

Lenten Daily Devotional

*Made by the Members & Friends of
Saint Mark Presbyterian Church*



March 6 - April 21, 2019

Dear Saint Mark,

It is with great joy that we share with you the daily reflections and prayers of our members and friends of all ages to accompany you on your journey this Lenten season. On these pages, you will find stories of love, peace, hope, and forgiveness.

Each entry lists a daily scripture reading and excerpt from this reading, as well as a reflection and prayer.

As we prepare our hearts for the resurrection of the Lord, let us walk together.

—Emily Turek, Jocelyn Callister, Jennifer Carr and Rev. Shelby Etheridge Harasty
March 2019

March 6

Psalm 51:1-17

A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

- ¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
 blot out my transgressions.
- ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
 and cleanse me from my sin.
- ³ For I know my transgressions,
 and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
 and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
 and blameless when you pass judgment.
- ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty,
 a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- ⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;
 therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
 wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
 let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
 and blot out all my iniquities.
- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
 and put a new and right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
 and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
 and sustain in me a willing spirit.
- ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
 and sinners will return to you.
- ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
 O God of my salvation,
 and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
 and my mouth will declare your praise.
- ¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice;
 if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
- ¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
 a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

March 6 (cont.)

Reflection

An esteemed public leader and former military commander admits to adulterous affair and conspiracy to have her husband secretly murdered while on a dangerous military mission. He admitted the sordid details that, under common standards, would be considered sexual assault after an honest prophet confronted him with the facts.

The story of David and Nathan that preceded Psalm 51 could have been stripped from today's headlines. But the apology that follows is vastly different from many contemporary confessions. "If I have offended anyone, I apologize", is the most obvious non-true apology. "I'm sorry, but" is another form of this non-true apology. Yet, David offers a confession that is the gold standard for all other expressions, including yours and mine. He prays this prayer after the prophet Nathan confronts him about his assault of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah.

What is real confession and apology? This Psalm shows the way.

- An appeal to God for mercy and moral restoration; a plea for thorough cleansing from all moral and spiritual impurity.
- An acknowledgement of moral transgressions against others, along with sin directly against God that can be only rightly described as evil in sight of God. The confession goes even deeper to acknowledge the sin that festers at the core of being and must be removed.
- Another sincere appeal to God, this time for the capacity to have a teachable heart to become a wise and joyful person.
- A deep desire for a clean heart, restored once more to God, capable of rejoicing in God's saving mercy.
- The willingness to share the wonders of God's love and mercy with others.

What's even more astonishing about David's heart-rending confession and subsequent forgiveness is that Jesus our Savior is from his lineage. The cross of Jesus for our salvation points to the mercy of God that is on display in David's prayer.

As I pray the Psalms they shape my own relationship with God and give me words when I have none. During this season of Lent, join me in offering this prayer from Psalm 51.

Prayer

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

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.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation,

and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Amen.

--Rev. Roy Howard

March 7

Isaiah 58:6-12

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'
If you take away the yoke from your midst,

the pointing of the finger, and speaking
wickedness,

¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.

¹¹ And the Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.

¹² And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many
generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.

Reflection

Stop the wheel.

Breathe.

Look Him in the eyes.

Who am I?

Why am I here?

To be salt, to remind the world the tastiness of being loved.

To be light, to smile the Sun out.

To be I.

Prayer

Dear Father in Heaven, thank You for being the head of our conscience, for always stretching out Your arms to receive us, for breaking our chains, patting us on the back, and for always cheering us on. We are Your hands and feet. We share Your overflowing love with all who come our way. We do not want to say a word unless it points the world back to You. Amen.

--Arthur, Iris, and Li-Jen, hand in hand (from 2016 devotional)

March 8

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

- ¹ Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
- ² I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."
- ⁹ If you say, "The LORD is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
- ¹⁰ no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
- ¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
- ¹² they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
- ¹³ You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.
- ¹⁴ "Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
- ¹⁵ He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
- ¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."

Reflection

The places described in this psalm where God will provide protection are so evocative. They include shelter, resting in a shadow, refuge, fortress, dwelling, tent, being lifting up in hands. God promises to protect those who place their trust in the Lord. When you call on him he will protect you. This protection is greater than what we can perceive, and greater than what we might reasonably expect.

Prayer

Dear God, Help me remember your promises to us, and to take comfort in them, to know I am not alone. To remember your love can rescue me when I am lost. To remember your love can protect me where I am vulnerable. To remember your love can be the answer when all other answers lead nowhere. To remember your love can soothe the hurt when I am in pain. To remember your love can lead me to safety when I am in danger. To remember your love can bring me strength when I feel weak.

--Audra Kelly & David Porter

March 9

Romans 10:8b-13

“But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim:⁹ If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. ¹¹ As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Reflection

In Romans, Paul spends a lot of time explaining "Justification" in Christ. He tells us that our sins are removed not from doing good works (a major point of controversy at the time) but only through our belief in Jesus Christ as our savior. It's through this belief that we are justified, i.e., reconciled to God and saved. Of course, as Christians we respond to the Word of God by loving others and showing that love. That is who we are. But it's not the showing of the love that justifies us to God, it is the acceptance of Jesus.

Prayer

Holy God, we thank you that you accept us - that you justify us - only by accepting your Son as our savior. We know we are sinners and recoil at the idea that we have to be sufficiently "good" to earn a place in your house. Thank you for the love and grace you show us through Jesus Christ. Amen.

--Mike Lutz

March 10

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”

⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.”

⁸ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written:

““He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;

¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

¹² Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

March 10 (cont.)

Reflection

During the Sundays after Epiphany, Pastor Roy emphasized the meaning as a time of enlightenment, when the true Jesus is revealed to us. Luke is showing us who Jesus is. To me, this portion on the temptations of Jesus throws more light on who Jesus is NOT. He is not the Messiah the Israelites were expecting. He is not going to prove his kingship by falling for the devil's offering him earthly temptations, like food to assuage his real hunger, the power to rule the kingdoms of the world, or prove the power of God to save him. Instead, he proves his Sonship to God by refusing to accept the devil's offerings. He also proves his humanity by being tempted, just as we all are during our lives. This might be a foretaste to prepare him for the rest of his ministry.

In our lives today, we are not faced with such dramatic choices. Thank you God! Our temptations are not always in black or white, good or bad; more like ethical questions such as, choosing personal gain over what might be better for the community, or forgetting our faith when being tempted by worldly pleasures. At my ripe old age, the temptations are more along the lines of resisting desserts at dinner and sleeping late on Sunday morning instead of attending Saint Mark. But we do need to be reminded, as we are every Sunday, that God loves us, and that should define our actions as Christians.

Prayer

(Last verse of hymn) (from Ps. 139)

“Search me, O God, and know my heart
Try me, O God, my mind and spirit try,
Keep me from any path that gives you pain,
And lead me in the everlasting way” Amen

--Page Hawk

March 11

Philippians 2:1-4

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Reflection

Although I find Paul's writing and syntax sometimes difficult to follow, this passage is both beautiful and to the point concerning Paul's deep concern for the church in Philippi and his wish for the Church. If Christ means anything to you, if his love has consoled you, if you are sharing in the Holy Spirit, if you feel compassion, do this one thing for me, Paul.

That one thing is to be in unity. And he lists things that will promote that unity: do not be selfish and do regard others as better than yourselves. And consider their interests, not your own. But these things are not easy even, perhaps especially, in the Church where we are concerned with what we believe to be the most important things in life, so the stakes are higher.

March 11 (cont.)

The fact is that Christ's people have often and will often disagree—not be of the same mind. Witness simply the fact that the Church is divided into countless denominations. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Book of Order has some resonate language concerning this: “Division into different denominations obscures but does not destroy the unity in Christ.” Belief in Christ is our unity and we must hold to that aspiration.

In the meantime, the Book of Order has some wise words to help us put into practice Paul's wish for the Church: “We also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which [people] of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.” We are human, we can't always be of the same mind, but we can work to suppress our own conceit and exercise mutual forbearance.

Prayer

Lord, we know that we Christians have failed you often in our failure to love others, in looking only to our own interests instead of theirs. Help us, as the hymn declares, to be one in the Spirit and to be one in the Lord, and we pray that all unity may one day be restored. Amen.

--Sara Coe

March 12

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Reflection

It was my first job out of college and I didn't like it. I had moved to Cleveland, living alone and separated from friends, family and my fiancé. Four years earlier my older brother had died from leukemia at age 22. After he died I told myself “I won't blame God.” I started asking myself “What do I believe about God?” and “Who am I?” Searching for answers, I quit my job, left that city and enrolled at Wesley Seminary. My fiancé, family and friends were quite shocked at my change in thinking, a decidedly different state of mind. Allowing our minds to be changed is how Paul thought faith in Jesus could flourish. He used the word “Let” to begin the verse “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”, conscious of how closed-minded we can be. Later in seminary I resisted more changes of mind that would have “let” me be a pastoral minister. My selfish refusal to let go of my own thinking – the pride of intellect – thwarted how God wanted me to think.

How God wants us to think is of course inimical to how the world thinks. How does Paul describe Jesus' thinking? First, Jesus didn't think “what's in it for me?” He didn't exploit his relationship with the Father for his own benefit. Second, he was all in - there was no holding back any part of himself in serving God. Third, Jesus was strikingly humble. He didn't stick out his chest and say “I'm the greatest !” Fourth, Jesus was obedient to God unto death. He accepted death as an act of faith in the Father.

March 12 (cont.)

I find it's a daily struggle to think more like Jesus. It requires commitment and discipline. But the Holy Spirit within gives us the strength to win that struggle – when we decide to “let” it happen. Prayer was part of Jesus’ way of thinking and He prayed in every circumstance. It should be part of our way of thinking too, tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us not only to think more like Jesus, but to act more like Him.

Prayer

Our Father, enable us to let our minds be changed by your way of thinking which Jesus showed us in his life, death and resurrection so we can not only think more like Him, but can act more like Him. Amen

--Dick Pavlin

March 13

Philippians 3:20-4:1

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

Reflection

There must have been tensions all around when my English father met his Irish-American in-laws shortly after my birth. But at least he was a Catholic. There is enough Irish, English, and possibly Scot blood in both family trees to make my parents distant relatives. But that was never acknowledged. Tribal lines had become crisply drawn after centuries of ethnic, religious, and political warfare on two small islands.

Years ago we spent a few days in Dublin and were surprised to discover that the city has three cathedrals, two Anglican and one Roman Catholic. Dublin was already a busy port in the 11th Century when the first cathedral was built. The population was a diverse mix of Danes, Celts, Normans, and Anglo-Saxons. But each had their own neighborhoods and each wanted their own church buildings and hierarchy, even though all were Roman Catholic at that time. The two medieval cathedrals became Anglican when the Reformation came to the United Kingdom in 1549. Dublin’s Catholic’s regained the right to worship publicly in 1825 and lost no time building a third cathedral.

Possibly the first cathedral in Europe was the Basilica of Paul in Philippi. It was a city-state populated by Greeks, Romans and Jews when Paul made his mission visits there. In Philippi Paul made his first Gentile converts and struggled to maintain ties to the Jewish community as he broadened his call to non-Jews. As he wrote this letter to the Christian congregation in Philippi, Paul was in Roman prison and facing possible execution for his missionary work. His thoughts turned back to his first European beachhead and the open and generous people who made it possible. He reminded this diverse congregation that their common bond of faith superseded their ethnicity and Greek or Roman citizenship.

The Church should be a place where people of diverse geographic, ethnic and social backgrounds gather under one roof. More than any human institution, the Church should be force for unification and tolerance. Our collective history tells us that many times it has not been. Hope is the virtue that allows us to continue to move forward towards positive goals despite the evidence of history.

March 13 (cont.)

Prayer

Lord, help us to focus more on your perfect goals and less on our all too human impulses and desires. Make us more tolerant of our own shortcomings and the shortcomings of those around us. Help us to recognize our common citizenship with each other and you. Remind us that righteousness is a way of living, not a set of scripture verses or a denomination. Give us the hope that enables us to continue your work on earth as we await our place in heaven.

--Richard Ridge (from 2016 devotional)

March 14

Luke 9:28-43a (NKJV)

Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe *became* white *and* glistening. ³⁰ And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him. ³³ Then it happened, as they were parting from Him, *that* Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!” ³⁶ When the voice had ceased, Jesus was found alone. But they kept quiet, and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen.

³⁷ Now it happened on the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, that a great multitude met Him. ³⁸ Suddenly a man from the multitude cried out, saying, “Teacher, I implore You, look on my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him so that he foams *at the mouth*; and it departs from him with great difficulty, bruising him. ⁴⁰ So I implored Your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.”

⁴¹ Then Jesus answered and said, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you and [be](#) bear with you? Bring your son here.” ⁴² And as he was still coming, the demon threw him down and convulsed *him*. Then Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the child, and gave him back to his father.

⁴³ And they were all amazed at the majesty of God.

Reflection

Jesus, with all his heart and Soul has been trying to teach his friends (the disciples) and others about the glory of God’s Kingdom. He’s just fed the 5,000; he tells them not to run away from suffering; he is performing miracles. He’s tried everything. Oh, they know who He is; they are just so irritatingly human. When Elijah and Moses visit Jesus on the mountain, and Jesus is transformed, Peter, John and James don’t really think about what is happening, but how they are going to memorialize it. They’ve fallen asleep praying with Jesus, wake up and see the sight, and then immediately try to find a way to make the experience material, not even knowing what the conversation among the Three was about.

The same can be said of the father trying to get the demon cast out from his son. Is the man putting his faith in God, or is he trying to get a job done with who is most available that day?

All of this frustrates Jesus, and I’m glad that Jesus’ impatience is portrayed for us in the Bible, for many reasons.

March 14 (cont.)

I see this passage as reminding me to live in the present, and to try and understand my faith more fully. What does having faith mean? How should I live a life a faith? How content should I be on a daily basis if my faith is truly strong? What should I really care about and how should I act (or not?) on it? I can relate to the disciples and the father a little too much. Surely we should pay tribute to God openly and expect help, right? But is this all of what Jesus was trying to teach us?

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, come live in me today and everyday, helping me to live each moment in God's presence. Help me to see and to be amazed.

-Jane Karakashian

March 15

Isaiah 61:1-3

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion - to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

Reflection

The Lord has called me to proclaim His message to the afflicted, so that they know that in their sorrow or pain, or weakness, the Lord is there for them. As a result of their faithfulness, they will be the new and better generation who will renew the land and the people. The world will be born anew, putting its past behind it. I do fervently believe that if our friends, family, neighbors, fellow citizens were to listen to the word of the Lord, there would be regeneration. But if they never ever hear the word of God, how can they carry the burdens of life or experience its joys?

Just recently I was trying to give comfort to a friend of mine who was experiencing disability, maybe permanent or hopefully, temporary. In my list of suggestions for how to deal with this crisis, I began by telling how my faith has given me the strength to deal with crisis in my life. When in despair, I turn to the Lord and pray that He will be there for me, that is always a comfort. I don't ask Him to fix the problem, I just ask that He give me the strength to choose the road to health and healing. In this letter, I also included practical strategies, but I did start with faith and warned her she might not agree, but I had to confess that that is where I began.

Prayer

Lord, give me the strength to be able to share my wisdom and faith with others in their hour of need. It is a gift to be able to help others in whatever way seems useful and possible. I am there Lord, call on me.

--Cecilia Nunez

March 16

Psalm 27

Of David.

¹ The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
² When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.
³ Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.
⁴ One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.
⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
⁶ Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,

and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.
⁷ Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
⁸ ‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
⁹ Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!
¹⁰ If my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will take me up.
¹¹ Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.
¹² Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.
¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
¹⁴ Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!

Reflection

I can relate to David in this psalm. His emotions are all over the place! Initially he speaks of darkness and being surrounded by his enemies. In my own life I can compare that to feelings I have had of fear and depression. David reminds himself that God is his light and his salvation; God will defeat those demons that plague us. David confesses what he wants: to dwell in God’s house forever. In this life and the next one, eternally. I want that too! Then David prays directly to God, asking him to answer him when he calls. Reminding God that he has helped him before and asking to not be forsaken now. I know that when I ask God to be in my life, when I ask him to protect and guide me, he never ever disappoints. The people in my life might fail me, but God never will. And when my focus is on him, when I ask God to teach me his ways, then I want to do what David does at the end of the psalm: tell others. Share God’s truth and remind others to be strong and to be patient. God WILL come through.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, thank you for your protection and love even in the darkest of times – in my life and sometimes just in my head. Remind me to go to you when I need help; I don’t need to try to fix everything myself. And thank you for the gift of your son Jesus, for in him is the greatest reassurance of all – eternal life with you. Amen.

--Diane Wirono

March 17

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³² He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ ³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Reflection

I’m guessing that most, if not all, of you reading this have heard me quote Brené Brown, the speaker and professor who researches risk, shame, courage and vulnerability. She talks about how the courage to be vulnerable has the power to transform the way we live, love and lead. Courage is showing up, letting ourselves be seen, letting ourselves be vulnerable.

The courage Jesus shows in this text is incredible. He hears of Herod’s plan to kill him, and is warned by the unlikeliest of people, the Pharisees. But instead of running, as they expect him to do, he keeps to his work. He keeps traveling the long and difficult path to Jerusalem to meet his death there like so many earlier prophets of God. This commitment to embrace his dark and difficult destiny for the sake of humanity is the very embodiment of inherent courage. This courage is displayed not simply in a single moment or act but in anticipating a significant, daunting, or even frightening challenge and not turning away from it but rather meeting it head on. This is also a matter of character – character that has emerged from a lifetime of facing fears and shouldering burdens and that is also being forged in the very moment of accepting challenges and responsibilities that one could avoid.

We think of “being like Jesus” as being strong and doing service, but Jesus also teaches us to have the courage to be vulnerable. He teaches us that a life lived behind a mask of utter, impenetrable, strength is not the life that God calls us to lead. In Jesus, God came to earth, traveled, preached, taught, healed, died and rose from the dead. He did all that because God wants to experience a deep and lasting relationship with us: emotions, failings, wanderings and all.

Prayer

Loving God, in Jesus you showed us how to love with our whole hearts: courageously and vulnerably. Not without fear, but knowing that love is worth the risk. Grant that we who know your salvation may walk always in your light, take courage in your faithfulness, and rejoice in your astounding goodness to us. Through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

--Rev. Shelby Etheridge Harasty

March 18

Isaiah 55:1-6

¹ Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come; buy wine and milk without money and without price.

² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

³ Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴ See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵ See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy one of Israel, for he has glorified you.

⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.

Reflection

The passage starts with “Ho”, as if to wake up anyone who may have lapsed in attention during the previous verses. Isaiah is emphatic: this is an important message for us. Then there are a series of invitations to “come.” Come no matter our poverty or wealth. Come to partake in the life the Lord offers. The Lord has made an everlasting promise, a covenant with us. Come and see what happens when we follow him. There are many forecasts of the Gospel message. The waters of baptism, the blessing for the poor, the warning for the privileged, the promise of steadfast and sure love and grace and the witness of the church and spread of the message of Christ.

It is a comforting message; to come and see, to seek and be found. No matter what, we are loved.

Prayer

Dear Lord,

We come to you and ask that you help us to become: compassionate servants, loving friends, staunch advocates, serving as your hands and feet in the world.

In Christ’s name we pray,

Amen

--Nancy Shea

March 19

Psalms 63:1-8

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your right hand upholds me.

Reflection

It’s hard to imagine David alone and afraid in the wilderness reciting this Psalm. His joy and praise for the Lord in his disparate time is admirable. I know when I’m feeling down or stressed out by life and the world

March 19 (cont.)

around me, I pray for God to help me. I focus on my woes and worries and less on those things that bring me joy. What if, instead of sadness and cries for help, we were more like David choosing joy and praise? What if praising him was all we needed to change our perspective?

Prayer

Lord in our darkest days, help us see you. When we lose hope, help us hear you. When we feel like we are alone, help us feel your spirit. Lord you are our salvation, help us to remember to praise you and feel your joy in ALL our days.

--Stacia Hall

March 20

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Yea, 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.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.



March 21

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Reflection

Jesus has taught us that we are all brothers and sisters and that we honor our savior through our love for each other. When we help others in need we demonstrate this love. Our family experienced this when we noticed a group of homeless people living in an encampment underneath a bridge in Washington, D.C. It was clear that new construction was going to soon result in this group being required to move out of that specific location. We discussed, as a family, how we could help them, even in a very small way. This was quite a few years ago, so Kylie and Julia were fairly young at the time. We decided to make bagged lunches for them. As a family, we went shopping together to choose items for the lunches and we all assisted in making the sandwiches and assembling the items for the bags. The girls wrote little notes to include in the bags. Then a parent, on their way to work, dropped off the bags for the group under the bridge. This is one small example of how we, as a family, helped those in need out of our love for humankind and Christ.

Prayer

Lord, please grant us the wisdom to see that we are all one people, in Christ, and the courage to help and forgive others in his name. Amen.

-LaRoche/Bloise family—Jennifer, Mike, Kylie, and Julia

March 22

Romans 8:31-34

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Reflection

I teach my students to identify text structure and one way in which authors organize their writing is the question and answer technique that Paul uses here. The “things” to which Paul refers may be summed up in the preceding 30th verse:

“And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

March 22 (cont.)

These things are weighty matters but I believe they simply come down to faith and trust in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul echoes John 3:16 in these verses, reaffirming the great love God has for us. If we truly have faith that Christ “intercedes for us” what can trouble us in this earthly life? The very one who has the power “to condemn” is also the one who intercedes for us. Paul answers his own questions with a clear response that nothing or no one in this world can separate us from that love.

Prayer

Let us pray. Heavenly Lord, our creator, sustainer, and redeemer, we give thanks to you for your steadfast love and faithfulness that endures forever. Help us to endure and try to be steadfast in our own faith and love for you. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

--Tom Prelovsky (from 2016 devotional)

March 23

Romans 8:35-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Reflection

By the time you read this, I will have undergone the biggest surgery of my life. It has been less than three months since my first go at mammogram ended with a tech guiding me into a small room where a radiologist delivered news that would set into motion a series of events that I never thought possible, feeling as healthy and young(ish) as I do.

Strangers in a variety of medical offices since then have repeatedly commented on “how lucky” I am, for if it wasn’t for seeking out early screening, I may have faced a far worse prognosis down the road. I know they are right, but this hasn’t made it any easier to process the knowledge that without intervention, the part of my body that helped me support and bond deeply with my two voracious and bright-eyed babies would hurt me. Despite my best efforts to prepare for my journey ahead, I’m entering a space of unknown, and I’m scared.

As isolating and disappointing as this experience has felt at times, I have never been more confident that Paul is right: nothing can separate us from the love of God. I am certain that God’s love surrounds and sustains me today, as it has before and will do forever. God has showed me day after day since that rough first mammogram that he is near: he’s showed up in the form of text messages and phone calls, shared meals and long walks with members of this church—this body of Christ. God’s love has come in long, “deep huggies” and spontaneous I love yous from my kids, and shared laughs with my husband. This love has also

March 23 (cont.)

been in the reassurance from people who have studied scripture far longer than I have that fearing death doesn't make me less of a Christian, nor does acknowledging parts of this journey I'm on really suck—as I'm certain you have recognized in parts of your own journey through life. God, whose love for us led him to send his own son to journey along a path of suffering and death, will never leave us.

Prayer (*From the song “Reckless Love” by Cory Asbury)

God,
There's no shadow You won't light up
Mountain You won't climb up
Coming after me
There's no wall You won't kick down
Lie You won't tear down
Coming after me*
Thank you.

--Jenn Carr

March 24

Luke 13: 1-9

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Reflection

The Jesus we encounter in the Gospels is noted for being unpredictable in often surprising, and even alarming, ways! He turns questions from his followers as well as from his detractors into unforeseen challenges that unmask a new way of looking at life. Often he responds with a parable, a twist on a “logical” and usual answer. Take, for instance, the situation that occurs as Jesus wends his way from Galilee to Jerusalem on this, his final journey toward death and resurrection.

Some eager “truth seekers” ask Jesus to rule on the big issue of punishment from God. Does God single out for punishment terrorists like Pilate? And what about those 18 persons who were killed by a falling tower? Did God “have it in for them”?!Whoa! Here is a topic which evoked (and still does today) many endless discussions and opinions. But Jesus is not going to give it much time. He utters a terse “No” to each question and then says in effect, “So let’s go on to a more important issue, the gift of a loving God’s grace to all.”

His “Barren Fig Tree” parable probes the fate of an unproductive and failed human life. Dwellers of this first century desert area of the world in which greedy land grabbers had gained financial power and reduced all other people to poverty and loss would understand well the metaphors of fig trees and orchards and selfish decisions to cut down any tree that was not “doing its job” of producing fruit to be sold at a great profit to them personally. They would also heed well Jesus’ introduction into this story of a caring gardener who urged the landowner in an agrarian economy to give him the opportunity to work with that frail and

March 24 (cont.)

barren tree so that it could live on to become a viable part of that orchard the next year. “Do not destroy this tree,” he is saying. “Feed it, nurture it. Do not cast it off as worthless. Help it to survive.”

Nor would it be hard for Jesus’ followers to apply this metaphor to other situations. What about those persons who had fallen short in their adherence to the community laws that enabled them to live in “loving-kindness” with each other? And even those who had committed crimes against others? Jesus is insisting on the grace of God as the answer. Not “cheap grace,” but a grace of time and space in which to get back on track, to make a fresh start, to participate in and become a part of God’s ongoing redemptive work of SHALOM in a needy and greedy world.

Hmmmm! Does this sound like a message for our 21st century world too? How might it manifest itself in our lives and goals even as we journey with Jesus in our own pilgrimages? In other words, to quote theologian Dr. Sharon Ringe in her Women’s Bible Commentary, could we in our own journeys “make the path [toward God’s SHALOM] while walking”?

Prayer

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Psalm 51: 10, 12)

--Louise Winfield (from 2016 devotional)

March 25

Luke 13:18-19

Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?

¹⁹ It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.”

Reflection

When we are seeds,
do we know into what we are going to grow?

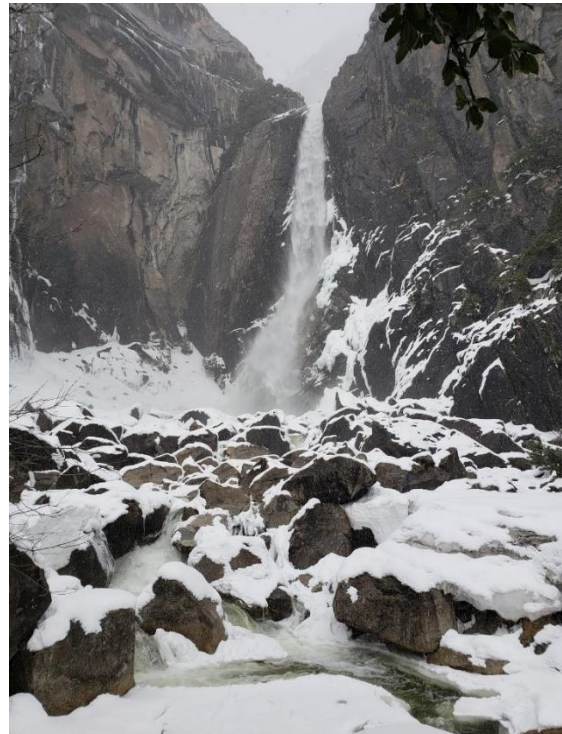
A pine,
a peach,
or a pear tree?

Yes.

The seeds know.

Your love falls on us
thaws
a river
alive under the rocks and snow

Your love calls
and guides the tiny, tiny seed
to grow



March 25 (cont.)

Prayer

Dear God, thank You for Your love. Thank You for the challenges that sometimes make us icy cold and rocky hard, and for always showing us the options of being warmed by You. We choose to grow into You in everything we do. We choose love and not fear. In your presence we pray. Amen.

--Arthur, Iris, and Li-Jen Chen

March 26



Luke 18:15-17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Reflection

I was once a kindergarten teacher so I have always enjoyed observing and listening to little children. They can be fresh and innocent in what they say. They make us think of the old saying “Out of the mouth of babes.” As is so often, Jesus surprises the disciples by saying something different than they expect him to say. He tells them to let the children come! Once again Jesus is saying it’s not the rich and powerful or those whose hearts are hardened and set who will inherit the kingdom of God, but those who are like

children innocent and trusting. It is a simple but complex matter of opening our hearts to the kingdom of God. It is change, Jesus’ counter cultural approach.

In Peterson’s version of the gospel “The Message” he says,

¹⁵ People brought babies to Jesus hoping he might touch them. When the disciples saw it they shooed them off. ¹⁶ Jesus called them back. Let the children alone. Don’t get between them and me. These children are the Kingdom’s pride and joy. ¹⁷ Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child you will never get in.”

Prayer

Oh God, help us open our hearts and minds to Jesus’ simple message of how we can enter the kingdom of Heaven, as that of blessed children! Amen

--June Colilla

March 27

Luke 18:18-27

One day one of the local officials asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to deserve eternal life?”

¹⁹⁻²⁰ Jesus said, “Why are you calling me good? No one is good—only God. You know the commandments, don’t you? No illicit sex, no killing, no stealing, no lying, honor your father and mother.”

²¹ He said, “I’ve kept them all for as long as I can remember.”

²² When Jesus heard that, he said, “Then there’s only one thing left to do: Sell everything you own and give it away to the poor. You will have riches in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²³ This was the last thing the official expected to hear. He was very rich and became terribly sad. He was holding on tight to a lot of things and not about to let them go.

²⁴⁻²⁵ Seeing his reaction, Jesus said, “Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who have it all to enter God’s kingdom? I’d say it’s easier to thread a camel through a needle’s eye than get a rich person into God’s kingdom.”

²⁶ “Then who has any chance at all?” the others asked.

²⁷ “No chance at all,” Jesus said, “if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you trust God to do it.”

Reflection

I’ve always wondered how the official must have felt after Jesus left. Did he regret not dropping everything to follow Jesus on the dusty roads to Jerusalem and be one of His disciples? Did he ever hear the call again deep in his heart after Jesus died on the cross? Did he then say yes?

Jesus calls us to follow Him every day. But in this noisy, anxious, and busy world, it is easy not to notice, not to hear, or to simply tune out the call to follow Him. Jesus does not ask us to drop everything or to sell all our belongings. He gently and lovingly invites us to accept the sacrifice he made for us on the cross and follow Him in our hearts and our lives.

I think the translation of the last verses that best capture the meaning of this passage is the one found in The Message. In it, the answer to the official’s question as to what he needed to do to deserve eternal life is simple. Jesus responds that no one really has any chance at all to be saved if they think they can “pull it off” by themselves, but “every chance in the world if [they] trust God to do it.” God, in His mercy and abundant love for us, sent Jesus to wipe the slate clean. His sacrifice made the impossible salvation of our broken selves possible.

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to listen to your voice every day, every moment when you call us to follow you. Please help us comprehend the dimension of your sacrifice on the cross for us. Wipe our hearts clean and help us surrender to your Grace, through which you have made our salvation possible.

--Bebel Delgado

March 28

Luke 14:7-14

⁷⁻⁹ He went on to tell a story to the guests around the table. Noticing how each had tried to elbow into the place of honor, he said, “When someone invites you to dinner, don’t take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he’ll come and call out in front of everybody, ‘You’re in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.’ Red-faced, you’ll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left.

¹⁰⁻¹¹ “When you’re invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, ‘Friend, come up to the front.’ That will give the dinner guests something to talk about! What I’m saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face. But if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

¹²⁻¹⁴ Then he turned to the host. “The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You’ll be—and experience—a blessing. They won’t be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God’s people.”

Reflection

I’ve always found Luke to be a relatable gospel. Maybe because so many of the stories revolve around parties and shared food! Most of us have been to a party, and for me it makes for a comfortable entry into the stories. This passage includes some etiquette lessons, too. Along with advice on how to behave as a guest, Jesus gives the host some surprising advice: invite the misfits. Reading this story now takes me back to a time when I felt out of place.

Karl, Olivia (who was about 7 months old) and I were travelers in a strange city. The sun had set and at the end of a long day, we were tired and hungry. Karl spotted a charming little restaurant filled with smartly dressed couples enjoying their meals on beautifully set tables. Looking in from outside, despite our hunger, we fretted and wondered whether we could bring baby Olivia into a restaurant that nice. What would we do if she fussed and cried during dinner? We didn’t like sitting next to crying babies in a nice restaurant and knew we didn’t want to become *those people* who, in the eyes of the staff and likely the other diners, *don’t belong* there.

Finally, before moving on in search of a “family friendly” place for dinner, we decided to be brave. Rachel stood by the stroller on the sidewalk while Karl entered the restaurant to speak with the maître d’ about whether we could dine there with a baby. Karl offered to take a table away from the other diners and also promised that if Olivia created a fuss we all would quickly leave. The maître d’ looked at Karl and raised an eyebrow, astonished at his question. Then he smiled broadly and said, “The baby must come in!” He quickly left his podium and the restaurant to come outside, and with Karl, hoisted Olivia, in her stroller, up several steps and through the front door of the restaurant. He led us to a table right in the main dining room next to a cheery fireplace, becoming, in that moment, the host Jesus described who says, “Friend, come up to the front.”

Now, some 17 years after that meal, Karl and I still marvel at feeling fully welcomed into a place we didn’t think would welcome us. This is the blessing that Jesus described to the guests at the table in our passage. God welcomes each of us -- misfits all -- to his table. Our experience at the restaurant gave us a taste of how it feels to belong.

March 28 (cont.)

Prayer

God of every time and place, thank you for welcoming all of us to your table, regardless of who we are or where we have come from. Jesus explained how we are to show hospitality to all. Remind us often of this requirement and move us to welcome all in your son's name. Amen.

--Rachel and Karl Kaufmann

March 29

Luke 15:1-7

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Reflection

The three parables Jesus tells in Luke 15 spring from an actual event captured in the first two verses: Scrofulous people—tax collectors and sinners—are drawing near Jesus to hear what he has to say. At the same event, well-scrubbed leaders—scribes and Pharisees—grumble, saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus responds to the grumblers with three parables. From one angle, the parables highlight the circumstance of sinners. They are **lost**—like a lost sheep, a lost coin, or a wandering son.

From another angle, however, the parables highlight primarily the features of the rescuers of the lost, their hard work and their salmon-leaping joy in finding the lost and in sharing that joy with their neighbors. What shepherd who had 100 sheep wouldn't go after the lost sheep, and, when he found it, carry it on his shoulders back to the flock? What woman who had ten coins wouldn't ransack the house looking for the lost coin and delight in finding it? What father, who lost his floundering son in a far country and thought him dead, would not welcome and celebrate his return, despite the grumbling of his elder son?

We recognize this exuberance most obviously in the father who kills the fatted calf to celebrate the return of his son. But the woman also rejoices with her neighbors in recovering the coin, and the shepherd calls together his friends and neighbors upon returning the lost sheep to the fold.

Only the third parable sounds the turn-around theme of repentance twice, both as the prodigal son comes to himself and recognizes that he has sinned against heaven and is unworthy to be called his father's son but also as the father who patiently closes with clarifying words for his grumbling elder son. Cumulatively, the parables return us to the first two verses in chapter 15, where we reflect on two groups of sinners within hearing of Jesus' parables: the scrofulous unrighteous who are listening to Jesus, but also the grumbling self-righteous, whom Jesus teaches with parables even while they contest him. Both are lost, but within reach of being found.

Prayer

May the ancient prayer be extended to all of us in our unrighteousness and our self-righteousness: "O Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world have mercy upon us and grant us thy peace." Amen

--William May

March 30

Luke 15:1-3, 8-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³ Then Jesus told them this parable:

...⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Reflection

This parable of the lost coin brought to mind the story of the old man and the starfish. In this story, an old man is walking along the shore after a big storm has passed and finds that the beach is littered with starfish. Off in the distance, the old man notices a small boy approaching. The old man could see that the boy was occasionally bending down to pick up a starfish to throw it back into the sea. As he reaches the boy, the man calls out, “Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?” The young boy replies, “Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they can’t return to the sea by themselves. When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water.” The old man replies, “But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I’m afraid you won’t really be able to make much of a difference.” The boy bends down, picks up yet another starfish and throws it as far as he can into the ocean. Then he smiles and says, “It makes a difference to that one!” (*adapted from The Star Thrower, by Loren Eiseley*)

Similarly to the little boy and the starfish, a woman searching for one coin makes all the difference to her. These stories remind me to not overlook the value of the small actions and things in our lives. Even the smallest of kind gestures and words can make a difference.

If we think of the starfish and coins as representing lives, these stories also remind me that every life has value.

Prayer

God of the infinite universe, God of infinitesimal things, I thank You for valuing me, and all people. Help me to understand the small ways in which You make a difference in my life. Make me a worthy steward of your creation. Let positive change begin with me, and reverberate to my family, friends and community. Amen.

--Elodie Domenge

March 31

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ Then Jesus told them this parable:

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that

March 31 (cont.)

whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Reflection

When I first saw the scripture that had been assigned to me, I wondered how I could possibly provide any insights that haven’t already been offered. How could there be anything new to say about the Prodigal Son, one of the most familiar parables in the Bible? Most of us have probably heard dozens of sermons on the Prodigal Son. After prayerful reflection, I realized that no matter how many times we’ve heard this story, it’s worth hearing again.

I found myself focusing on verses 1-3, where we are told that the “sinners” were listening to Jesus while the more learned members of the community, including religious leaders, were condemning Him for welcoming sinners into His kingdom. We do not need to be free of sin to be unconditionally loved by God. There is so much relief knowing that we are God’s beloved children and nothing we do or fail to do will keep Him from loving us.

I also found myself thinking about the elder son. We don’t know if he ever forgave his brother. What we know is that he was angry when he heard music and dancing when his younger brother, who had squandered everything and ostensibly lived in sin, returned home. We know that he was angry with his father for celebrating the son who “was dead and is alive again.” The elder was feeling self-righteous about his own worth and could not find joy in his brother’s return to the family.

The part about feeling self-righteous and angry over another’s sins was something I have struggled with. Only my struggle had an added layer of complexity; the Prodigal Son in my personal story was never repentant. In my experience, knowing that a “sinner” is genuinely sorry for what they did makes forgiving them easier. “At least they recognize that they made a terrible mistake” or “at least they have acknowledged their wrongdoing and have asked for forgiveness,” etc.

March 31 (cont.)

The only way I was able to get beyond my own difficult and angry period with the Prodigal Son in my story was to come to know deep in my heart that God's love has no bounds. It was through prayer and prayer alone that I was finally able to forgive. It did not come easily. If God is able to forgive all of His people, including me, regardless of our sins, then I must forgive the people in my story in order to try to live in His image.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for loving all of your people despite the magnitude of our sins. Though it is difficult for me to understand how you love us so completely, I am grateful that you do. Please help us to forgive one another so that we may begin to heal from the wounds of our world that feel so very deep right now. Amen.

--Suzanne Lofhjelm

April 1

2 Corinthians 5:16-20

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ, reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, God is making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Reflection

This passage feels pivotal. Paul reminds us that God loves us so much that He gave His Son to wipe away our sin and give us new life in Christ. God wants us to live our lives in harmony with Him and each other, and it is through Christ that we know this. What a blessing!

In reconciling us to Himself, making us His friends, as the Good News Bible says, God has given us an exciting message to share. He wants us to show others, all mankind, that He is their friend. He does not focus on their sins. He wants to be reconciled with them.

"So we are ambassadors for Christ." Feeling much like Moses in his skeptical response to God, I wonder, How can I do that? How can God speak through me? It is clear that God gives power where it is needed. Moses doubted, but ultimately, God did speak through him. And if we listen and let Him, God will guide us to be his ambassadors. To that end, the refrain of a song from my youth runs through my head, "... and they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." Love is a powerful tool, and it seems like a good place to start. If, with God's help, we can love our fellow humans in our everyday thoughts and deeds, many will feel our love and hopefully, they will also see God's grace.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for your gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation. Help us to gratefully accept your gifts. Help us to let your spirit work through us so we can truly be your ambassadors. In Jesus' name, Amen.

--Gail Dufek

April 2

Psalm 103:1-5, 11-14

¹ Praise the LORD, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
² Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
³ who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
⁴ who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
⁵ who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
¹³ As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear
him;
¹⁴ for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.

Reflection

Psalm 103 is a typical litany of praise from David. In the first five verses he recounts the many “benefits” of the Lord – forgiveness, healing, redemption, love, compassion and then goes on adding more qualities of a compassionate and loving God. But then he hits us with the phrases – “so great is his love for those who fear him” and “the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.” What? Why would we FEAR a god who is so loving and compassionate? It’s that one word – FEAR – that confounds us. We have read it before, we have heard it before – “the fear of God” – it sounds so negative!

The easy solution is to substitute the words “awe,” “reverence” or “respect” in its place, but they may not convey the strength of the feeling that the word “fear” conveys. As I was reading some commentaries on this Psalm, and the “fear of God” component, I found the following description to be quite helpful. Do not think of fear as being the self-absorbed kind of fear where we are afraid we will be punished for doing something wrong/stupid/mean. That’s the kind of fear that happens to people who are wrapped up in themselves. Think of it more as the intense emotion you have when you have the opportunity to meet one of your personal heroes. You get ready to ask for an autograph (or a selfie) and you realize that you are sweating, stammering, making no sense. What is going on? There is no way you are going to be punished or hurt – but you are genuinely afraid of doing something stupid or saying something that is inappropriate to the person and the occasion. Your joyful admiration has a fearful aspect to it. You are in awe, and therefore you don’t want to mess up. If this is how we behave to a mortal hero, think of how much more appropriate that behavior is in connection to God! This description brought me back many decades to the opportunity I had to meet Eleanor Roosevelt in person. She was my hero! I had read about her, reported on her in my fourth-grade class, and even visited her estate just up the Hudson River in Hyde Park. But there I was in the audience at a talk she was giving and I had the opportunity to meet her, talk to her, and get her autograph (no selfies back then!). Fearful, joyful admiration – awe! Now I know what David meant in this Psalm!

Prayer

Lord, in fearful, joyful admiration we come before you, thanking you for another day. Help us to live in awe of you and all you have done. Keep us from taking it all for granted . . . we humbly pray. Amen.

--Phyllis Norie

April 3

Ephesians 1: 15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Reflection

These verses in Ephesians inspired us to read the entire book of Ephesians. It is so rich with adoring love of God as expressed by Apostle Paul and the feelings about the church of Ephesus. It provides inspiring guidance to church goers and believers—to be wise, dynamic, and constantly remind ourselves that with privileges go family responsibility. We are further challenged to embrace truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation as more than words. Learn how to apply them, you'll need them throughout life. We are challenged to also be a church showered with goodness and marked with the Holy Spirit.

Are we headed in that direction? It is up to each one of us to do our part.

Prayer

Dear Lord, We pray for our members, our pastors Roy and Shelby, our young people and all others who choose us as their church home. We pray that we provide a loving response to those in need and give us strength in spreading God's word. Amen.

--Betty and Jerry Lowrie (from 2018 devotional)

April 4

John 1:5-10

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

Reflection

Two small lights burn continuously in my apartment to ensure that I don't return home to utter darkness. If I get up at night, I can safely make my way to the kitchen or bathroom while not being afraid I will fall.

Light reminds me of God's presence in my life. Even the dark days of gloomy weather or hardship do not overcome it.

John, the apostle and author of this gospel, uses the third person to refer to himself as one sent by God to announce the arrival of Jesus, the true light, who is coming into the world.

April 4 (cont.)

This passage introduces the book of John written by the Apostle John late in the first century C.E. While other gospels provide biographies of Jesus, the Gospel of John focuses on the divine nature of Jesus. John uses “Word” and “Light” as metaphors for God and Jesus.

Prayer

Awesome God,

Thank you for the many ways we witness to Jesus/God by reflecting the true light of the world. Grant us the courage and wisdom to speak out in a time of fear and division. In His name, we pray.

--Pat Simmons

April 5

Acts 2:38-39

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Reflection

The part of this passage that is most striking to me is how baptism is an act, central to Christianity, that has bound people throughout time. Though much in the church has changed, the promise of the Holy Spirit is, always has been, and always will be for everyone – people here and now, plus those from the past and future who we will never meet. For millennia, baptism has been a proclamation of Christians’ intention to repent and follow Jesus Christ. How wondrous it is that this simple yet perfect blueprint for living our lives was applicable then, and always will be. Even as rules and expectations change throughout time and from place to place, we can find the best compass as we look to the baptismal font. As a parent whose children were recently baptized, I aim to let this knowledge guide me and ease my worries.

Prayer

God, please help us remember our baptism each day, listen for your call, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit with an open heart. Help us to love and forgive each other as you love and forgive us. Amen.

--Emily Turek

April 6

Matthew 26:26-29

While they were eating, Jesus took bread. He gave thanks and broke it. He handed it to his disciples and said, “Take this and eat it. This is my body.”

²⁷ Then he took a cup. He gave thanks and handed it to them. He said, “All of you drink from it.”²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many people.²⁹ Here is what I tell you. From now on, I won’t drink wine with you again until the day I drink it with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

April 6 (cont.)

Reflection

In this verse Jesus is offering himself to his followers through blessed bread and wine and is foreshadowing the ultimate sacrifice he will make for humankind. He includes everyone at the table by asking everyone to partake. He signifies that they are all invited to come to him, explaining that he gives of himself to atone for the sins of all humankind. If there were any questions about Jesus's ultimate purpose prior to these statements they were answered, he came to pay for our sins. He is hinting again to what is to come by telling his followers that he will not partake in earthly wine but he will drink with them again, in the kingdom of heaven. In this same verse he states that they will be new, having been cleaned of the burden of their sin through their love of him.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, that you came to earth to know us, love us, and pay the ultimate sacrifice for us. We are a sinful people and often do not honor you through our words and deeds. We thank you that despite our failures you continue to invite us to you through your sacrament. Amen.

--Amie Gribbins (from 2016 devotional)

April 7

Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says—

he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,

¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

¹⁸ “Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.

¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

²⁰ The wild animals honor me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,

to give drink to my people, my chosen,

²¹ the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.

Reflection

This passage has a rawness that is gripping. I’m particularly drawn to the “jackals and the owls” who honor God, the response of nature to God’s power of creation. I’m also impressed by Isaiah’s confidence in *why* God created his chosen people: “that they may proclaim my praise.”

That is a difficult concept. It seems that Isaiah is attributing a certain narcissism to God, which contradicts the humility we value in our worship. Did God really create us simply to be a cheering section for him? But of course, God is not humble – we must be humble before him. We must be grateful for all he has done, including setting us free (from real or metaphorical slavery) and for the gift of life in nature.

Prayer

Dear God, may I always be humble before you, and grateful for the beauty of creation that you made to give us and all things life.

--Rob Pergament

April 8

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Reflection

In this passage Paul is discussing spiritual gifts; the greatest gift of the Spirit is love, this love is not in the ordinary way that we may think of but the love which is known in the church. This is a passage to guide us many times: in the morning before a challenging day with health challenges, difficult people or situations. Helpful in the evening as we evaluate how we handled ourselves that day, how we might make changes, seek help or try harder. Also to know that God loves us and will help us face another day.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord for giving me guidance on how to be a loving person. I pray for patience, wisdom and the ability to learn, grow and try again. And thank you Lord for loving me, for giving me a loving family and caring Church.

--Betty Lowrie

April 9

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Reflections

Love is something that we often overlook. Social media often amplifies feelings of envy or allows others to boast. People often do not forget wrongs and tend to hold ill will toward perceived wrongs. Grudges tend to linger instead of moving on.

I tend to hold on to grudges and do not always see the best in people. This is obviously not a positive trait because it does not allow me to build positive relationships with people which can result in more negative interactions. The negativity perseveres. The cycle could be broken if I could see the kindness and positive side of others which would create more positive interactions. By keeping “no record of wrongs”, it allows me, along with others, to thrive and not be easily angered.

Prayer

Dear God, please allow me to see the best in others. Please allow me to be joyous in others’ achievements and successes. Encourage us to be kinder to others and be patient and helpful when others fail.

--Eric Garcia

April 10

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Reflection

Amid the hustle and bustle of busy weeks, I am so grateful for this beautiful passage that reminds us where our hearts should be centered. The daily worries--big and small--can take up so much precious space in our hearts and minds: Did I make the right decision at work? Am I being a good friend/partner/parent/child? Am I good enough? Did I forget to send the tutu for ballet class to school? How on earth will I ever pull together a semi-healthy meal tonight? The brain can rattle with thoughts and concerns, but if we let it sink in, Paul's message in this passage can ground us. To me, it reminds us that our earthly worries, and the things we place too much value on, are, like the prophecies, tongues, and knowledge, fleeting.

I've read this passage so many times, but as I re-read with this Lenten season in mind, I see how clearly Paul is describing the development of spiritual growth. When we are children, it is difficult to see past the here and now, but as we grow, we learn more about what really has staying power in our lives: faith, hope, and love. And, I am humbly reminded that I am still growing.

There is a reason why this passage is so famous, particularly verse 13: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." In fact, the words are hanging on a wall in our home, and my guess is that's the case for many of you. Faith and hope are graceful, soothing beliefs that give us strength and gratitude, but love is the ultimate bedrock on which our relationship with God is based. Love is the great multiplier: We receive unconditional love from God, and when we live out that love in our lives, through our interaction with families, friends, and strangers, it spreads far and wide, and can never end. You will have failures in aspects of your life from time to time; but your soul will never fail, because you are love.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are so blessed and thankful to have your scripture to remind us to slow down and focus on the truly important, everlasting aspects of our life. Help us to remember, when we get lost in the noise, that our faith, hope, and love are our greatest possessions, and that all else is merely temporary. Let love guide all that we do, so that we may at all times be a reflection of the never-ending love you have shown us. Amen.

-Megan Coval

April 11

1 John 4:7-12

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our

April 11 (cont.)

sins.¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Reflection

When I was a boy I was convinced that there was a secret room in my parent's home. I dreamed about the secret room... A LOT! Sometimes it was between the second and third floors of our house. Other times it was in the library which became my younger brother's bedroom when he was born a few years later. Sometimes the entrance was in my closet. I had found World War II souvenirs in the basement when my family moved in when I was around 11 years old which was about the coolest thing ever. The past owner had been an inventor, started his own electric machine company, he had a lab in the basement (no kidding), and in my mind the secret room probably had some pretty fantastic stuff. I never found the secret room in my parent's house, but reading 1 John 4 – I feel like John is promising another type of secret place with treasure. In fact, I've been lucky enough to find this place on occasion. John invites us to love one another which will let God enter into our life. I know when I've had the opportunity to live my love helping others it has opened a door inside me, and for a time I've inhabited a special place. From what I've read, the word love (agape) in 1 John 4 means "to open wide" and I've been fortunate to have the door of love open wide several times in my life.

Prayer

Dear Father, prepare me for the opportunities to love others so that I can open wide the secret room within me where you abide.

--Tom Peterson

April 12

Deuteronomy 10:12-15

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,¹³ and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it,¹⁵ yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples as it is today.

Reflection

I believe that there are some passages in Scripture that seem to distill much of the Bible into just a few verses. This is one of them. Moses' charge to the people is very clear about our obligation to God. Fear and love the Lord, walk in his ways and keep his commandments and decrees. To fear the Lord means to respect him and regard him as your Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Love him with all your being because he loves us and chose us. Following all God's commandments and decrees seems daunting but consider what Jesus has to say. In Matthew 22:37, when he is asked what the greatest commandment is, he responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Deut. 6:5) He then adds a second commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" and remarks, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." So there it is. It seems so

April 12 (cont.)

simple and clear. It's what God requires of us. Besides, it's for our own well-being. How can we do otherwise?

Prayer

Our Lord and our God, we praise and thank you for all that you are and all you have done for us. Your steadfast love and faithfulness are well beyond our understanding and our worthiness. Help us to fear you and love you, serve you and walk in your ways. Help us to see you in our neighbors and love them as ourselves. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

--Tom Prelovsky

April 13

John 15:4-5, 12-17

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

⁵ I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

¹² This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. ¹⁵ Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.

¹⁶ Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.

¹⁷ These things I command you, that ye love one another.

Reflection

These are very "full verses". I have no doubt many whole sermons have been given on just the first two (4 & 5) verses about bearing fruit. The next six (12-17) verses also offer a rich trove of possibilities: love, friends, servants, more bringing forth fruit and some more love. I chose to focus on "love". "Love" is used four times in the last six verses and is the basis of Jesus' great commandments-- "For God so loved the world..." John 3:16; "...Thou shalt love the Lord thy God..." Matthew 23:37; and "...Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Matthew 23:39.

I was struck with how verse 17 in the The Message ties love into the bearing fruit aspect: "But remember the **root** command: Love one another." (emphasis supplied)

Without roots, a plant cannot even live, much less bear fruit. And when one ponders on what, "loving one another as Jesus has loved us" means for our lives, it is helpful to remember that the word "love", as used in these verses, is a translation from the Greek word "agape". The Greeks had four or six (depending on what you read) different words for "love". The word for love which was used in these verses was "agape" which means "charity, the love of God for man and of man for a good God". Thomas Aquinas explained it as "to will the good of another". C.S. Lewis described it as "a selfless love that is passionately committed to the wellbeing of others (not for what it can bring to you)." See Wikipedia discussion under "agape". I like C.S. Lewis' description the best.

Is it possible the without "love" as our root, we can bear no fruit?

April 13 (cont.)

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

Please help us to have love so that we can help to make your precious world a better place to live. One where there is no war, no starving children, no homeless people, and no environmental desecration. In Jesus' holy name, Amen.

--Beth Irons

April 14

Luke 19:28-40

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'"

³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

³⁴ They replied, "The Lord needs it."

³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

³⁸ "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"^[a]

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

⁴⁰ "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

Reflection

The 4th and 5th Grade Sunday School class reviewed this scripture together and meditated on what we read. The word cloud below provides the words the scripture brought to their minds as well as some questions they developed to assist us in thinking about this scripture and how it may relate to our lives today.



Questions to Consider:

Would you have simply followed Jesus' instruction and untied the colt?

Why didn't the Disciples question Jesus' instructions?

Why did the Owner just let the colt go?

April 14 (cont.)

Would you let someone take something of value to you in the name of the Lord or would you question and fight for your belonging?
Why would the stones cry?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for our family and friends. Thank you, God, for your sacrifice. Help us to treat others the way we want to be treated. And, help us to love and be loved. Amen.

--4th and 5th grade Sunday School class

April 15

John 12:1 – 8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him.³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected,⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages."⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial."⁸ You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Reflection

What are we to make of this strange passage in which Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, pours an extremely costly perfume on Jesus' feet at a dinner party? Judas Iscariot, of notoriously bad character according to author John, protests this waste of money, but Jesus himself affirms Mary's action. (It will help us to know that in the chapter immediately preceding this one, news of Jesus' recent extraordinary words and acts had begun to spread and that the Passover leaders were determined to find and arrest him of dangerously challenging their authority.)

We have heard of this Mary before. She was present at Jesus' miraculous raising to life of her brother, Lazarus, Jesus' dear but very dead friend. Also Author Luke has featured her as the woman who stubbornly refused to help her sister prepare a meal for their guests and who opted instead to join those guests in the "parlor" who were talking with Jesus. And Jesus defended Mary's choice! .

Now in this story, Jesus is once again defending Mary. This time it concerns her unusual anointing of Jesus – not of his head, but of his feet! Jesus instantly realizes by this act that she understands his precarious position at this year's Passover feast and that she is announcing his death by washing his feet as a preparation for his burial. Nor is this any longer a purely personal event for Mary! As the strong and fragrant perfume fills "the whole house," Mary is clearly notifying the other gathered friends of the ominous looming threat to Jesus' life and message and inviting them to pay attention - to support their beloved leader and friend Jesus as he enters this crucial time of impending death. Mary's role has become a prophetic one and there will be life and death consequences in the near future!

April 15 (cont.)

Prayer

Thank you, Mary of Bethany, for being the first of Jesus' followers to open the door of what discipleship may mean when Jesus himself suffers death on the Cross.

--Louise Winfield

April 16

John 12:20-36

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. ³⁴ The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" ³⁵ Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Reflection

"...The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor..."

This scene in John is right after Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem, not triumphantly as a king on a white horse which the people expected of the Messiah but on a donkey. Jesus knows now that his hour to die has come. He uses a common metaphor of life and death.... a grain of wheat dies so it may grow and bear much fruit. Is this a metaphor for Jesus' life also? Must he die to be resurrected for us? Death leads to life?

I feel that by following Jesus we also will bear fruit. Do we need to die to bear fruit? How can we do this? And why should we hate our lives? Does it mean that this world with all its hurt and evil, materialism and self-interest is what we should hate? Does how we react to what is going on around us show whether we love or hate this life?

So many questions, in these 3 small verses.

April 16 (cont.)

When we came to Saint Mark 45 years ago, I had grown up in a Presbyterian church, but had never studied the Bible other than as a child in Sunday School. At first I felt completely illiterate unable to understand what everyone else seemed to get. But over the years I have come to see that we are all on our own journey toward faith in Jesus. Some start their journey as young people, others as adults and some later in life. As ordinary people we follow Him, try to obey his commandments and teachings by serving and helping others and in so doing we get a step closer in our personal journey and the assurance that we will be with Christ.

Hopefully, this Holy Week brings us closer to the Resurrection and closer in our walk with Jesus.

Prayer

Dear God, as we've gone through Lent and now it is Holy Week, show us the way toward the Resurrection and help us to know Jesus that we might get closer to you through our journey of faith. Amen

--Ellie Hagner

April 17

John 13: 21-32

When he had said these things, Jesus was greatly distressed in spirit, and testified, "I tell you the solemn truth, one of you will betray me."²² The disciples began to look at one another, worried and perplexed to know which of them he was talking about.²³ One of his disciples, the one Jesus loved, was at the table to the right of Jesus in a place of honor.²⁴ So Simon Peter gestured to this disciple to ask Jesus who it was he was referring to. ...

³¹ When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in him.³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and he will glorify him right away.

Reflection

This passage describes the supper Jesus shares with his disciples in Jerusalem before his imminent and violent death. In its human details, the meal does not offer a respite from the violence to follow. Any host or hostess would consider the meal a disaster. The disciples squabble over which one of them is the greatest (Luke 22:24), and Jesus undercuts them with a homily about service and humbly washes the feet of his disciples (John 13:5-9). A confused and clumsy Peter at first resists Jesus' gesture and then extravagantly accepts the foot washing and asks for more, more – wash my hands and head as well. In the course of the meal, Jesus rebukes Judas who will betray him.

Yet, at this same meal, Jesus took bread and wine and distributed them to his errant and defecting disciples. He will proceed to fulfill his own indefectible purpose – despite outright betrayal, denial, the eventual slump of disciples at Gethsemane, the shiftiness of the leaders, the fickleness of the crowds, and the violence of isolation and death which he knew would follow. The meal is over, Judas departs. It is night. Like the disciples, we mostly see disaster in the story. But as John tells it, Jesus recognizes the face of God, the Father's glory, opening up to us in the self-sacrificing love of the Son. (John 13: 31-32)

Prayer

Gracious God, like the disciples in this story, we see through a glass darkly. Help us, at length, to see you, face to face.

--Rev. Dr. Bill May (from 2016 devotional)

April 18

John 13:1-7, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Reflection

As soon as I read this passage, a smile appeared on my face. It brought me back to the first Maundy Thursday service I attended as a Deacon. That evening as I straightened the bibles and prepared the baptismal font, Pastor Roy pulled me aside. "Tonight, we are washing feet."

For the next 20 minutes my mind raced. The only time I remember attending a service where we washed feet was when I was 10. I went to a Catholic mass with my friend, Andrea. Her brothers were fidgety and giggling the entire time and the priest shot us a look. As I recalled that look, I started getting anxious. And then it was time...

Meisie Roberts was doing Deacon duty with me that night. She grabbed my hand and pulled me up saying, "Let's wash each other's feet." What a wonderful experience it was. It was intimate and it bonded us. It washed away all the earlier trepidation I was having and replaced it with love and gratitude. The servants of Saint Mark can always be counted on to support you, encourage you, and love you. This is the example that Jesus set for us.

Prayer

Lord, On this day you have shown us that we are your servants and servants to each other. Help us to follow your example every day. In your name we pray.

Heather Karakashian

April 19

John 18:1 – 19:37

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it. ² Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. ³ So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. ⁴ Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?”

⁵ “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.

“I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) ⁶ When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

⁷ Again he asked them, “Who is it you want?”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” they said.

⁸ Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” ⁹ This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.” ¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.)

¹¹ Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” ¹² Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him ¹³ and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴ Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people.

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, ¹⁶ but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in.

¹⁷ “You aren’t one of this man’s disciples too, are you?” she asked Peter.

He replied, “I am not.”

¹⁸ It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.

¹⁹ Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. ²⁰ “I have spoken openly to the world,” Jesus replied. “I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. ²¹ Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.”

²² When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” he demanded.

²³ “If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, “testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?” ²⁴ Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵ Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, “You aren’t one of his disciples too, are you?”

He denied it, saying, “I am not.”

April 19 (cont.)

²⁶ One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?" ²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

²⁸ Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

³⁰ "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."

³¹ Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."

"But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. ³² This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

³⁴ "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

³⁵ "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

³⁸ "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. ³⁹ But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?"

⁴⁰ They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

^{19:1} Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ² The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe ³ and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face.

⁴ Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." ⁵ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"

⁶ As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!"

But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him."

⁷ The Jewish leaders insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

⁸ When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, ⁹ and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"

¹¹ Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

¹² From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

¹³ When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the

April 19 (cont.)

Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). ¹⁴ It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.

“Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews.

¹⁵ But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked.

“We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

¹⁶ Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. ¹⁷ Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

¹⁹ Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. ²⁰

Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. ²¹ The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.”

²² Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”

²³ When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.

²⁴ “Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.”

This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said,

“They divided my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.”

So this is what the soldiers did.

²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” ²⁷ and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

²⁸ Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

³¹ Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. ³² The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. ³⁵ The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. ³⁶ These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken,” ³⁷ and, as another scripture says, “They will look on the one they have pierced.”

April 19 (cont.)

Reflection

For me, Good Friday is the most important day of the year. This, despite the fact I can only bear it on an annual basis and don't think I could stand it if it came more often. Indeed, it is unlike all the other important dates on the Christian calendar, which I welcome with joyous anticipation. There is the hopefulness of Christmas, which I can bask in for an entire month prior. There is the fulfilled promise of Easter which comes marching in triumphantly each year and coincides with spring and the birthday of my twins. Even the season of Lent quietly winds through its 40 days like a solemn funeral procession reminding us at each turn of our mortality and uniting us all in our shared fate. But Good Friday, the day we remember the crucifixion of Jesus, stands in stark, naked contrast to all the other days in the liturgical calendar, from all the days in any calendar. It is the day we strip away all the pretty, all the lovely and lay bare our hearts and souls. It is the day we are reminded of the raw pain that is woven into all our lives simply because we are human and cannot escape it. And let's be clear, it is an ugly, horrible hurting. One we do not want to spend time thinking about, let alone feeling. It is sorrow pushed down deep, it is fear buried way below the surface. It is hurt, and desperateness and helplessness. And all of us, every one of us, denies it, hides it and runs from it. Even Peter disowned Christ rather than face it.

But, despite this, if I am brave enough, I welcome in Good Friday when it comes with open arms. I allow it to lift the rock exposing those great burdens to the light of day for all to see. I allow my defenses to be knocked off kilter and any pain I carry to be exposed. And at that point, all I can do is to stand at the foot of the cross and look up to Jesus. Fr. Richard Rohr talks about how Jesus hung in suspension on the cross between the divine and the human, between a bad thief and a good thief, between being utterly whole and utterly disfigured -- how he held together all the opposites in one moment in time. And here is the holiest of moments I can imagine -- Christ showed me that He could take all the messy, unfair pain in life and in some mysterious way make it whole. And as if that wasn't enough, He showed me that He is there alongside of me when those moments come in my own life. Unlike the apostles, or well-intentioned friends or family, Jesus has the courage to always show up. I know, with all my heart, that Jesus will be there with me through all the tears and unfairness that may come. Because of Good Friday, I can come back to the cross, no matter how bad it may seem, and know that I am never alone.

Prayer (adapted from a prayer by Fr. Richard Rohr)

Jesus Crucified, you are my life and
You are also my death. You are my
Beauty, you are my possibility, and
You are my full self. You are everything I want, and you
Are everything I am afraid of. You are everything I desire
And you are everything I deny.
You are my outrageously ignored and neglected soul

Jesus, give me the courage to open my heart to Good Friday
Give me the courage to open to that which I fear most
Your unconditional love
Your unconditional love
Amen

--Marlise Burr-Asher

April 20

John 19:38-42

Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away.³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.⁴⁰ Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.⁴¹ At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid.⁴² Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Reflection:

Who are these men who step in to quietly take away and bury the body of Jesus? We know Nicodemus from earlier in John's gospel (chapters 3 and 7). In fact, it was to Nicodemus that Jesus said "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." He was one of the Pharisees and called "a ruler of the Jews" who snuck away in the night to ask Jesus his burning question about being born again. In this way, it is all the more appropriate that he is the one who helps to bury Jesus so that he can rise again into the kingdom of God. Do you think Jesus knew Nicodemus would have this role when he spoke with him that night?

Joseph is described in this passage as "a disciple of Jesus but secretly for fear of the Jews." He is mentioned in all four of the gospels in this role of providing the tomb for the Christ but with little other information. Presumably, he was wealthy and had some influence – enough that just by asking, Pilate granted him permission to take Jesus' body. We can also assume he was a Jew since he knew of the burial preparations but not of his position specifically. However, his influence in this role is undeniable and has inspired legends: during the 12th century, he was written in to the tale of Arthur as the first keeper of the Holy Grail. Mark writes he was "a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God." In this way, at least, he and Nicodemus connected.

Reading of these men, I have to ask if I would have been as brave as they were. Would I risk my position, my reputation, for the person against whom everyone, even his closest friends had turned? With this risky and yet necessary deed, these two men sealed a place in history and, I'd like to think, in the Kingdom of Heaven. Are there others in my life who may be "secret disciples" who would take such risks with their faith that I may hide away from, as the Twelve did?

Prayer

Dear God, help me to build the courage to be more like Nicodemus and Joseph who asked the hard questions and did not give up on the man they followed as Your True Son when it was dangerous.

--Jocelyn Callister

April 21

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he

had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Reflection

Give me a sign, demands the one we call Doubting Thomas. The demand is not from an outsider, but rather from a man who spent three years of his life as a disciple of Jesus. He was the one who dared to ask questions when he didn't quite understand. Hounded by doubt and questions, he nevertheless stayed the course.

Thomas is man for our time. Ruled by science and technology, our quest for raw data, for just the facts, is unquenchable. Like the scientist, or the believer who wants some tangible evidence, demands a sign and not just any sign; he wants real evidence. Are you the One whose hands received the nails, whose body was tortured like a common criminal? Can I see, for myself, the wounds in your side? If this is the One I see, the One who was crucified, for the love of the world, then I will believe. If I can't touch it or see it, I won't believe it. Thomas cared enough **not** to fake his faith.

His willingness to follow his questions led him to faith, true and abiding faith from the depths. "My Lord and my God", confessed Thomas when confronted by the crucified, risen Lord. "Do you believe because you see?" asks Jesus. "Blessed are they who do not see and yet believe."

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the perseverance of Thomas and his willingness to be honest with Jesus. Grant us the same willingness to ask our questions without forsaking our quest to know and follow our Lord Jesus. When we doubt, give us the Spirit of courage to persevere with our questions until we come to love you more deeply and walk with you more faithfully, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

--Rev. Roy Howard