddened by the loss of trust. His disciples were confused at the message that Jesus gave to Judas, not realizing what was about to take place, and after Judas left, Jesus’ next words to them must have been really confusing.

When I read verses 31 and 32 I have to admit my first reaction was “What? I don’t get it.” I looked up the word “glorify” (which is to acknowledge and reveal the majesty and splendor of God by one’s actions), and that helped a little. But I confess that I still get perplexed by Jesus’ words a lot of the time. Even though as a life-long Christian I should be fully aware of the Easter story and all that it signifies, the full impact somehow becomes lost in day-to-day living. The Greatest Story Ever Told should be more than a story and “Glory to God” should be more than a hymn.

Lord, even though I don’t always understand, help me to live a life filled with Your glory, ever grateful of the gift of salvation. Amen.

-Margi Blair

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

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

-John 13:34

When I was a little girl in Melody Choir and later in Junior Choir, it was easy to sing songs like “Love is What’s It’s All About,” “The Magic Penny--Love is Something If You Give It Away”, “This is My Commandment”, or “Pass It On”. Now, as an adult, it is a much greater challenge. When I first received this focus Bible verse, John 13:34, on which to base my devotion, my instant self-talk reaction was, “There is no way I can write about loving one another.” Family and friends are easier than others. Those who are close to me know my struggle of being Christ-like at my job. How do I love all adults and children when I don’t even like some of them? How do I love the adults who lie about me, berate me, verbally abuse me, and disrespect my professional opinion? How do I love *all* the children despite their behavior?

One day I was reading to help me understand how to love better when I came across a statement that said Jesus *commanded* us to love one another because He knew we would not *feel* like loving each other. That spoke to me! On my own I could never love others as God does. That kind of love can only come from the Holy Spirit. Who am I to not love, though, when Jesus set the standard? After all, in Jesus’ last days He washed the feet of those followers who betrayed Him and denied that He was the Messiah.

If I want to be a disciple of Jesus, I must meet the daily challenge and love one another. As another author stated, “Love is never easy. If it were, it wouldn’t be love.”

-Joanne Hill

April 10

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

Maybe you’ve been there. At a total loss for what to do, where to go, and wondering how you will even survive. You’ve cried out to God for help, for answers, and for rescue, but nothing. It seems like he is so far away. That he has “ghosted” you, giving you the silent treatment. And it’s not just while you are awake; at night the mind still races such that you can’t sleep. That’s exactly where the Psalmist was at in Psalm 22.

As I child, I don’t remember being taught Psalm 22. I don’t remember being told about the times when I would feel abandoned and all alone with such anguish. *But* I was taught the 23rd Psalm. I still recall verse 4 that says, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

So when you are going through a Psalm 22 stage in life, when you are feeling abandoned and alone, be encouraged! Psalm 23 is next and with that comes the reassurance. Not that everything will be perfect, not that we will never have trials, but rejoice that God is there. You are never alone. There is no need to fear!

-Barbie Buckner

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

There is a wonderful line in *Jesus Christ, Superstar* that very few people hear because of what is happening when it is spoken. Jesus is talking with the disciples who are very worried about what he says is ahead, and he says, “To conquer death you only have to die!” It *zinged* me the first time I heard it and still comes to my mind often. Living on a planet and in a creation that has existed for literally *billions* of years, the fact of *our* mortality and infinitesimally short lifespan is kind of hard to swallow at times. The idea that, tiny as it is, our life really *matters*, is even more difficult for many to wrap their heads around. The only possible explanation has to be that, somehow, there is much, much more going on than meets the eye, or even the mind!!

Enter Yahweh, into the awareness of a group of slaves in Egypt, then with them into Canaan, into captivity in Babylon, promises made, domination under the Romans, and enter Jesus. Things aren't what you think, aren't even what they appear to be! The greatest are the least; the purpose of life is not just to survive, but to *love*, to *serve*, even to *sacrifice*; and dying is not the worst thing that can happen to you. In fact, it too is *not* what it looks like!

In many ways the end is not the end; it is actually the beginning! It is simply a matter of recognizing that all of it, everything, is in the “hands” of the God who created it, and His very core and prime driving purpose and energy is Love.

So, we can die to self-interest and selfishness, and connect to the Love that created us, and we can learn *why* we exist

and *what* we are here for. We can learn about the ways and the things that interfere and block us from fulfilling our purpose and growing into *what* we can become. Jesus knows, does, teaches, demonstrates, sacrifices, dies, and lives in a new, fuller reality that He promises we can also enter when we die – and actually even when we are still traveling in these physical bodies – the Kingdom of God! We must sincerely try to give up, to step away from, those selfish, tiny, frightened thoughts and deeds that are not what we are meant for, and to live in Love and respect and awareness of what is *really* going on. And when we fail or fall into those bad things, we ask for and *get* forgiveness and another chance! We learn and we love and we grow, both physically and spiritually, and when the body is done, we move on to what’s next, *still* in the “hands” of that loving God, because, “To conquer death you only have to die!” There are complications and difficulties along the way, but because we follow Jesus, who was sent by that Yahweh/God and has already navigated the way, we travel confidently, thankfully, lovingly, determinedly, and with a constant sense that we are going the right way, and are not doing it alone!

-Father Jim Seipel

