

40 Days

St. Stephen's of the Valley 2024 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 14th. There will be 40 devotions in total, one for each day leading up to Easter Sunday. Sundays will **not** be included in those 40 days, as Sundays are always celebrations of the resurrection.

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

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

Your brothers and sisters in Christ of

St. Stephen's of the Valley Lutheran Church

Palmdale, California

Lent 2024

February 14

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

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

-Matthew 6:1

What comes to mind when you hear the word “hypocrite”? Perhaps a politician speaking out against corruption yet secretly accepts bribes. A prominent person in the public eye advocating for environmental conservation yet drives a gas-guzzling SUV. An everyday person complaining about bad drivers yet they themselves are no better. But it’s likely that the last thing that comes to mind is it being associated with the theater.

Hypocrite comes from the Greek word *hypokrites*, meaning “an actor” or “a stage player.” The word itself is made up of two Greek words that literally translate to “an interpreter underneath.” Back then, actors in ancient Greek theater wore large masks to mark the character they were playing, literally interpreting the story from underneath their masks.

When we do good deeds, but know we’re only doing it for the attention and the accolades that come with it, we are not being honest. We are not practicing what we’re preaching and hiding our true intentions. All the world’s a stage, and here we are wearing these masks, yearning for that earthly applause.

Would it be better to do the right thing for the wrong reasons or motives rather than ultimately doing the wrong thing? Maybe. But Jesus’ point here in this portion of his Sermon on the Mount is that God cares about *how* we do our good works, and with *what motives* we do them.

It is important as we start this Lenten season to remember to do good deeds with an honest and caring heart and for no other reason. Remember for who you’re doing this work for; not for our own glory, but for His. Remove the mask, open your heart, and see how deep that love can go. For God is the only audience we need, and his applause for us will never end.

-Jennifer Rapp

Please Read Psalm 25:1-10

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

I discovered the original Hebrew verse was written in alphabetical order, each verse beginning with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet so that it would be easier to memorize. The writer knew the importance of following God. The psalm tells of God's forgiveness of sins. God could not look at the sin of his people. There was a need for sacrifices, but it was also clear that the Lord wanted us to repent of our sins. He sent his son as an eternal sacrifice.

It is up to us to look to the Lord and ask him to lead us and teach us to be more like Jesus. Even before Jesus was born, the people knew that God was the savior and we need him to atone for our sins. As we go through this Lenten season in which Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice and the ultimate salvation, we are reminded to fall on our knees and ask for God's help to surrender to Jesus and to follow Him and to be more like him daily.

This same verse paints a picture of God as our leader, our teacher, and our Savior. Teach us we pray to ask for humility, lead us to truth and save us from our sins. In your Son's Holy name. Amen.

-Linda Doss

February 16

Please Read 2 Timothy 4:1-5

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

-2 Timothy 4:2

Paul wrote words of encouragement to his friend Timothy, a fellow missionary, not long before his death. It was during his second imprisonment in Rome and is in fact considered to be the last epistle he ever wrote. It is a very personal, last letter.

Paul wanted Timothy to lead the church in a new direction, one where they are not just listening to various teachings but to a place where they are out in the world, preaching the word, spreading the Gospel, and serving others as Jesus had served them. He was to help others get prepared; correct those who were blind to sin, and strongly discourage such behavior. He needed to have patience with them, encourage and instruct them.

This is important now more than ever before. Things today seem so much more critical. There's more drug abuse, violence, illness, homelessness, poverty and other hardships. I know every generation compares themselves to the ones before. Older generations feel the current generation is crueler, has less compassion, experiences more crime and uncertainty than when they were young. At times they feel lost, like they don't belong here and long for the “good old days” when things were clearer, people were kinder, kids were safer, and drugs and sex were not available on every corner. Many of us are afraid of rejection, afraid to offend anyone, to speak up, or to get involved. We hardly converse with others anymore. We share photos of what we had for breakfast on social media but we won't share the word of God with our neighbors. We feel awkward or stupid so we just stay quiet.

Fear does not come from God. We forget that God wants us to share His word with others. He will be there with us. He will guide us and help us conquer these fears. So many people need to hear God's promises. We need to have patience and not give up in spreading the message of God's love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. We need to remain faithful to the Lord and teach others about His gift of eternal life.

Tara McVeigh-Smith

Please Read Matthew 9:2-13

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

-Matthew 9:9

“Follow me.” That is all it took for Matthew to leave everything and become an apostle. I have wondered if Matthew knew of Jesus before he was called. Was he there when Jesus gave His sermon on the mount or had he heard about the miracles he had already performed...or was this his first encounter with Jesus? Maybe Jesus just met him, looked into his heart, and used his divinity to compel him to follow. Maybe he just put a bit of the Holy Spirit into Matthew. We don’t know. I think what is important, though, is whom Jesus called.

Although we don’t know the occupations of all the Apostles, I think we can be sure none of them were a Pharisee or a Sadducee. Jesus came to bring the message of God’s love to the world. He knew that the religious leaders would not accept Him or God’s message. The religious leaders knew the law and practiced the rituals, but they did so without love. It seems that on every other page of the gospel, a Pharisee, Sadducee, or someone acting on their behalf, would challenge Jesus. It happens just two verses after Jesus calls Matthew, when the pharisee challenges Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus knew he couldn’t bring the message of God’s love to the world through the religious leaders. Instead, he called 12 commoners and created a groundswell movement. Reaching directly to the people and igniting a kind of revolution. In just three years of teaching, He created a movement that would continue to grow and grow.

In 2020, there were an estimated 2.38 billion Christians, all of them following Jesus. I love the message of God’s love that Jesus brought to the world, and part of me can’t help but admire the wisdom of the way He did it.

-Wayne Kalliomaa

February 19

Please Read Psalm 77

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

When I read these verses, I think about Chris Tomlin's song
"How Great is Our God":

*Name above all names
Worthy of our praise
My heart will sing
How great is our God*

I was looking at a picture from the James Webb Space Telescope of just a piece of the sky. The caption said that the hundreds of points of light were galaxies and that each galaxy could contain 100 billion stars, and that was only a small piece of the sky. What a great God we have that could create all of that. It all happened when God spoke and the Big Bang happened.

Again Chris's song plays in my head:

*How great is our God, sing with me
How great is our God and all will see
How great, how Great is our God*

*God, we are so thankful that you created all of this for us. You are
a great God and we are forever grateful for all you have given us.
Amen.*

-Jerry Boulett

Please Read 1 Peter 3:3-18a

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

-1 Peter 3:9

When someone does or says something “evil” to me, my reflex reaction is to get even with them, to retaliate. I may even go so far as to plan how I will get back at them. Even though I am a Christian it is difficult to turn the other cheek.

It may take awhile to fight off the urge to get revenge, but when my response is to bless rather than retaliate, then I am acting like a child of God. The word “bless” is such a religious word that I have trouble grasping what that means. When I looked it up, the definition that made the most sense to me was the one that said “to ask God to look favorably on someone.”

My version of “turning the other cheek” is to start praying for that person or situation. My attitude is certainly not transformed overnight. My prayers for this person or situation usually need to be ongoing. It often takes a very long time to turn my attitude around and/or see a transformation. I may even discover that I was the one who needed to be changed.

-Fern Jackson

February 21

Please Read Matthew 4:1-11

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

-Matthew 4:10

In Matthew 4:1-11 we read the story of Jesus’ time in the wilderness. What is a “wilderness”? By definition, a wilderness is an uninhabited or inhospitable place. Jesus was in such a place for forty days, during which time Satan tempted him with food, safety, and power. His trials and temptations during this time were based on things most of us long for in our own lives, especially during the tough times.

It is common today to call the rough patches in our lives “wilderness experiences.” These are times when we may feel lost, confused, or even as if life is somehow punishing us. Jesus was not lost or confused, and he was not being punished. His wilderness experience was a time of preparation, a transitional period on his journey toward his ultimate purpose of saving humankind.

Our wilderness experiences are also transitions; a bridge between where we’ve been, and where we’re going. During these times we often experience the loss of many of our creature comforts: friends, finances, opportunities, health, optimism, and even our spirituality. Like Jesus, we are tempted and tested during these times. But also, like Jesus, we can face these turbulent waters by following His example.

Verse 10 reminds us to turn away from Satan as he tempts and tests us when we are at our weakest. It is during our time in an inhospitable place, when we feel the lowest, that our need to reach out to God is the highest. By following the pattern Jesus laid out for us, we can chase Satan far from us, and fulfill the command to worship God and serve Him only.

There is no place so remote, so lonely, so far away from your comfort zone, that Jesus has not already been. There is no challenge, difficulty, or obstacle he has not conquered. In the deepest, darkest parts of your journey, Jesus is your guide. Look to Him to lead you out of that wilderness, and into eternal life.

-David Smith

Please Read Romans 3:21-31

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

-Romans 3:27, 28

Wow! Paul sure does pack a lot into his writing doesn't he? So, what does it mean to be “justified”? From the court of law, a judge with a prisoner before them can declare the prisoner innocent or justified.

What is “redemption”? It's to buy back a slave or prisoner in order to set them free. Look at verse 28, “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”

I am innocent because of my faith. Although I sin, daily, because of my faith in Jesus Christ I am declared innocent. I do what I do out of my faith. Not because some law says to do this or that. I want to help others because I see a need, not to get brownie points with God. I donate food and my time because, well, Jesus would. And honestly, that's what I like about being Lutheran. Faith alone, Word alone, God alone. Pretty simple, right?

Who gets to be justified? Who is this for? Is it just for the “cool kids”?

If you continue on, verse 29 explains it perfectly. God is God to the Jews and the Gentiles. Well, that is pretty much *everyone*! Jesus' death is why we, me and you, are redeemed. Jesus loved us so much, he sets us free from the prison of sin. Maybe somebody you know needs to hear that. Maybe you need to be reminded of that.

-Doretta Rapp

February 23

Please Read Psalm 22:23-31

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

-Psalm 22:24

Were you to be asked to stand in front of the congregation and tell just how angry you are with God, and how you feel that God has abandoned you, would you accept the invitation? Would you tell of times when you wanted to yell at God for not answering your prayers? How grateful we are that it is unlikely that we would be asked to make such a public confession.

The psalmist, however, has no problem yelling such displeasure at God. “My, God. My God, why have you forsaken/abandoned me?” And a thousand years later these words will be among the last words from Jesus’ mouth from the cross. And this year, as altars are stripped during Maundy Thursday worship, we will hear these words cried again.

Yet, as powerful as these words may sound, they are the prologue to, but not the purpose of this psalm. The psalmist remembers the angry words, but also remembers God’s most gracious response to words spoken in pain and anguish and fear. Gracious God responds with love and care and forgiveness and redemption. Gentle God answers with healing and strength and resurrection’s new life. For God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Now the psalmist, freed of the feelings of abandonment and feeling wrapped in God’s love, speaks words of praise and thanksgiving and cries out to us, “You who love, adore, worship and serve the Lord, give praise! God has abandoned no one, nor hidden God’s face from anyone. Rejoice in this good news.”

But today is Lent, 2024. On this day we read Psalm 22 with one hand and the newspaper in the other. We read of war and promise of war. We hear of famine and global illness. Greed over-

comes compassion. Good appears to be swallowed by evil. And we ask, “My God, *why* have you abandoned us?”

The Spirit of the Lord comes to us and gently whoops us upside the head. “Listen people, how many times have you been through hard times and wondered if God had forgotten you, and you had been saved by God’s grace? God does not despise the afflicted, nor hide God’s face to our pain. Set aside your despair. God hears you. God has a plan. Trust in the one who offers healing, hope and resurrection. Give thanks and rejoice.

Gracious God, You listen to our needs even as we cry out in anger and pain. Receive our praise and thanksgiving to you for your gracious love, care and redemption. Amen.

-Pastor Donella Silviera

February 24

Please Read Mark 8:27-30

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

-Mark 8:29

“But what about you, who do you say that I am?”

Jesus first asked, “Who do people say I am?” The answers varied from John the Baptist to Elijah to one of the prophets.

But he persisted to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” With the above alternatives considered and discarded the only option is Jesus is the Christ. Peter (and the disciples agreed with him) speaks what Jesus really was and exceeds the sentiments of the people. He was not the forerunner of the Messiah, but the Messiah himself.

When we study Jesus’ words and actions we can also reply, “You are the Christ and can share that Jesus is the Savior of the world.”

-Barbara Counts

Please Read Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

*“O give thanks to the Lord; call on his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.”*
-Psalm 105:1, 2

Today’s scripture reading invites us into a symphony of praise and remembrance, urging us to give thanks to the Lord and recount His wondrous deeds among the nations. Our focus verses (1 and 2), the psalmist sets the tone for this anthem of gratitude, calling believers to give thanks to God and proclaim His name, making known His deeds among the peoples. This call to praise echoes through the ages, reminding us of the importance of vocalizing our gratitude and bearing witness to God’s faithfulness.

As we meditate on verses 1 and 2, we’re reminded of the transformative power of gratitude. Expressing thankfulness not only uplifts our spirits but also testifies to God’s goodness and faithfulness. This process of being thankful isn’t just reserved for once a year at Thanksgiving, but should be a part of our everyday living — “Thanks-Living.”

Let us heed the psalmist’s call to actively praise and proclaim the name of the Lord, sharing His mighty works with those around us. In doing so, we participate in a sacred act of worship, magnifying the Lord and inviting others to join in the chorus of thanksgiving and praise.

-Barbie Buckner

February 27

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

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

-Hebrews:11:3

This verse is meant to show us about faith. It is where the rubber meets the road. You either believe God spoke his words to create the universe or you don't. If you walk with the eyes of faith, you believe it is so. Our faith doesn't come by what we see but by what we don't see. It is faith in action. Our faith unites us with the past, the present, and the future. It is the foundation on which God's promises are real. It is our solid base of faith toward God that he is the creator of all. He created the world by speaking it into existence. How powerful is that?

Faith is living and knowing that every promise of God is true. So many people in the Bible lived by their faith. Even when they had to wait, endure trials, even when they couldn't see into the future. This is the faith we need each and every day. It is needed through tough times, when we are weak, when we lose hope. It is knowing there is something bigger than us and that is our Lord.

It is that we with our heart and we believe that God is who he says he is...heart, body, mind and soul.

-Diane Schaeffing

Please Read Jeremiah 30:12-22

*“Their prince shall be one of their own;
their ruler shall come from their midst;
I will bring him near, and he shall approach me,
for who would otherwise dare to approach me?
says the Lord.
And you shall be my people,
and I will be your God.”
-Jeremiah 30:21, 22*

There is a difference between consequences and punishment. Most of us do not do a good job of remembering that at the time things are happening, but we really do know and recognize that reality. If I drop a dish on my tile floor as I am taking it out of the cupboard, the result will be a broken dish—the result or consequence of my trying to do that while I was talking on my cell phone—not *punishment*, just results! Punishment has to have an offended party who *responds* to words or actions in a way such as to make the offender suffer or pay for their actions *and* to try to make certain such things do not happen again. All of which may seem a strange way to introduce this reading from Jeremiah, but you may already know that this difference plays a significant role in the life and prophecies of Jeremiah, perhaps the longest and most personal book of any of the prophets.

After his death, Solomon’s two sons split the Kingdom of Israel into two nations, *Israel*, the larger, northern, kingdom, and *Judah*, the southern kingdom. Jeremiah lived in Judah, but his family roots were in Israel. By the time he was born Israel had already disappeared; through unfaithfulness and disobedience and because of intermarriage and being overrun by the culture and gods of the Assyrians. No war, no defeat; the nation simply no longer existed. Mourning for that loss was still very real in Judah, but Judah itself was in real danger from the *Babylonians*, who had conquered the Assyrians and the Egyptians and seemed headed for Jerusalem. Jeremiah saw disobedience and disrespect for Yahweh/God in Ju-

dah, and knew that such things had been carried to such an extreme in Israel that Yahweh/God had nullified his Covenant with them. He warned the people of Judah that the same could happen to them.

The worst actually *did* happen to Judah as the Babylonians conquered and took into exile all of the leaders of Judah, destroyed the temple and Jerusalem, and made slaves of all the people, including Jeremiah. It was even worse than they had expected, but, in their captivity, the people of Judah repented and tried to restore their relationship with Yahweh/God. To their surprise, even though they were conquered and removed from their land, the mourning and prayers of the people were heard and Jeremiah, the prophet, was given words of hope, continuing love, and faithfulness from Yahweh for the people of Judah—even this promise of restoration! Our reading today reflects that time, and Yahweh’s words of understanding; most significant are the last two verses, as Yahweh renews the Covenant, “*You shall be my people, and I will be your God.*”

The prophet’s words in this chapter and the next show us Yahweh/God understood the sadness and repentance of the people enduring a suffering which *he*, himself, had allowed as a consequence of their failures. In their captivity they have been faithful, however, therefore they shall be restored and the Covenant *will* continue! Clearly, we see that even in their disobedience Yahweh/God had not been far from them, just as now, in their captivity, he is close and caring. No matter how deep the failure and offense goes, God is with us; He actually *desires* the relationship described in the Covenant and we can always repent, *knowing* that He is present and loving and wants to restore the relationship.

We, coming from the New Testament Covenant, established by the blood of Jesus, we know *already* that our failures and sins are exactly what He died for, and as benefactors of His resurrection we can *always* repent, be forgiven, and know ourselves to be “saved” and restored to that Covenant relationship!

-Father Jim Seipel

Please Read 1 Peter 2:4-10

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

-1 Peter 2:10

During this season of Lent we focus on the great love of the Lord and its extreme cost of Jesus giving his life on the cross for our sake. In this devotional love we examine this great love and our responsibility to share this love with others.

Over a series of year I had the privilege of retreats led by laymen and women by Kogudus “Estonian” called Kogudus. The weekend theme was on the Apostle’s Creed. Eventually this retreat also became weekends in prison settings. It became evident despite their settings there was some evidence of rock setting faith. I also had the privilege of a service of Baptism in this setting. We discussed this at great length. These retreats were important to the few inmates who were allowed to attend. Wardens would note our group coming at any time as the week following the retreat brought a sense of calm into the prison for one week.

Baptism is a beginning point as a sign of God’s agape love working in our lives. Mercy and joy are spiritual marks of our lives.

A number of years ago I was privileged to be with a group that toured Wittenberg and other sites in Reformation Germany. We could sense the struggles Martin Luther had with the church at that time. He struggled with his sins, and in the film “Luther” we saw him exclaim, “baptizatus sum” (“I am baptized”) after reading from the The Vulgate (a Latin version of the Holy Bible) in the monastery’s library the phrase from Romans 5:28, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” What a revelation, for this changed his view of the mercy of God.

In the small catechism written by Luther we are reminded Christian Baptism is water with God’s Word begins a new life. Of

note in the fourth section of his treatise he states, “What does baptism mean for daily living?”

Daily we die to sin and Daily we rise to Christ. What a revelation.

In our text of 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter, one of Jesus’ 12 disciples, urges the readers to remember Jesus suffered and died for them and to live holy lives.

In John 1:14 we read, “We have seen his glory; the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” But fortunately, in John’s Gospel and in the life of Christ, grace and truth go together. If it weren’t for the assurance of grace, how could we acknowledge the full truth about ourselves? A passage from *Sources of Strength* by Jimmy Carter: “Our responsibility is also to reach out to others with God’s mercy and grace by what we say and do. His needs are great. We stand in solidarity with our siblings in Israel and Gaza. We know true joy because of all God has done for us.”

We pray for a cease fire. Release captives and restore families. We ask for you to inspire the world to support peace talks and new understanding. Comfort the grieving and frightened. Teach us that violence is never the answer, and only You can provide solutions. Make us responsive to your Spirit. Amen. (From pastoral letter SW Synod ELCA Bishop Rev. Brenda Bos)

-Don Swenson

Please Read Psalm 119:9-16

*“I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.”*

-Psalm 119:14

If you were asked to list all the ways that the “law” has blessed your life, I wonder how long your list would be? My best guess is that you (like me) would not come up with as many good things to say about the “law” as the writer of Psalm 119.

Psalm 119 is one of the longest sustained reflections in all of scripture. It has 176 verses (the longest Psalm in the Bible), filled with joyful acclamations describing the beauty and the wonder of the law. It comes as a surprise when in v.14 the writer tells us that it fills them with as much delight as being very rich would give them. Most of us, when we talk about the law are likely to talk about the necessity of having good laws. Many would also provide abundant commentary on what a nuisance the law can be. It always seem to fall short of insuring the behaviors that would make all of us feel safe and secure. It seems to create as more debate than unity. And, quite frankly, many of the laws that are enacted don’t really seem to offer any meaningful contribution to our society. Some seem to work against the well-being of many people. More than a few are just antiquated, even silly.

Just to be clear, when we talk about the “Law” in our scriptures it is not the same thing as the “laws” that our governments put into all our local, state, and federal codes. But as the Bible understands the “Law” it does envision a sort of universal code, that can be easily described and understood. Those precepts are widely enough accepted that they can be understood to stand behind the endless attempts by our governments to put laws, that is enforceable rules, in place that will guide our society toward achieving its best behavior.

The simplified understanding of the Law in scripture is a thing of beauty that can easily fill our hearts with delightful vision of what the world might be like if we all sought to fulfill the intent

of the Law. In Lent we are encouraged to put added energy into some basic human disciplines that reflect the intent of God's Law. The disciplines encouraged during Lent are the spiritual practices of repentance, prayer, fasting, works of love, and sacrificial giving. They are practical, and beneficial behaviors designed to seek to draw us closer to our Lord. These disciplines are a sort of rule, or law that reflects Jesus' teachings about the law. Jesus lifts up what he calls the greatest commandment (law), "Love the Lord your God, with your whole heart, mind, and soul. And, love your neighbor as yourself." That is the understanding of the Law that the Psalm writer asks God to help them fulfill. Indeed, would all of us find delight in the fulfillment of those ideals in our world. If love and caring, spiritual practices designed to honor God and neighbor, and sharing of the riches of this planet, ruled in our lives, and in our world what a wonderful world this would be. I wonder if we can all move that understanding of the Law into the center of our lives in these few short weeks of Lent. If we can, I think we will find many reasons to delight in the Law, reasons that fill our lives with unexpected riches.

-Pastor Jim Fuller

Please Read Mark 9:2-8

“Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.”

Mark 9:7, 8

This scripture tells the story of the Transfiguration. Up to this point in Mark’s Gospel, we have witnessed Jesus’ teaching, Jesus’ healing, Jesus’ miracles... all revealing the presence of God in Jesus. Peter, James, and John have had front row seats to all of this. They’ve seen it all, up close and personal. But then, in the Transfiguration, they see Jesus, “...his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” If that wasn’t awesome enough, Jesus is next seen talking with Old Testament heroes Elijah and Moses.

Now, from our vantage point, in the New Millennium, we look back at Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration and think, “Certainly, this inner circle of the disciples will instantly grasp what’s going on here.” God is revealed in Jesus. After all, Jesus’ parables and teachings are still rattling around in their brains, their hearts are full of joy for that Gerasene fellow freed from a demon, there’s still bread stuck in their teeth after feeding 5,000 people.

But, how do these core disciples respond? Let’s build Elijah, Moses, and Jesus houses to chill in! What? Why? The point is, they don’t get it. They don’t have a clue.

Can we blame them? God in Jesus is doing a completely new thing, something never seen before, something so outrageously out of the box, it’s unthinkable; beyond comprehension... in and through Jesus.

I’m always amused, in a roll-my-eyes-kind-of-amused way, by those who believe they’ve got God and what God is doing all figured out. But, God is often acting outside of our understanding. How can anyone with any kind of integrity discern what God is up

to, all the time?

So, how should Peter, James, and John have really responded? The first thing that comes to my mind is, “Be still and know that I am God...” (Psalm 46:10) Listen. Cease action. Be open to what God is doing. Be open to how God is working. Try not to allow preconceived notions of how we think God is working to overshadow what God is actually doing.

Be still. Know God in Jesus. Listen.

-Pastor Barry Vail

Please Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

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

-1 Corinthians 3:11

Not remembering much about the city of Corinth, I took some time to restudy it. Corinth was a city of wealth, luxury, and immorality. It was geographically important as it controlled two harbors so was an important and vital trade route both on land and sea. It was a large city, around 700,000 (counting both free citizens and slaves). The many people that occupied the city had diverse backgrounds, from the legalistic Jews to the previously Pagan Gentiles. Corinth had built a huge temple in honor of the goddess of love, Aphrodite/Venus. At one time the temple employed more than 1,000 prostitutes, although these practices had probably ceased by the time Paul came to Corinth. But nevertheless, Corinthian's had a reputation of sexual immorality and drunkenness; a people who worshipped money and all things that it could buy.

Paul came to Corinth because he knew if the gospel could take root there, that it could go everywhere given the trading influence it had on the region. Paul spent 18 months there and established a church. One of the largest churches for that time. The church had no central meeting place and met in homes or wherever they could, so the church was really made up of many small congregations around the city.

About three years after Paul had left Corinth and while he was working in Ephesus, a city around 275 miles to the east and across the Aegean Sea, word reached him about several serious issues and problems within the Corinthian church. It seems their spiritual life was faltering. In this first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is addressing the problems in the church and gives foundation for practical Christian ethics.

Chapter 3 is addressing one of the issues, which is the divisions within the Corinthian church. It seems these many small congregations are lining up behind various church leaders: Peter,

Apollos, and Paul. In verse 6 Paul states that, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” Pointing out that we are God’s servants.

In verses 10-11 Paul uses a building as a metaphor saying he (Paul) built the church per God’s wisdom on the foundation of the cross of Christ. In verse 11, our focus verse, Paul states that “no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid.” So whatever building is done, it must fit the foundation and the shape must match the foundation, and likewise, the structure is supported by the foundation. Verse 16: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

Paul is stressing to the Corinthians that the church is them and that God’s presence is in them. They need to live as a community of God’s people. And 1 John 4:8b says “God is love”, so the foundation of all things is love. These various congregations in Corinth must learn to love each other and live in peace for they belong to God and not to any religious leader.

Paul was an ambassador of Christ to these messed-up people of Corinth, so perhaps the lesson here is to remember we are being called to be God’s ambassadors in our world. That we are being reminded to be careful how we build, be intentional with what we are doing so that we live out faithfully our calling as God’s people and make love the foundation of all that we do.

-Sandra Lebo

Please Read Hebrews 9:23-28

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

-Hebrews 9:24

Lent, a time we can take to contemplate the life of Jesus, following Him on the journey he took to the cross. We can think about the amazing revelation of God through Him; His turn-the-world-upside-down life that He lived to show humanity the love God has for us all, the sacrifice of his coming into the world and dying on the cross for our sins. This is a time to draw close to Jesus through study of His word, prayer, fellowship and service to our communities. These verses in Hebrews can bring our attention to Jesus, and how much He did for us, to open the way to a relationship with God.

There is no comparison between the sacrificial work of the priests and the work of Jesus. The sacrifices conducted by human hands for cleansing sins and maintaining a right relationship with God fell so far short of what was actually needed to heal and restore that relationship. These practices had to be performed day after day, sacrifice after sacrifice, gift after gift, to give the people atonement for sins and a relationship with God. Not even the High Priest, entering the Holy of Holies once a year to sacrifice the blood of animals for the forgiveness of sins, for himself and the faithful, could completely and eternally mend that broken relationship. Additionally, this system of cleansing and forgiveness was set up with things that only represented and resembled heaven; they did not break through to heaven itself.

Clearly, a better way was required and a better way given. Knowing the limitations of the law and rituals, God created a pathway to be able to be in a relationship with Him, one that is always open, thanks to Jesus. God ensured a way that we can draw close to Him without human-made ideas and rituals. In Jesus, we have a high priest that did not need an arrangement that resembled heav-

en; Jesus actually entered heaven and presents us to God. Jesus did not have to offer himself again and again for our sins. He died and shed his blood once for all, and will come again to save those who eagerly wait for him. His work in our salvation is complete.

During this lenten season, we can draw near to our gracious and loving Jesus, who came into our world and forever and completely removed our sins, so that our relationship with God can be restored. We can think on His sacrifice that brought Him to us, how the restoration of creatures and creation to their Creator was of higher regard than His very life. We can journey with Him, study the words and messages he brought to those around Him, model how He lived among His neighbors, communities and the world, demonstrating justice, kindness and peace. We can watch His examples of faith, devotion, and prayer. There is no one better to draw near to seek and cherish the relationship with God that He made possible as we wait for Him. We can rest in His work, and our minds be at peace, knowing that Jesus, the perfect sacrifice has entered heaven and bids us welcome.

-Terri Pyle

Please Read Mark 11:15-19

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

-Mark 11:15, 16

Growing up in a household with three generations of fiery Italian women, I’ve always been a fan of this Jesus story. A snapshot of Jesus’s emotional human side, it was relatable for me because there were times I wished I could flip tables in my life (specifically during certain math classes). It was comforting to my teenage/young adult brain and its lack of impulse control to know that the savior of the universe got just as pissed off at things as I did.

I learned later, to my dismay, that this story isn’t as simple as Jesus getting angry and showing it. Yes, that’s part of it, but his reasoning for getting that furious was far deeper than is written.

This event takes place during Passover, which means the temple was teeming with activity as Jews from near and far made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. These people were not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, but cared so deeply about their faith that they traveled, lost wages, and uprooted their day-to-day schedules and lives in order to worship.

Although it makes our modern values bristle, the custom at the time was for animals to be sacrificed in worship. In order to be sacrificed, the animals had to be checked for purity. Anyone who has traveled with an animal, whether by car, plane, or another mode of transportation, knows how difficult it can be. I can imagine that bringing your own pure dove to the temple wasn’t really an option.

Good news! Temple approved doves for sale! Only ten to fifteen times the price of a normal dove! Get yours today!

Exhausted from the journey, it’s understandable why some

people might just accept this blatant price gouging and do what they had to do to show their devotion to God.

But there was another catch.

The temple required a specific type of money to be used within their walls. Roman money, which depicted the emperor's image, was not allowed. This means that these weary travelers had to exchange their money, of course at a massive fee, before they could use it to buy the aforementioned exorbitantly priced birds.

When Jesus flipped tables at the marketplace, he wasn't flipping the tables of people selling reasonably priced fair trade coffee or those with homemade baked goods available for a free will offering. He was flipping the tables of those who needlessly took advantage of the desperation of persecuted people who only wanted to worship in peace. Jesus didn't call it a den of hardworking craftsmen, or a den of honest salespeople. It was a den of robbers.

So yes, if anyone asks you "What would Jesus do?", it is true that flipping tables and chasing people around with a whip is within the realm of possibility. It is also true that Jesus only did this in the name of justice. He wasn't a belligerent person who couldn't control his anger. He was standing up for the mistreated when no one else would.

And remember what happened after Jesus scolded them and flipped their tables?

He died for them anyway.

-Carina McVeigh



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

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

-Psalm 107:1

Have you ever met someone who you thought would be a great friend but turned out not to be? When I read the passage from Psalm 107, I knew exactly what I wanted to write about. In sixth grade I met a girl, and we quickly became friends, but because of some family things she changed and not for the better. I let her bad attitude affect my attitude and my life. During second semester she became sick and wouldn't be at school for weeks at a time. One time, at lunch, she started to yell at me, and things went downhill from there. We were almost always fighting, then, we wouldn't talk to each other for weeks. She would still like to be friends, but I don't want that kind of influence in my life. During all of this, I prayed and asked God for help with this friendship. I feel like this is the answer God gave me. I give thanks to God because he is good and he answered my prayers.

-Taylor Hogstad

March 8

Please Read Ephesians 1:7-14

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

-Ephesians 1:11, 12

In these verses Paul is speaking to the Ephesians and sharing the Good News, that we have redemption through Christ's blood, forgiveness of sins, and that God will bring together all things in heaven and earth according to his plan.

We as believers are blessed with these spiritual gifts, this truth, this message of the gospel that saves our soul! And it brings to light the simple, wonderful truth; God loves us so much, he is so “in love” with us, that he decided even before he created the heavens and the earth, to make us his adopted children, provide us salvation through his son Jesus Christ, and to transform us to do good works for his glory. We are incredibly privileged because of what God has done for us.

Paul tells us that the God of all creation has marked you and me with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit *guaranteeing* our inheritance. No “what if's”, or “well I hope I'm good enough's”— it is a done deal! Wow, what an incredible feeling!

As believers we exist for God's glory, and in turn, to bring him glory, in what we say, what we do, and in how we respond to his call to love our neighbors and live in unity. Praise God for his grace freely lavished on us through Jesus Christ.

-Dana Skinner

Please Read John 3:1-13

“So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

-John 3:7, 8 (The Message)

I enjoy learning new things. I recently learned a few new stitches for knitting because I wanted to make a blanket for Taylor. I also learned a new math word while teaching a first-grader a new way of learning about numbers and math. The excitement I get from discovering I can do something new then practicing the new thing is energizing. I always look forward to sharing what I’ve learned, and I think sometimes people get a little exasperated with me and my excitement. Not always, but occasionally.

I think that’s one of the many reasons I am so drawn to Nicodemus. I cannot explain the connection I feel between his story and me. There is very little we would have had in common. I’m not a man. I’m not a religious leader... hmmm, let’s try another one. I’m not a teacher... umm... It seems we might have more in common than I thought. Nicodemus asks tough questions but does so under cover of darkness where no one else in his elite group will hear. I like tough questions and talking about the answers. I want to think about what it means to be Spirit born and know that the breath of God dwells in me. I want to feel the wind blow through the tree limbs (just not at 30 + miles an hour—I have my limits). I want to see the hand of God move across the waters and see the mastery God created. I also want to be the one standing up for my friend.

Nicodemus stood up for Jesus at the end when it truly mattered. Because of his conversation with Jesus that night, Nicodemus took care of Jesus’ body for burial and was responsible for Jesus’ tomb. I want Jesus to have that kind of impact on my heart so that, at the end, my faith will speak for itself, and my life will have made a difference.

-Megan Hogstad

March 11

Please Read Hebrews 3:1-6

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

-Hebrews 3:5, 6

The author of Hebrews uses the metaphor of a house to provide us with a mental picture for understanding the outcome that Jesus was working to achieve with his ministry among the people of this planet. When we think about a house, we most likely envision a building, a structure designed for a family to live in. There are some basic things that belong in a house in a floor, a roof, walls and windows. In our modern understanding a house would also be divided into rooms. There would be shared living area, a kitchen for cooking, bathrooms and bedrooms, maybe an office space, closets for storage, perhaps a garage. Most Middle Eastern, 1st Century houses would not include all those separate spaces, so if they envisioned their living space it would be quite different from our picture of what a house is. Still, some common conceptions of a house and what it was for can help us understand what the writer is getting at. A house is a place where people live. People who care for one another. A place where work is shared, food is shared. A house offers some sense of belonging, a feeling of safety and protection, of intimacy in the form of people knowing each other pretty well, and accepting each other. The writer seems to imply that those were the kinds of shared living that Jesus hoped for among the people he gathered together as followers.

In Biblical thought a house can have some other meanings as well. The Temple in Jerusalem is sometimes called the House of God. Jesus uses the term, “my Father’s house” several times when he is talking the Jerusalem Temple and the reverent devotion that was appropriate in that sacred space. It seems likely that these verses in Hebrews have that idea of God’s house, a place of reverent devotion and worship in mind when they explore Jesus’ hope

for gatherings of God's people.

Rather than invoking the image of a building, the term house can also mean a family, especially when used to talk about prominent families. The House of Abraham, or Jacob, or house of David, are examples of this. It is a reference to a multi-generational household, spanning the history of those who are descendants, or welcomed into the "family" of a significant spiritual and/or political leader. The House of God certainly includes this idea that those who have come together to serve and to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are included in God's family.

We often refer to our church buildings, especially our worship spaces, as the House of God. But this text wants us to embrace the idea that, we the people of faith, we the people we call the church, have been built into a dwelling place for God. What a wonderful, what a daunting idea that is. The dwelling place for Jesus in this world, the earthly house that Jesus resides in, is the people who have come together to serve, and to worship Jesus. Have we become a home worthy of housing the Lord of all creation? Is our fellowship an adequate spiritual dwelling for Jesus? While we focus on shaping our churches, both the buildings, and gatherings of our church family, so that they serve us, have we been clear that it is even more important to ask how we as God's house serve God.

In Lent we are reminded that we have been gathered together so that Christ can live and work, and find joy in living in us, in our worship, and just as importantly, in our service in the world. Lent can be seen as a time for restoring, remodeling, renovating, our shared calling to be a dwelling place for our Lord. A place where any who join our household, will find Jesus living among us. Jesus telling us what the house should look like. Jesus at home among us because we have made space for him in our hearts, minds, and our service in the world. Lent could serve us well as time of getting our house in order, so that when at Easter we celebrate Jesus' homecoming, we will have prepared a home that will fill his heart with joy.

-Pastor Jim Fuller

March 12

Please Read 1 Corinthians 10:6-13

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

-1 Corinthians 10:13

There's this supposed quote from Mother Theresa on the internet that reads, “I know God won't give me anything I can't handle. I just wish he didn't trust me so much.”

God will not give you more than you can handle. How often have we heard that phrase throughout our lives? It is meant to give us assurance that we can weather any storm God throws our way, and how great our strength is in overcoming such obstacles. And on the surface it's a great sentiment about perseverance and winning our battles. Too bad that's not the point.

What Paul is getting at is that God *will* give us more than we can handle, but it's also God who provides a way for us to endure it all. The Bible is full of people who were unable to handle the load that God put upon them. Noah. Abraham. Jacob. Joseph. Hannah. Joshua. Even Paul himself. The list goes on and on. But what matters is that relying on God helped them through those trying times. They could lean on him, as we should do.

We are all ill-equipped to carry our burdens alone, plain and simple. God provided the only way we can keep putting one foot in front of the other in the form of his Son. God gives us more than we can handle so that we will put our faith in the one who handled it all. We will endure because he endured death on the cross for our sins. So no matter our deepest hurts, our most painful heartache, God is with us.

-Jennifer Rapp

Please Read John 8:12-20

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

-John 8:12

In this passage of John, Jesus is teaching at the temple and in this moment it is in the treasury where he delivers, in my opinion, one of his most famous lines: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Now Jesus doesn’t mean that he is literally the light that brightens the world, just like he doesn’t literally mean that anyone who doesn’t follow him is walking in literal darkness. What Jesus actually means is that he is the spiritual light that guides us through the dark times in life and that anyone that believes in him will never have to worry about walking through those dark times alone, because he will always be with them no matter what. So I know that it sounds cheesy, but if you are ever having a tough time and you don’t know what to do, just remember that Jesus is there waiting for you to step into the light.

-Austin Hogstad

March 14

Please Read Isaiah 30:15-18

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

I read a quote recently about unanswered prayer and it went something like this: God doesn't say no, he says “Yes”, “Wait”, or “I have something better for you.” I like that idea, because I don't know about you, but I would like my prayers answered ASAP, if you know what I mean. At least this gives me chance to take a breath, slow down, and (hopefully) be aware that God has a plan for me.

Prayer and patience go hand in hand, it seems. Again, something I have had to learn over the years. Prayer can be a discipline for some. I have journaled my prayers in the past and I will admit looking back, I can see the “yes's”, the “wait's”, and the “I have something better for you” answers. I have also, cried, screamed, and whispered prayers, and I bet you have too. I, along with you, have had long-term prayers. I still do. I faithfully believe that they will be answered.

The good news is God is listening. He “longs to be gracious to you” and he wants to “show you compassion.” So, keep on praying! Continue to have patience and know that God *will* answer your prayers.

-Doretta Rapp

Please Read Hebrews 4:14-5:4

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

-Hebrews 4:15, 16

Be honest now. On a cold late night, you are all alone in a broken-down car and with a dead phone battery. I show up in my clerical collar, carrying my Bible and prayer book, ready to offer aid. Soon behind me, a man smelling of alcohol and rather rough looking, arrives with automotive tools and an auto mechanic's license. Each of us offers to help. Whose offer will you accept? I imagine you chose the mechanic and you got home safely.

God calls all people, some to be priests, others to be mechanics, but all are called to be of service to our neighbors. Yet, trapped as we are in sin, pride spoils our call as we forget that our call is to serve. Instead, we seek recognition, wealth and accolade. The season of Lent calls us to repent.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that God called Jesus to be a high priest, but uniquely a priest without sin. Jesus knows the temptations faced within each call. As Jesus faced each challenge, he resisted the temptation, even as he accepted pain and death for the sake of the people. Sinless Jesus was the true, the most holy priest who offered comfort and blessing to the stranded, while repairing the engine. He carries the prayer book and the tools for he has the knowledge and the heart. Jesus knows when to offer comfort and when to kick the engine.

So, the driver of the stranded car wonders, “Should I open the hood? What if I touch something that will give me a bad shock? What if I forgot to set the break and the car rolls over me? What if I do the wrong thing and make the problem worse?”

Our High Priest calls, “Come, approach the throne of grace boldly and receive help in your time of need because I know what

needs to be kicked.”

Sometimes we need a kick to the head when we fail to see the needs of others or fail to hear their cries of pain.

Sometimes we need a kick to the wallet when we fail to share God’s riches with those in need.

Sometimes we need a kick to the heart when we lack compassion.

Jesus, our High Priest, has suffered as we have suffered, but without sin. He knows our fear, our questions, our lack of equipment, as he assures us saying, “Take comfort. I’ve got you. You will be okay. I’m here with everything needed to bring you home.”

Saving God, you are our ignition driving us forward in your name and you are our break to keep us from crashing in to sin. You are our high priest who judges us with mercy and compassion even when we break the rules of your road. We are bold to come before your throne seeking your judgement. Thank you for your grace and mercy.

-Pastor Donella Silvieira

Please Read Psalm 51:1-12

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

These verses take me back to my childhood, sitting on the wooden pews as the song “Create in Me a Clean Heart” was sung. The words bring a sense of peace. They could almost become a daily mantra, *create in me a clean heart*. Take away the petty thoughts and distractions in my heart and life. Make each day start with a clean slate and renew my spirit as I start each day. “Do not cast me away from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me.” We need to be in your presence always and guided by your Holy Spirit.

-Barbara Counts

March 18

Please Read 2 Corinthians 3:4-11

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

-2 Corinthians 3:5, 6

Let the Spirit Speak!

If I have any talent or qualification or any words of wisdom or admonition, it is from God. You may know this illustration but consider a glove. It has the shape of a hand but it is limp, lifeless, no power, talent, or strength on its own. Once a hand puts it on, the glove has power. It can now do many things. It is filled.

Or consider a shoe. Without a foot inside, it can go nowhere. It is qualified for nothing. Once it is put on a foot, it can go anywhere the wearer wants to take it. It also is filled.

Now consider words. It is hard for us to allow the Spirit to fill our words. We like certainty, to know the facts. When we don't know we “google it.” When it comes to being ministers of the new covenant as it says in v. 6 that “the letter kills but the Spirit gives life.” Our facts and our knowledge are empty, they have no power. They are the letter and “the letter kills.” But when our words are filled by the Spirit, “the Spirit gives life.” We are filled!

Dear Lord, Fill me! Thank you that you made me, I am your idea. Show me how to see myself as you see me, filled by you. Thank you for the talents and qualifications you have given me. Help me to allow you to fill my words with your Spirit that I may bring life to others. Amen.

-Allison Vail

Please Read Psalm 119:9-16

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

I am an old woman, not as old as I'd like to be but older than I care to admit. Most of my life is behind me and with that most of the rashness of youth is over. I have settled into a comfortable life, hopefully lived with a bit of wisdom and contentment. The follies of my youth do come back to me in quiet memories and I have to admit that I cringe in my actions even after all these years, but I do know that God had a lesson for me and greater plans for me to use these lessons later in life.

I am grateful that I grew up in the church and was taught God's word at an early age. Unfortunately, youth has a way of ignoring advice no matter the source. I feel fortunate that my straying, although a painful lesson at the time, helped God lead me to be able to be useful to others.

I am humbled knowing that God is in me and with me always. There is still much for this old lady to learn and consider. God is good all the time.

-Margi Blair

March 20

Please Read John 12:34-50

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

-John 12:46, 47

Past Tense:

We are in the car. Two parents, one daughter, one son. Road trip! “Oh, Oh! There’s an elk! Do you see it?”

“No, where?”

“It was right there”, pointing. “Where?”

We have driven past it. “Too late. Maybe next time.”

We drive into Yellowstone National Park and stop at the first gas station/restroom. After using the facilities, my daughter grabs her disposable camera and starts snapping pictures of the plastic pink flamingos stuck in the ground around the business. She finally saw something and is thrilled! My son already has his nose back into the newly published Harry Potter book. He is captivated!

Present:

I’m trying to decide how to write a Lenten devotion. I’ve emailed Jennifer Rapp several times. I’ve told her the Bible readings that she gave me didn’t “grab me”. I’ve started to read C. S. Lewis. I’ve searched ELCA studies of John. I searched Episcopal studies of John. (Am I too Missouri Synod Lutheran to do this?)

“Look! Look! It’s right there!” Jesus said. My light is showing you that God is here for you! I’m never leaving you, even when you don’t feel it or get it! Even if it doesn’t grab you, I’ve got my arm around you!

Look! The bread and wine are my body and blood. I’m right here!

Look! Your friend texts and says she’s had crisis after crisis at work. You think you should be working on your Lenten devotion. I’m right here when you are listening and encouraging her

with my Light shining through you.

I know you get distracted. Plastic pink flamingos can be cool! Harry Potter books are exciting. And most of all *I'm here! For you! For the world! I'm here!*

“Thank you Jesus for being my constant, my good, my loving God!”

-Marilyn Felten

March 21

Please Read Philippians 2:1-11

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

-Philippians 2:3, 4

The church in Philippi supported the apostle Paul and his ministry more than any other church and he was very fond of them. In fact, Philippians is sometimes known as the Epistle of Joy because of how supported Paul felt while he was in prison. He even wrote the entire book of Romans during this time. Paul also wrote to the Philippians from prison to keep them updated on events, to let them know how he was doing and to thank them for their support. He encouraged them to live the way Jesus lived, humble and kind. He asked them to stand together in unity, share their faith and value others above themselves. They should lead others to Christ by setting a good example and guiding them, even if they faced persecution.

Paul makes it clear in this passage of scripture that selfishness, personal ambition, and conceit are not the way to live. We should be using our energy and resources to serve the interests of others, not ourselves. When we focus our actions through the lens of humility, regarding others more than ourselves, we mirror the attitude Jesus had toward those He ministered to.

When we serve others, we get outside of ourselves. It has been said that the best way to get out of depression is to find someone else who needs help. But Paul reminds us that selfish serving will accomplish nothing. It is only through selfless service that Christ followers can emulate the Savior. Imagine a world in which everyone regarded their neighbor more highly than they regarded themselves, where we put the interests of others ahead of our own, and where conceit and personal ambition give way to humility.

May each of us help create such a world a little bit more each day. Amen.

-Tara McVeigh-Smith

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

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

Psalm 118 in my Bible is also known as a Song of Victory. As I read through the verses, it does seem pretty apparent that the Lord has helped the psalmist through some rough stuff and they are very happy and appreciative about it.

In verse 22 there has been a stone rejected by the builders, yet it has become the capstone. A capstone, as I have discovered, is a really important part of the building process. It could be used over a door or a large stone to anchor a wall. Either way, it’s really important and necessary for the structure to be stable and withstand the elements and daily use.

Spoiler alert, Jesus quotes this passage in Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10-11, and Luke 20:17 about himself. Yet, I also see this as a reference to you and me, because in verse 23 the psalmist goes on to say that *the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes*, emphasis mine. So if God can change a rejected stone into something so useful and unfailing, what can he do for us? Throughout this psalm the writer has called out to the Lord and their cries were answered. So, call on the Lord, he can change your circumstances. Thank him for that, even if it’s not the answer you were looking for, because we don’t know the big picture of our lives. Only God does.

Heavenly Father, You are all knowing. You know how my life is supposed to go. I am merely human, a frail person who struggles with life from time to time. Thank you from listening to my cries. Thank you for all you. This a the day that you has made; I will rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

-Doretta Rapp

March 23

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

“[Jesus said,] ‘Look, 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; 34 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

As you can probably imagine, all four of the “Gospels” in the New Testament were written *after* the death and resurrection of Jesus. The fact that that is true often suggests various questions about the accuracy of the memories that produced the stories. Additionally, the insistence of theologians and believers over the centuries that Jesus was the *incarnation* of God—God taking *human* form—complicates aspects of the scenes and dialogue in many of the events in the stories because it is so much easier to say incarnation than it is to understand or explain how it might appear or reflect in the words and actions of Jesus. This reading, like almost all of Mark and Matthew, should be read with an awareness of its being described through a lens that includes the resurrection, and that it has been translated over the centuries by faithful scholars who believed that Jesus the Christ was God, *incarnate*. Because we frequently and understandably suspend disbelief related to those factors, we can comfortably read and accept what Mark describes without wrestling for the millionth time with those two issues. It is vitally important that we meditate and contemplate from exactly where our faith *is*, and not from what we have been told or what has been expected; factors like the two mentioned here may or may not have a place in your consideration of this and other readings, but the time spent praying and considering them will still be rich and feed your faith!

The wording of the two scenarios presented in this reading is not an accident. Adjectives and adverbs used give a reality and believability to the scenes which add to their meaning. The first part, verses 32 through 34 of chapter 10, are set on one of the

traditional trails that led to Jerusalem by way of Ephraim, Jericho, and Bethany, and the mood and thoughts of both Jesus and the disciples as they walked is certainly understandable. The anger of the authorities about what Jesus was saying and doing had already become quite clear, and him being in Jerusalem was bound to be the opportunity to kill him that everyone was dreading and expecting. Fear and anxiety had to be palpable in the group as they walked, and *we* must deeply appreciate the courage and love shown both by Jesus and by his friends as they kept walking. The method and side preparations involved in Jesus' death, *and* his knowing all of what was ahead are simultaneously logical and, really, unknowable to a normal human mind. It is important to focus on the amazing dedication, love, and courage of Jesus, and the almost innocent allegiance of his friends who clearly had *no* idea of the horrors (or the Victory) they would be dealing with in Jerusalem. It is simply breathtaking to put oneself in that context and imagine and feel what was being required of Jesus and was so utterly feared by the disciples, but it is Lent and that is exactly what all of us really must do!

The latter selection of six verses telling the story of Blind Bartimaeus is added simply to remind each of us that *blindness*, even in its most extreme form, can be healed—even the blindness *we* suffer from—and *faith* is the means for that happening. Perhaps this is meant to be a pat on the back and an encouragement for us to have the heart to really *invest* in our efforts to deal deeply with the matters mentioned in my first two paragraphs about this day's selection. This day should be one of great *thankfulness* and *respect* for Jesus' courage and faithfulness as we contemplate this reading from Mark!

-Father Jim Seipel

March 25

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

In John 12:1-11, we witness a poignant moment as Mary anoints Jesus with costly perfume, an act of profound devotion and sacrifice. Amidst the disciples’ murmurs about the perfume’s value and potential for aiding the poor, Jesus responds with timeless wisdom in verses 7 and 8, our focus for this devotional. He acknowledges the importance of caring for the poor but emphasizes the significance of Mary’s action, linking it to his impending death and burial.

Jesus’s words in verses 7 and 8 remind us of the deeper spiritual truths of the situation. Mary’s act symbolizes the extravagant love and adoration we ought to lavish upon our Savior. It prompts us to reflect on the sincerity of our worship and the sacrifices we make in service to Christ. Just as Jesus affirmed Mary’s actions, may we also seek to honor Him with our whole hearts, offering our best and most precious gifts in devotion and surrender.

-Barbie Buckner

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

This is an appropriate passage for Lent, and one, I believe, we'd often prefer to gloss over. Indeed, Lent is something I've not been fond of—the whole concept of giving up a food, for example. Growing up Catholic, we were urged to choose something to give up for 40 days. As much as I didn't want to, I'd surrender chocolate, or ice cream, or French fries for that time, and I'd yearn all the more for the thing I let go of. I was very aware of my loss, but I knew Easter was coming and I could eat those things again.

As an adult, I now see that verse 24 represents a very different and difficult challenge for followers of Christ. Ice cream was far simpler than what he asks of us. Jesus so clearly says that, “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.”

Notice he starts with “very truly.” It's his way of saying, “Listen carefully and get the message.” After that, I realized that following his command, I'd not give up ice cream for 40 days—ice cream would die to me, forever. That's a horrible thought! The underlying message is about my life. If I live only for myself, I am but a single grain. But if I give of myself unselfishly, like loan my car to a friend, my life will bear fruit.

Looking back, I'd would now very much prefer to give up chocolate for 40 days, and not my selfish desires for the rest of my life. This is a good object lesson that the life we are called to is not all roses and happiness—truly following him means a surrender of my will to his needs. I will admit, I struggle with this idea still, and I'm only occasionally successful. Do you have the same problem? Thankfully, I believe in a compassionate, forgiving God. He knows I am weak.

-Edward Mooney Jr.

March 27

Please Read John 13:21-32

“When [Judas] 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

There is a lot glorifying going on here. When I read these verses, my mind starts to go on cruise control. The repetition of words reminded of the “begats,” those genealogical lists that are found in the Bible. My eyes glaze over the words. When something is important. To God and he wants to get our attention, he repeats the words or phrases. A couple of examples: “Love one another,” “Do not worry,” and in these verses, “Glorifying.”

I often associate glorifying with something only a pastor or bishop can do, not just a layperson. It sounds like a ritual that is official in some way. It is not that complicated. It is to recognize God for who he is and to praise him by walking in faith. Whatever we do, we do it *all* for the glory of God.

Jesus knew his hour had come. He had been born just for this moment, just for us. The ultimate act of love. He had taught and loved his disciples. In his final act of love, he had to prepare them for his death. He did this knowing he was about to be betrayed. Usually, we find out about a betrayal after the fact. How devastating it must have been for him to know before it occurred.

He was about to be betrayed, still he washed Judas’ feet.

He was about to be betrayed, still he broke bread with him.

He was about to be betrayed, still he loved him.

He loved his disciples to his death and will love them after. In his darkest moment he glorifies God. Our unchanging God changes everything. Glory be to God!

-Diane Schaeffing

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

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

John 13:14, 15

After I’m out and about in the world, I come home and take my shoes and put my house slippers on.

In Jesus’ time, I assume they had a basin of water and towel by the front door. They removed their sandals and washed and dried their feet, probably putting on house sandals. It’s like they washed the world’s problems off as they entered their safe haven from the world.

After celebrating the Passover Supper, Jesus rose and started to wash his disciples’ feet. Of course Simon Peter has to be the one to cause a fuss. He wanted Jesus to wash his hands and head, too. I think Peter was embarrassed that Jesus was about to do a humbling servant’s job. He didn’t understand. Jesus told him if he didn’t let him wash his feet, he had nothing to share with Jesus. Jesus told Peter, “You are completely clean, except for your feet, not all of you are clean, but you will understand this later.” At this time Jesus knew who was going to betray him.

After washing their feet, Jesus resumed his place at the table. He asked if they understood what he had done for them. Jesus said, “You call me Teacher and Lord, which I am. I have washed your feet, you should also wash each other’s feet, as I have done to you. Truly, truly I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Blessed are you if you do wash each other’s feet.”

I have had my feet washed by others several times. I’ve also participated in the washing of others’ feet. Both are equally humbling.

I’m always amazed as how simple Jesus’ teachings are it we’d only pay attention.

Lord, give me the wisdom and strength to be a servant with a humble heart. More of you Jesus, less of me. Amen.

-Darcy Hedstrom

March 29

Please Read John 18:1-19:42

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

-John 19:28-30

Well, here we are. Good Friday. A day of mourning because we recount all that Jesus went through from his arrest, trial, and ultimately his death. But it is also a day to celebrate, for we all know what happens next. This journey, this reading, isn't an easy one, but at the center of it all is Jesus willing to give his life for us.

A painting called *The Crucifixion* is housed and displayed at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale. Created by the Polish painter Jan Styka, it's the largest religious painting ever painted, measuring 195' in length and 45' in height. My grandmother, who used to work at Forest Lawn, would occasionally take me and my siblings there when we were younger, and I have to say there is nothing like seeing this painting in person.

What makes this panoramic painting so impressive is not its size, but the detail it holds. It depicts the scene just before Jesus is placed on the cross on the mount of Golgotha. You see the two prisoners to be crucified with him. You see Simon of Cyrene who helped Jesus carry the cross (though not in John's gospel). You see Mary Magdalene and hundreds of Roman soldiers and citizens who have come to watch. There is so much going on in this painting and it's a little overwhelming to say the least. But at the center, at the heart of it all, is Jesus.

Jesus stands in the middle of the canvas, eyes upturned at the heavenly light coming from above. He is looking up, accepting of what he is about to do. Rather than despair, there is hope. When Jesus said, "It is finished", it was a victory cry. When he bowed his head, he did so in peace, not defeat. He gave up his spirit willingly;

it wasn't taken from him. His sacrifice, death on a cross, and all for us.

I really recommend visiting this painting in person; my descriptions of it here certainly don't do it justice. Styka tried to portray Jesus' crucifixion as accurately as possible, and although the tone is a sad one, it still conveys a message of hope to those who come and view it. Jesus is at the heart of who we are and everything we do. He gave his life so that we could truly live. Love won.

-Jennifer Rapp

March 30

Please Read Matthew 27:57-66

“[Joseph of Arimathea] went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.”

-Matthew 27:58-60

Seven hundred years prior to the burial of Jesus following his crucifixion, Isaiah wrote the following: “His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.” The story related to us in Matthew is the complete realization of that prophecy.

When Jesus died on the cross, his followers and disciples scattered. They were overcome with grief and fear, and they hid themselves away in despair. Even though Jesus had told them he would be handed over to authorities, killed, and then rise from the dead on the third day, they could not imagine that happening. Instead, they focused on what they could see in front of them. Jesus was gone.

Meanwhile, Pilate and the others who had been instrumental in putting Jesus onto that cross, were also filled with fear. For them, the fear was that He would become even more powerful and dangerous to them after death than he was when he was alive.

Jesus' followers wanted him to be buried as a matter of respect. It was customary in those days to leave the bodies of those crucified out in the elements. But it was those who had put Jesus to death who insisted on sealing the tomb and even placing a guard to keep watch. They feared his followers would steal the body. But the followers of Jesus had no such intentions.

The finality of the sound of that stone being rolled into place after Jesus' lifeless body was placed inside the tomb must have been unbearable to those present. It is difficult enough for us to feel that finality at the end of our Good Friday service. But it is

precisely that low point, that sorrow, which fuels the joy three days later when we celebrate Easter. We go from despair to joy, from hopelessness to hope, from tears of sorrow to tears of joy.

For Jesus, even death was not the end of His story. Far from it. It was an event on the way to eternal glory. Because He did that for us, we can be assured that death is not the end of our story either. The sorrow of Good Friday is only a precursor to the joy of Easter morning. May we all hold that wonderful, glorious truth in our hearts all the days of our lives.

David Smith

