

Lenten Daily Devotional

*Made by the members and friends of Saint
Mark Presbyterian Church*



February 26-April 12, 2020

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.

During this time of transition, it is especially important that we stay connected to God and to each other. This daily devotional is a powerful way to do so. We will all read the same scripture, pray the same prayers and be united in our Lenten practice.

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.

—Jocelyn Callister, Jennifer Carr and Rev. Shelby Etheridge Harasty

February 2020

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February 26, Ash Wednesday

Psalm 51:1-17

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against 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.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give you a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Reflection

Psalm 51 is one of seven penitential psalms in the great “prayer book of the Bible”. It is attributed to King David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband murdered. He subsequently was confronted with his sin by the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12). The Psalm serves as a stark reminder that even the greatest humans commit sin and must ask forgiveness from God. Even the mighty King David, anointed by God and revered by his people, needed to confess his sin and literally beg God for forgiveness. The Psalmist pleads to God to “blot out my transgressions”, “wash me”, and “cleanse me” from sin. The metaphor for sin is a stain that needs to be removed and only God can do that. No sacrifice nor action by us can remove our sin. Only God in His “abundant mercy” can do that. Before asking this, however, we need to be truly sorry and remorseful as David was. We must get to where we have “a broken spirit” and “a broken and contrite heart” because of our offense to God. While God will always love us, sin interferes with our love of God and must be removed. We all sin and must acknowledge our sin, truly be sorry for it, and ask God to forgive us so that we can continue to love Him and love others.

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.

Tom Prelovsky

February 27

Isaiah 58: 6-12

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness^[a] will go before you,

and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;

you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,

with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,

then your light will rise in the darkness,

and your night will become like the noonday.

¹¹ The Lord will guide you always;

he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land

and will strengthen your frame.

You will be like a well-watered garden,

like a spring whose waters never fail.

¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins

and will raise up the age-old foundations;

you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,

Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Reflection

Isaiah 58: 6-7 is very familiar to us—we hear much the same in Matthew 25:35-40. We, who call ourselves God’s people, have a duty to care for others—to feed the hungry and to support the homeless, at and Saint Mark we have worked on that. Lately, though, my thoughts have been dwelling on the issues raised by the words in verse 6: “Is not this the fast I choose, to loose the bounds of injustice, to undo the things of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”

Although Isaiah was speaking metaphorically, America started with a literal yoke, slavery. In February, I was able to go on a Synod of the Mid-Atlantic-sponsored pilgrimage to the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace & Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. This is a project of Bryan Stephenson's Equal Justice Initiative. The theme of the museum is that slavery did not end, it evolved. The museum, through heart-wrenching display after display, tells the story of the kidnapping, enslavement, and trade of millions of African people. Once the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude "except as a punishment of crime" passed, slavery morphed into a system of racial terror, African American rights were violated, and all-white legislatures authorized convict leasing. Racial violence established white supremacy throughout the former confederate states—and the era of Jim Crow was supreme. Then after the success of the Civil Rights Movement, the new slavery became the racialization of criminality in which blacks have been and continue to be disproportionately arrested, tried, convicted, and jailed.

Another experience causing me to dwell upon the yoke has been a book group I am in at work that is reading White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism by Robin DiAngelo. The book points out that ideologies in our society such as individualism and meritocracy (that anyone can succeed if they are smart and work hard) obscure racism as a system of inequality. One example she gives, is a feel-good film, "The Blind Side," that I and many have enjoyed. But, as DiAngelo says, the film is full of problematic racial narratives, such as white people being the saviors of black people; black adults being corrupt; black neighborhoods being dangerous; black people as poor, incompetent, and unqualified; and sports as the way for blacks to escape this destiny. Reading and discussing this book, a chapter at a time, over a period of months, has at least made me think more deeply about when in my life I have been (and continue to be) complicit in the yoke, in racism. This is work I will continue to do.

Prayer

Lord, open our eyes. When we fail to see the humanity in front of us, open our eyes. When we see someone as lesser, open our eyes. When we act unkindly to others, open our eyes. Help us to see where we are complicit in injustice, and open our eyes and help us to do better. Amen.

Sara Coe

February 28

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10 Revised Standard Version

20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6 Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says, "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation."

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. 3 We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Reflection

Paul, founder and leader of so many early Christian churches all over Asia Minor, is greatly distressed and yet deeply hopeful. He has been sharply opposed, persecuted, and even imprisoned by strong leaders of these communities, who have created many rules and regulations that they believe must be strictly observed by righteous members of this new movement. Paul takes a stand against them, insisting that true righteousness is realized only by faith in the reconciling love of God for all humans - Jews, Gentiles, and people of varying ethnic origins – as demonstrated and affirmed in the life and death of Jesus. Righteousness is not achieved by persons or communities by simply expressing faith IN Jesus, but by actively demonstrating the faith OF Jesus as he lived and worked on earth and now has been swallowed up into the eternity of the Spirit.

Nor is it enough, says Paul, to plan and look forward to the automatic coming of the Kingdom of God. Church communities must live out God's love and care for all people in their present life and times.

In the language of his day, Paul says (originally in Greek): "See, NOW is the acceptable time: NOW is the day of salvation. We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way."

In today's chaotic and divided 21st century world, we are often counseled to "live in the moment." I am not certain that everyone understands that slogan-like expression to mean exactly the same thing, but I do wonder if Paul today might choose those words to press his point for the urgent need of active signs of God's reconciling love in our congregations and with our neighbors far and near. What does it mean for us to daily – regularly – act upon Paul's famous assertion: "So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17)?

Prayer

"The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor.13:13)

Louise Winfield

February 29

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others *to be seen by them*. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, *to be honored by others*. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners *to be seen by others*. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their *faces to show others they are fasting*. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

**Emphasis added.*

Reflection

I can't help but read these passages and just see the Us-vs-Them-ness of it. We live in a time when that sentiment is so prevalent and so divisive. I have tried to stay away from that kind of thinking, recognizing that, as passionately as I feel about the things I feel passionate, others have just as much justification for why they think the way they do. So I was a little saddened, I'll admit, to see Jesus frame these teachings in this way.

However, in the parts I added the italics, I noticed Jesus' attention to intent. He's not saying never give alms in public or never pray in public or share that you are fasting but that your intent when you give, pray, and fast should be between you and God. The focus is more on a "still, quiet" kind of faith practice. For, as the last section reminds us, when your values are focused on the treasures that are stored in Heaven, where the Father sees them, your reward comes from Him.

Prayer

Dear God, help me to find the balance between sharing my faith – not hiding it under a basket – and yet keeping my focus on the rewards you have for me – not the praise or recognition from my peers which will pass away with time. Amen.

Jocelyn Callister

March 1

Matthew 4: 1-11

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Reflection

Jesus was tired and hungry when the devil showed up. I make terrible decisions when I'm tired and hungry. I rush my kids and raise my voice too quickly when they aren't moving at my speed. I grab the easiest snack I can find instead of pulling together a quick meal. I'm a jerk to my husband.

Jesus was tired and hungry when the devil proposed there might be an easier path forward.

It had been 40 days and nights, and I believe even Jesus, being fully human, was feeling vulnerable. Three times the devil challenged Jesus to consider how much more comfortable he might be if he were to take matters into his own hands: Satisfy your hunger. Test God. Rule all.

Jesus was tired and hungry when he responded to the devil's challenge with a challenge for us.

The longing to avoid suffering in your life and shelter those you love most from suffering is natural, my friends, but the discomfort and pain will still come. At times, you will feel broken, sick with fear, and alone—as if the rug has been ripped out from under you. But in those moments that seem most out of control, you do have a choice: You get to decide how you will respond. Where will you place your hope in such moments? A tired and hungry Jesus is our guide: We are to place our trust in the Lord. Out of such moments we can be born into new life.

Prayer

Dear God, Thank you for filling our lives with choices, big and small, and for feeding us with your word. Please forgive us for the times we choose unwisely, allowing our desire for comfort and our fear of the unknown to interfere with our relationship with you. Forgive us for the ways that we fight for control. Please give us the eyes to see you and the ears to hear you as we stumble through the wilderness of this Lenten season and all the days of our lives. Amen.

Jenn Carr

Psalm 32

¹ Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
² Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against
them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.
³ When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
⁴ For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.^[b]
⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord."

March 2

And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.
⁶ Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.
⁷ You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.
⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you
should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.
¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.
¹¹ Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Reflection

In my village Kandale, in the southwest of the Democratic Republic of the Congo where I grew up, fufu was a staple in our diet. Fufu is a mixture of corn and/or cassava flour stirred into hot boiling water. This dough is usually eaten with goat meat, chicken, or smoked fish, and cooked in heavy palm oil and peanut sauce. Anyone who knows me knows that I love fufu. The one trouble with loving fufu is the amount of weight that I have slowly gained over the years. I have tried several diets but failed totally. Primarily because none of the diets allow for fufu, for obvious reasons. However, three years ago, I learned of a new diet. Like previous ones, it did not allow fufu either, however, the coach was very supportive of me and was willing to discuss my cultural needs. I decided to give it a try and asked my family to sign a commitment sheet stating they would support me fully. I hung the commitment sheet on our fridge as a constant reminder to them and to myself to stay on the diet.

My discipline and commitment coupled with support of family and a good coach paid off. Six months into the diet, I started to shed some weight. Random people, as well as my family, began to notice. The compliments and encouragement felt good! The diet was divided into three phases, based on BMI levels. I had completed the first phase and had two more, or four more months to complete the diet and lower my BMI for good. Before I could reach my goal, however, I fell back miserably. I began to smuggle small amounts of fufu and unhealthy food back into my diet. I would measure my piece of chicken, carefully remove all the skin from it, eat the skinless piece, and then eat the skin as well. I was careful not to record any of that into my food log.

Like a little pregnancy, my little lies began to show on the scale. My poor coach could not understand why my weight was coming back on, even though my food log showed I did everything right. Because of

shame and guilt, I struggled to tell her the truth. Eventually, I began to distance myself from my coach, making horrendous excuses why I could not make my weekly appointments. I stopped answering her calls and before long quit the diet altogether. But at home, I continued for a while to deceive my family by pretending that I was still on the diet. Deep down I could feel that they all knew I was not respecting my part of the commitment we made.

Shame and guilt grew heavier on me and it became too much to hide my lies to the family. Finally, I mobilized my courage to come clean. I told everyone that I was no longer on the diet. They were all very understanding. A huge relief came over me and prompted an urge in me to seek God in my search for a sustainable answer to my poor eating habits. As part of that, I found myself at the end of last year making a plea to friends with whom I share regularly on a WhatsApp forum. I asked if everyone could pray for me to develop a healthier relationship with food and they all agreed happily.

As the new year got underway, I felt a call to start on a plant-based diet. "You must be joking God," I thought to myself "What's the point of having fufu without goat meat, chicken or dry fish stew?" "It is like Naaman being asked to bathe in the Jordan river," (2Kings 5) a voice whispered in my head. The next day, on January 5th, 2020 I made a new food shopping list and embarked on the journey to healthy eating—based on plant-based nutrition, that is. More than a month later, it feels not just good but also right. I can tell God is by my side this time.

Psalms 32 is a story of hiding, deceit, suffering and the relief in confession. It reveals the good news of a loving Father, who is waiting and willing to forgive and restore us. When we bring our heavy load to God as David did, He promises to forgive us and show us a new way forward. There's no condemnation. Are you ready to give God a try with whatever is holding you down and keeping your life hostage?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for paying the price to cover our sins and transgressions. As we enter the holy season of Lent, help us confess our sins and consecrate ourselves to you. This we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Colette Ramm

March 3

Romans 5:12-19

“For just as by the one man’s (Adam’s) disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s (Jesus’) obedience the many will be made righteous.” ¹⁹ “...much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.”

Reflection

Who am I ? What is my nature and destiny? Am I only what I think - as Descartes said “I think therefore I am?” These are some of the most important questions we ask ourselves. Paul says the free gift of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ offered to me defines who I am, my nature – and my destiny. When I accept this gift and believe what Jesus revealed about God, I understand who I am. Then I fully know the truth – I’m forgiven of my sinful nature, I’m made righteous and whole by Jesus’s resurrection, and I’m destined to be with God for eternity. Or I can ignore or reject this free gift, believe an alternative truth that is not the real truth, and become an alternative me who is not who God intends me to be.

It took me longer than it should have to fully accept God’s free gift. Now that I have, I know who I am, certain my nature has been made righteous, and sure of my destiny with God. Despite my daily failure to be all God knows I can be, the free gift I accepted renews and restores me before God – as it does for all of us who accept it. Alleluia!

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for the free gift you have given me of your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for me and for all mankind. Help me to continue to know who I am, to be who You know I can be, to trust in Your forgiving Grace, and to hope for my eternal destiny with You.

Dick Pavlin

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy hill.
Let all who live in the land tremble,
 for the day of the Lord is coming.
It is close at hand—
 ² a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and blackness.
Like dawn spreading across the mountains
 a large and mighty army comes,
such as never was in ancient times.

¹² “Even now,” declares the Lord,
 “return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting and weeping and mourning.”
¹³ Rend your heart
 and not your garments.
Return to the Lord your God,
 for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
 and he relents from sending calamity.

Reflection

The word for the verb “repent” in Hebrew is one of my favorite Hebrew words. It’s ‘shuv,’ and it can also be translated as “to turn.” I like this because it gives a concrete image to an abstract concept. When God is asking us to repent, God is asking us to turn toward God. I like the image of turning because it makes me think that when we repent, we leave something behind. We leave behind those sins, those things we have to repent for, and we make a conscious effort to turn toward God. Those things that separated us from God, they can no longer be in our line of sight.

When we repent, we literally turn around, we stop walking away from God and start walking towards God. Turning to God with our whole heart, as God begs us to do through the prophet Joel, is to change our minds, reconsider our actions, to orient ourselves wholly toward God.

The prophet calls for repentance, and not just for the whole person. God wants the whole city, the whole people, the whole nation of Israel to join in this repentance and worship. Repentance happens in our hearts, but it also happens in community.

Prayer

Gracious God, help us to turn away from sin and hatred and fear and to turn toward you. Help us to orient our lives so that we face you and all that you have to offer us. As we move through this season of Lent, help us to leave behind that which separates us from you and from each other. May we always be turning toward you, O God. Amen.

March 4

¹⁴ Who knows? He may turn and relent
 and leave behind a blessing—
grain offerings and drink offerings
 for the Lord your God.
¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion,
 declare a holy fast,
 call a sacred assembly.
¹⁶ Gather the people,
 consecrate the assembly;
bring together the elders,
 gather the children,
 those nursing at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room
 and the bride her chamber.
¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister before the Lord,
 weep between the portico and the altar.
Let them say, “Spare your people, Lord.
 Do not make your inheritance an object of
scorn,
 a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
 ‘Where is their God?’”

Rev. Shelby Etheridge Harasty (from 2017)

March 5

Acts 3:1-10

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. ² Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. ⁴ Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” ⁵ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

⁶ Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” ⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. ⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Reflection

It was fitting to read this passage on the same Sunday our class discussed worry. We listened to the song “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” and discussed how God helps us overcome our worries. As we worked on the welcome banner for our new interim pastor, we talked about the pastoral change. Several of the kids discussed their own worries about having a new pastor. We talked about the pastoral change and feelings they felt when Pastor LeeAnn left and how much we all love and adore Pastor Shelby. The simple message being that sometimes our worries are just that “worries”. Luckily, we have the love and support from God who encourages us to place our worries upon him. As we read this particular scripture, the kids were amazed at the power of God and the ability of this disabled man to rise every morning to live each day. As they pointed out, he was lucky to have friends and family who supported him and carried him each day to the temple. They quickly noticed not only God’s miracle in the story but also the small miracles of grace the beggar received daily. It’s easy to allow our worries, problems, and fears to overcome our ability to see God’s daily miracles in the people and world around us. However, it is only through placing our faith and trust in God that we can safely let go of our fears and live a life reflective of God.

Prayer

Lord help us to place our worries upon you and be happy!

4th/5th Grade Sunday School Class

March 6

Psalm 19

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
² Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
³ They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
⁴ Yet their voice ^[b] goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
⁵ It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
⁶ It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth.
⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
⁸ The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
⁹ The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
¹⁰ They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
¹¹ By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
¹² But who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.
¹³ Keep your servant also from willful sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then I will be blameless,
innocent of great transgression.
¹⁴ May these words of my mouth and this
meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Reflection

This Psalm of David declares that the nature of God is revealed to us first through creation and then through the Law, both of which are perfect. Our response must be humility as we pray to avoid straying from the way of God and conduct our lives in a way that is pleasing to him.

In the past few years John and I have been fortunate to be able to travel to many countries around the globe. We have seen many wonderful and amazing sights but as much as the topography might change the sky remains familiar. No matter the time zone there is a sunrise in the morning and a sunset in the evening. During the day the sun gives light and warmth to everyone. God who put the sun in place knows and cares for everyone living under it. In the same way all around the globe the night sky is lit by the moon and decorated with a tapestry of stars. Simply by looking up at night it is hard to believe that such beauty, detail, and magnitude was not put in place by a mighty God that is beyond our comprehension.

In the second part of the Psalm David tells how God has revealed himself through the Law. The words of God are perfect and to be valued more highly than any financial or physical pleasure. Sadly it is also evident wherever you go in the world we as people fail to follow the laws of God. We cannot even live by the concise version -- Love God and love others.

David ends the Psalm with a recognition of this failure. He prays for help to avoid sin and a plea that his thoughts and words would at least be acceptable to God.

Although David's knowledge of the world was very different from what we know today, it is still totally relevant and his prayer just as needed.

Prayer

Awesome God and gracious father, thank you for the wonders of your creation. Thank you for being a constant presence in a world of change. Help me to increase my knowledge of your word and for this day at least may my thoughts and words be acceptable and honoring to you. Amen.

Rosemary Johnson

March 7

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."^[a]

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Reflection

I used to be so intimidated, confused, and at the same time enamored by people who could quote the Bible readily. Now, I don't mean pastors and Sunday school teachers. My experiences ranged from quotes being said sternly to teach a lesson, or as a way to make *them* feel empowered and wise. It was inserted in situations that did not feel as though it was a message from God. Others genuinely understand the meaning and chose to share it to enlighten others, which is where my enamored part comes in. An example is a beautiful passage written in to enhance an Easter card that really made you feel the light.

I can't remember all those verses and names or even what order things happened. I know that I am not the only one. I used to want to be a nun when I was younger because if I knew the whole Bible, then I would know God better. But God did not structure things so we could know him through OUR wisdom. It is what he reveals to us that we can truly know him.

God gave us the crucifixion of his son, Jesus. I understand this to be one of the highest forms of cruelty. What this says is that God is willing to endure cruel punishment and shame. God's love for us has no bounds. He will not love me more if I am "wiser." So many rely on and limit themselves to their own personal *human* wisdom or strength and cannot find in their hearts to defer to God's plan.

Prayer

Lord of light, please reveal to us how we can find our way to you through you. Amen.

Lisa Barton

March 8

John 3: 1-17

- 1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.
- 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."
- 3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."
- 4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"
- 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.
- 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.
- 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'
- 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."
- 9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.
- 10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?
- 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.
- 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?
- 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.
- 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,
- 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."
- 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
- 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Reflection

It's easy to read this passage and jump right to one of the most famous and quoted Bible verses, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." But, there really is so much more here. A close read reveals Jesus, in his role as the consummate teacher, patiently encouraging the curious Nicodemus to step back from his very literal approach to understanding of God ("..how can someone be born when they are old?") to become more comfortable with the mystery of faith. In this passage Jesus both patiently and firmly teaches Nicodemus the importance of believing, and the power of the beautiful love that comes from belief.

The power of belief and faith---it is such an important reminder of us. It helps us pay closer attention to the things we cannot see, but can feel; to look up for solace and comfort when earthly happenings feel too much to bear. When we pay attention to our faith, we can more regularly feel the promise of God, the protection of Jesus, and the breath given to us by the Holy Spirit. What a beautiful love that has been given to us.

Prayer

Gracious God, we ask that you help us today to pay attention, to notice, and to name the ways in which you are present in our everyday life. Our hearts are open to the ways that you reveal yourself, in big and small ways, through the Holy Spirit. Help us to embrace the mystery of faith, so that we may be able to hold steadfast in our belief even through the most challenging of times. May we do all things in love and in Your holy name. Amen.

Megan Coval

March 9

Psalm 121

¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
² My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

Reflection

In the world of “fact-checking” it’s easy to pick out a single line or scripture and claim that to be the truth. If one was to do this with Psalm 121 then there would be a ton of questions. The scripture paints a picture in which no one who chooses to follow God will ever experience harm or suffering. Now, we know this simply isn’t true. We know it from other passages in the Bible and our daily lives. If this scripture was fact on its own then no Christian would be persecuted, no Christian would ever face a horrible disease or loss, and we would have no reason to ask “why do bad things happen to good people?” Taking into context prior biblical scriptures, I think the intent of this Psalm is to remind us that God’s power is greater than our own. Our ability to face life’s challenges without him are less likely to be successful. A reminder that we need God in our daily lives. It doesn’t mean everything will go our way but it does provide a reassurance that we will never suffer alone and that we are stronger with him.

Prayer

God, please grant us the confidence to know that you are always watching over us. Help us to trust you and see you in our everyday lives.

Fleisher Family

March 10

Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³ What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”^[a] ⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. ¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.”^[a] He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

Reflection

“You are guilty and all charges have been dropped.”

These verses remind me of a judge sitting at the bench looking down on the accused and bellowing out this message. It is the reverse of our current legal system in which all are considered innocent until proven guilty. Paul says the opposite, that you are all guilty, but that God, in his infinite grace, has thrown out the sentence. Not only are you free to go, but nothing you have done or will do will have any impact on your final sentencing. The hours I spent volunteering at the local food bank can’t be entered into evidence. Neither can the regular tithing you have done for years or the fact that I helped the elderly woman next door shovel her driveway even though my back was kind of sore. None of it will be considered as a way to reduce my sentence.

This type of backward thinking is hard to wrap my mind around. It is in fact contrary to how most of us were raised in the church. Many of us were taught, me included, that if you did good things in your life, God would like you and reward you by allowing you into heaven. You would, in short, be able to earn God’s love and approval. But, Paul in his revolutionary theology of “justification by faith” turns it all upside down and says, “no, in fact it is not about what you do, but rather about what you are.” You are not worthy of grace, and you cannot do anything to earn it.

We are so bound up in our society by what we achieve. I have worked both inside and outside the home, and I can tell you it is often difficult to not have a flashy answer to the question of “So, what do you do for a living?” That is because it is hard for anyone in our world not to wrap their identity up in something external, in something that they can do. If you can do it, you can control it. But Paul reminds us that we don’t come to know God by what we do right, but rather by what we do wrong. That is because we can only submit to grace if we can’t earn it. We can only open ourselves in vulnerable ways to God, and in my experience, this usually happens when I fall flat on my face. I don’t like this lesson. But it is the lesson Paul learned on the Damascus road. He didn’t do anything to earn God’s grace. In fact, he had made about as many mistakes as anyone can. He had not just neglected Jesus’ followers; he had persecuted them. And yet, there was Jesus meeting him on the road.

Prayer

Gracious God,
Giver of the divine,
Open me during this time of Lent to you
Use my mistakes and weaknesses so that I may be closer to you
Come to me on the road of my journey
Forgive my debts
And thank you for your eternal and unearned gift of grace.
Amen.

Marlise Asher-Burr

March 11

Ephesians 2: 1-10

² You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the passions of our flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ---by grace you have been saved--- ⁶and raised up with him and seated us with him in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God---⁹not the results of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Reflection

Many of the verses in this passage are so familiar. "God, who is rich in mercy ... even when we were dead through our trespasses, [we were] made us alive together in Christ ... by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your doing: it is the gift of God." They are so comforting and uplifting.

There are many notes in the margins of my Bible alongside this passage. I have studied it before. One of the notes really clicked this time as I read and reread these verses. "Once you were, but now you are." Paul is reminding the church at Ephesus of the gospel story. Jews and Gentiles and by extension all of us are granted new life by grace through God's mercy. We are joined together to follow Christ's teaching, which is the life God intended for us through the ages.

Prayer

Gracious God,
We humbly thank you for your everlasting love and the gift of your mercy and grace. We pray for open hearts to follow Christ's teaching and to do your good work.
In Jesus's name we pray,
Amen.

Nancy Shea

March 12

Psalm 91

¹ Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.^[a]

² I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my
fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."

³ Surely he will save you
from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.

⁴ He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

⁵ You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,

⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.

⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

⁸ You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

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^[b] 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

Every day I am faced with a new set of challenges and decisions, but that's what makes life interesting! And you? Of course! How do we handle those challenges? Are we just too overwhelmed, overtaxed, frustrated to the point of lashing out at others, or ourselves? Or, maybe not.

Why am I a calm person? Why am I resilient in the face of adversity? Why don't I seem to get angry and lash out at others when I'm hurt, resentful, or frustrated? Why am I forgiving of my own foibles and mistakes, which I seem to make every day!? Why do I seem to just rise above the fray and just go about solving the problem and reach a decision? You too?

I think it because God is in my life and I truly love and trust in Him. I think it is because I know God is my refuge; he is my fortress. He covers me with his "feathers" and I find refuge under his wings. When I awake each morning, I look forward to the challenges of the day; although there are surely "lions" and "cobras" waiting to strike, I am in a place Most High, away from harm, and just armed by God's love, ready for a new day!

Prayer

Dear Lord,

Thank you for your protective wings that shield me from the hurdles that come my way each day, the trials, the tribulations. You are my refuge! I pray that your love and grace will not only shield me and give me peace, but also that those I love and care for will be receptive to your loving grace, and through your love will also find refuge that will carry them over the hurdles that they face each day. Amen.

Bill Merritt

March 13

Isaiah 53: 1-12

1 Who hath believed our report and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? 2 For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded [2] for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid [3] on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. 8 He was taken from prison [4] and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. 9 And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; [5] because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. 11 He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Reflection

This passage from Isaiah is from the time when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon, crushed and without hope. The preceding passages talk about God's promise to restore the people to better times despite all their sufferings.

Inevitably in life, we all go through terrible times that test our faith, our resolve, and even the futility of our existence. Passages like this offer hope and seek to shine the light to the end of such times. Despite whatever hardship comes along, we are shown to persevere in keeping our faith.

In times of strife and tribulations in my life, keeping the faith, a positive attitude, looking for the opportunity in the chaos, and most importantly an open mind has been the only way out. These and other similar passages in the Bible are a reminder that our experiences are not unique, and that people have been going through such experiences as long as humanity has been around. Despite this and other reminders, our predicaments can seem unique, lonely, isolating, unclear and there are many fears that can overpower our minds and defeat us. But if we choose to stand still with faith and the sense that there is a lesson to be learnt from what is happening, there are always positive resolutions that surprise us. Sometimes, we realize in hindsight that it was the best thing that really "needed to happen". We finally find meaning in the whole experience and an evolution in our own thinking starts to happen.

As Jonathan Livingston Seagull wrote, "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls the butterfly."

Prayer

Almighty God,
Give us grace to direct our lives in obedience to your Spirit,
that as you know our weakness, so we may know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
George

Vinod

March 14

Psalm 62

¹ Truly my soul finds rest in God;
my salvation comes from him.
² Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.
³ How long will you assault me?
Would all of you throw me down—
this leaning wall, this tottering fence?
⁴ Surely they intend to topple me
from my lofty place;
they take delight in lies.
With their mouths they bless,
but in their hearts they curse.^[b]
⁵ Yes, my soul, find rest in God;
my hope comes from him.
⁶ Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.
⁷ My salvation and my honor depend on God^[c];
he is my mighty rock, my refuge.
⁸ Trust in him at all times, you people;
pour out your hearts to him,
for God is our refuge.
⁹ Surely the lowborn are but a breath,
the highborn are but a lie.
If weighed on a balance, they are nothing;
together they are only a breath.
¹⁰ Do not trust in extortion
or put vain hope in stolen goods;
though your riches increase,
do not set your heart on them.
¹¹ One thing God has spoken,
two things I have heard:
“Power belongs to you, God,
¹² and with you, Lord, is unfailing love”;
and, “You reward everyone
according to what they have done.”

Reflection

Often in the modern world, it can be a struggle to find the time we need to commune with God and let Him speak into us. The psalmist (David in this case) reminds us that in a time of inner silence, we can find our Rock and Salvation. I find this silence wandering the paths of one of our many local parks, away from the noise of civilization, marveling at the beauty of creation. Others may rise before the sun and find the silence in the breaking of the dawn, before the demands of the day have set in. And some may find it in the evening, after the cares of the day have been addressed, but before settling down to sleep.

The psalm follows a chorus and verse structure, continually repeating God's steadfastness and encouraging us to wait for Him in the chorus, while providing wisdom in the form of short proverbs in each verse (used here in the musical rather than scriptural sense). We are also called to acknowledge that although our worldly trials may seem daunting, God is more powerful than any earthly trouble. Gossip can be a problem at school, the office, or wherever people gather socially and often seeks to tear down. We must remember that God is with us regardless of what those around us may say or how they act that causes us harm.

Material gain may seem desirable and certainly it can make us more comfortable in our present circumstances, but to seek wealth at the expense of others is vanity. We cannot allow ourselves to become oppressors of the poor. We should strive to create a society that cares for all, whatever the conditions of their birth and upbringing.

Prayer

Lord, your awesome power is displayed through your mighty works and your boundless love. We too often fall into jealousy and seek to tear others down. Thank you for being our Rock and our Salvation. Help us to remember to wait for You in silence.

Paul Grosser

March 15

John 4:5-24 CEB

He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food. The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.) Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water? You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!" Jesus said to her, "Go, get your husband, and come back here." The woman replied, "I don't have a husband." "You are right to say, 'I don't have a husband,'" Jesus answered. "You've had five husbands, and the man you are with now isn't your husband. You've spoken the truth." The woman said, "Sir, I see

that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you and your people say that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you and your people will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You and your people worship what you don’t know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews. But the time is coming—and is here!—when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. The Father looks for those who worship him this way. God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth.”

Reflection

She was the outcast of all outcasts. Probably shunned by the community. She went to the well at noon, when she likely knew no one else would be there. But someone was there; Jesus was there. She was a Samaritan, he was a Jew. Samaritans and Jews shared the same ancestors, but the kingdom had split, and Jews didn’t associate with Samaritans. But this was Jesus. He saw the fullness of who she was, spoke it out loud, and even called her out when she held some big details back about her life. Jesus made it clear that he knew all the shame that had been placed upon her. It didn’t matter. Then he had this theological conversation with her, and offered her the living water of eternal life. She left to tell the people what Jesus had told her; he had restored some of her dignity and given her something of great value to share.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, give us the courage to remove our blinders. Help us to see value in every person we meet, knowing that you live in each one of us. Please keep our hearts open and our minds willing, so that we can partake of the living water that will bring us eternal life. In your son Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Diane Wirono

March 16

John 4:27-42 New International Version (NIV)

27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" 28 Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 29 "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" 30 They came out of the town and made their way toward him. 31 Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." 32 But he said to them, *"I have food to eat that you know nothing about."* 33 Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" 34 *"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."* 35 Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. 36 Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. 37 Thus the saying *'One sows and another reaps'* is true. 38 I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. *Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."* 39 Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. 41 And because of his words many more became believers. 42 They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and *we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."*

Emphasis added

Reflection

A tiny little fairy garden kit: a 6th birthday present for my daughter.
Two lima beans, each printed with a word:
Happiness. Peace.

I help my daughter plant these seeds.
We water and nurture it, and sow...
Happiness. Peace.

I try to plant these seeds each day.
To live an intentional life,
To be guided by that inner compass.

I try to plant those tiny seeds of kindness,
Christian love,
Compassion.

By placing a book in the hands of a student who wants to learn about
Martin or Rosa or Malala.
Or simply to see themselves - their skin, their culture - reflected in a beautiful book.

I trust them to be moral agents.
To see that everyone has value,
That every life is precious.
These students will grow up.

I might never see them again.
I will probably never see the fruit of those tiny seeds I plant.

“I have food to eat that you know nothing about” said Jesus.
Jesus’ Word.
These seeds of peace...

This is what will save the world and sustain us when we hunger for spiritual food.
After a long winter and spiritual death,
The miracle of new life gives us sustenance.

We may not see the fruit of what we sow...
Can you even imagine what beautiful blossoms will grow from these seeds?
What will be resurrected from the ground when we nurture those seeds?

What will future generations reap from what you sow?
What will you sow during your one precious life
To make the world a better place?

Prayer

Lord, let my life be a reflection of your love and peace. Amen.

Elodie Domenge

March 17

Exodus 17:1-7

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?"

³ But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"

⁴ Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."

⁵ The Lord answered Moses, "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Reflection

In this passage, the Israelites are in a liminal space. They are following Moses, but even he is in a liminal space as well. Neither he nor the Israelites know where they will get their next drink of water. While this example is stark, this passage reminds us that when we are in a liminal space in our own lives – when we feel lost or adrift – God will provide. While we aren't likely to strike a rock and have water flow out of it, we will certainly receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we take the time to pray for guidance and listen for God's answer.

Prayer

Loving God, help us to feel that you are near to us always, and help us to be near to each other, especially in our church community, in times of joy and in times of uncertainty. Amen.

Emily Turek

March 18

Psalm 95

¹ O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our
salvation!
² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of
praise!
³ For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
⁷ For he is our God,

and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen to his voice!
⁸ Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
⁹ when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen
my work.
¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go
astray,
and they do not regard my ways."
¹¹ Therefore in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter my rest."

Reflection

Every Sunday morning our Saint Mark family joins with gathering music to begin our worship with a joyful noise to the Lord. I know God is present when hands are clapping, Nancy is playing her tambourine, and voices are lifted in praise and thanksgiving. Singing in the choir offers me a primary vehicle for feeling the spiritual presence in my life.

Prayer

Almighty God, we give you thanks for all the ways we know you are the center of our lives. Grant us the courage and strength to live as Jesus has taught us. May we follow the psalmist's message to come into his presence with thanksgiving and to make a joyful noise to the Lord. Amen.

Pat Simmons

March 19

Romans 5: 1-11

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we^[b] boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we^[c] also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.
⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this

so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Reflection

“Jesus died for us, while we were still sinners” And, we are ALL still sinners - not one of us is exempt. But, by God’s amazing grace, as Christ’s followers, we are put right with God. What does “put right” mean? It means that we have eternal life through Christ’s death on the cross, regardless of our propensity to continually mess up. And, not only that, but we are even declared to be God’s friends! What an incredible gift!

The scripture reading also says that we have been given peace, hope, endurance (from our troubles), and love in our hearts (from the Holy Spirit). If we have been given all of these things, in full measure, should we not then also share that grace and love and peace with all who we come in contact with? In other words, if God has given us “grace upon grace,” regardless of our failures, then who are we to withhold grace from those who have hurt or wronged us? Don’t we owe it to God, in gratitude for what he has done for us? Sure, we’re only human, but do we not have access to every resource that God offers us, as his friends? It’s so easy to keep that chip on our shoulder and so hard to let go of the pain inside, in order to allow God to fully heal us. The chip just feels safer. I have done my fair share of “big forgiveness” in my life, and it is never the easy road.

BUT, there is a reward... The song Forgiveness, by Matthew West ends with this line: “so let it go and be amazed, by what you see through eyes of grace... the prisoner that it really frees is YOU... Forgiveness.”

Prayer

Gracious God, give us the capacity to take the grace that you have given us and, in response, give it to those who have wronged us. May we see all people through the eyes of Christ. Amen.

Jen Ferguson

March 20

Romans 6: 1-11

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Reflection

In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul makes the case that no matter our background, we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). He goes on to argue that we are redeemed and justified before God by faith in Jesus. In Ch. 6, Paul clarifies that through our baptism, our sinful selves died and have been buried along with Jesus, and we have new life through his resurrection. He encourages us to “count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). Yet, simply knowing this is not enough – every week in service, we come before God to confess and remember our baptism because our sins persist. Thankfully, rather than leaving us on our own to try to work out our salvation, God gives us His Holy Spirit to continue His transformative work in our lives. Later in Romans, Paul encourages us in this journey away from sin and death to life and reconciliation by sharing, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any power, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38).

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you that by your grace, you make it possible for our faith to open the way for the gift of salvation through the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus. Holy Spirit, we pray that our hearts will remain open to you in all things, that you will strengthen our faith, and that you will continue your transformative work in our lives. Amen.

Scott Clark

March 21

Romans 6:1, 15-23

¹ What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey —whether you

are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

¹⁹ I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. ²⁰ When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. ²¹ What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Reflection

6: 1 “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!

6: 15 “What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!”

Paul deals in Romans 6:1, 15-23 with the vexing relations between obedience to the law and grace in the religious life. A sliver on the issue here.

Meditation on the Grammar of Grace: Ordinarily, a moral grammar relies on two types of sentences: imperative and declarative. The imperative says: Do this. The declarative then follows up with some negatives, including the withholding of approval or the arrival of generally hard times, except, of course, for the occasional “mulligan” thrown in.

Paul recognizes both the force and the flaw in the thought of critics who think of grace simply as the reality that follows the human deed. The moral bond between law and grace goes slack. “What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” Paul answers emphatically, “By no means!” The good news of grace is that grace does not displace the law, it relocates it. God’s gracious action precedes the law; Paul recognizes this dynamic in his own life and in the grammar of Israel. The declarative event of Israel’s gracious deliverance from Egypt precedes the imperatives of Mount Sinai. The original gift of deliverance settles into the being and bowels, the imagination and will of the Israelites. It alters their identity, as they turn away from their errant wanderings and turn toward their task in the Promised Land. The event of Mount Sinai specifies that task, the promised discipline that the people undertake in response to the event. Gift and task together constitute the calling: God’s covenant with the people and the people’s covenant with God.

The German language draws together more directly than English the concepts of gift and task with the words “Gabe” and “Aufgabe.” The repetition of the same syllable in both words conveys the sense that the task flows from the gift. A gift propels toward the task. The charge moves toward its discharge. The covenant recognizes the gift and the gift specifies the task. The Israelites purportedly live within the sound of gift and task.

The prophets of Israel were very clearheaded about the giftedness of this gift. Deliverance did not set Israel apart from others and reward the people for their superior merit. Israel did not outperform other nations on her SATs. Strangers were also there at Mount Sinai, along with the Israelites; and they would be there again in the promised land. The very events that set the people of Israel apart from their neighbors placed others within the compass of Israel’s duties.

Luke took this duty to heart saying, “When the stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as the native among you; and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God (Luke 19:33-34). The question of being open to the stranger, the bereft, the enslaved, the hobbled at the gate tests the length and breadth both of the ancient covenant and God’s ownership of each of us as we make our way openly among strangers and learn to speak and act on behalf of those who otherwise have no voice.

Prayer

Gracious God, you opened up your life to us in your Son and laid on him the burden of the cross that all of us might know the glory of his self-expending love. Grant that our faith in him may not be shaken by adversity or daunted by the threat of it, but that we might follow the way that leads to fellowship with him, and so with you and with all your creatures whom you affirm by your grace. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Bill May

March 22

John 9: 1-41

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. 4 I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. 7 And He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing.

8 Therefore the neighbors and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, "Is not this he who sat and begged?" 9 Some said, "This is he." Others said, "He is like him." He said, "I am he." 10 Therefore they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered and said, "A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and I received sight." 12 Then they said to him, "Where is He?" He said, "I do not know."

13 They brought him who formerly was blind to the Pharisees. 14 Now it was a Sabbath when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also asked him again how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." 16 Therefore some of the Pharisees said, "This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 They said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him because He opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet." 18 But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind and received his sight, until they called the parents of him who had received his sight. 19 And they asked them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20 His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself." 22 His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. 23 Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So they again called the man who was blind, and said to him, "Give God the glory! We know that this Man is a sinner." 25 He answered and said, "Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see." 26 Then they said to him again, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?" 28 Then they reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. 29 We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from." 30 The man answered and said to them, "Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! 31 Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him. 32 Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. 33 If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing." 34 They answered and said to him, "You were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us?" And they cast him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" 36 He answered and said, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" 37 And Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you." 38 Then he said, "Lord, I believe!" And he worshiped Him.

39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind." 40 Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these

words, and said to Him, "Are we blind also?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains.

Reflection

The first time I read through the passage for this reflection, I started to laugh, albeit somewhat uncomfortably. How long does it take the formerly blind man to convince the Pharisees that Jesus healed his sight? They ask his neighbors, they ask his parents, and he must testify yet again. He must verify it at least three times. How ignorant are those Pharisees? Ha, ha, right? Because I'm in the know about Jesus--I know who He is. For *I* can see, and *I* know. But maybe, I'm just as blind. What is happening to their world, the one that everyone had been so comfortable with? It must not have been easy to realize that the Son of God was in the flesh among them, breaking Sabbath rules, healing people, telling them that it was *they* who were actually blind.

What happens to us, when we are made to see something we did not already know? When has God opened our own eyes? And was it something we really wanted to see or know as the truth? What happens when the world as we know it has been completely shattered as a result? It can be overwhelming.

All we can do is trust in God--that He will walk next to us as we process this knowledge. The only thing that is important, above all else, is that He is with us and that we must rely on Him. There is no other way.

Prayer

Jesus let me receive your Grace. Walk next to me and hold my hand. Let the Holy Spirit dwell in my heart. When I am overwhelmed, I know you will carry me forward. Amen.

Jane Karakashian

March 23

Isaiah 35:3-7 (American Standard Version)

3 Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees.

4 Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come *with* vengeance, *with* the recompense of God; he will come and save you.

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

6 Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.

7 And the glowing sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water: in the habitation of jackals, where they lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes.

Reflection

Whenever we are faced with a hard circumstance, it is sometimes easy to forget who God is and the power He holds over our lives.

God sees us when we are weak. He understands our struggles and hears our cries of help when we come to Him. He is a God who loves and cares deeply for His children and based on that truth our faith should stand firm and unwavering.

I am often guilty of losing sight of God's control in my own life when faced with a hard circumstance. This passage is a reminder that I am not the "lord" over my life, God is. He has outlined every single day, minute, and second of our lives and nothing that happens is by chance. As the creator of our hearts and minds, we need to trust Him and remember who the true God is and who can give us the strength we need to face each and every day.

Prayer

Holy God, We hope for your light in the world. Help us to see all lights as a reminder of your love for all people and that the darkness will not last but be lit up by God. Amen.

Mariechen Bresler

March 24

Ephesians 5: 8-14

⁸For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) ¹⁰and find out what pleases the Lord. ¹¹Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. ¹²It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. ¹³But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. ¹⁴This is why it is said:

“Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

Reflection

When I feel I am in God's light, I feel more balanced in the world and in my life. I feel more secure within myself. I feel secure in God's love and acceptance of me. These are the times I am able to move past the hurtful things others say and do. I sometimes remember to pray for them during these times as well.

When I am in the dark times in my life, I forget I am a child of God and I forget to bring myself back into His light. I have to remember that God's light has not moved or dimmed, but that I am the one who has moved away. These are the times I feel insecure and alone in the world. I allow others to define me. I look for the acceptance of people who I do not even like and who do not treat others with kindness. These are the people who keep us in the darkness.

In the passage in Ephesians 5, verses 8-14, we are asked to live as children of light “for light produces every kind of goodness, righteousness and truth.” In this passage, we are told to turn away from things or people who keep us in the darkness. God's light shows us the way to live and how to treat others. One of Michelle Obama's inspirational quotes encourages to “choose people who lift you up”. We must be part of a community who lifts up others rather than brings them down to the darkness. We are challenged to live in the light. I will try to take up this challenge especially in the season of Easter.

Prayer

Dear Lord, please let us remember to live like a person who belongs in the light. Let us remember you are with us always, shining your light on us even during the times of darkness, Let us help one another find your light and to lift others up. Amen.

Dorothy Alexander

March 25

1 Samuel 16:1-13 (NRSV) David Anointed as King

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." ² Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." ⁴ Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" ⁵ He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." ⁷ But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." ⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." ⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." ¹⁰ Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these."

¹¹ Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." ¹² He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." ¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah."

Reflection

Saul was named king of Israel after the people said they wanted a king like other nations not the judges they had. He was given to them by the Lord (who was still in charge), but Saul disobeyed the Lord and the Lord was sorry that he had been made king. Samuel was a prophet who was mourning Saul's downfall. He had anointed him and now was sent by the Lord to anoint the next king.

This is the story of the Lord telling Samuel to go to the home of Jesse in Bethlehem because He has chosen one of Jesse's sons to be the new king of Israel. It is the story of Samuel who was unable to act. It is the story of an unwilling Samuel opening to seeing God's will. It is the story of the choosing of an unlikely king and God doing the choosing. The one finally anointed is the youngest, smallest son, a lowly shepherd and, as we find out later, he is a person with many flaws. This is how God always works by using the least likely person to do his work. And God is always in charge.

What does this passage say to us? Are we called like Samuel to listen and discern what God wants us to do? Can we let go and let God into our lives? Lent is a time for us to prepare ourselves so we may have a right relationship with God. God may have plans for each of us, the least of us. Can we listen for what God wants of us?

Prayer

Lord, help us during this Lenten season to listen for your voice and discern what you would have us do. So often we ignore you and go about our own ways. Show us also how to see others, the least of these, for who they are and accept them as you are accepting of us. Amen.

Note: There are several interesting points in this story. It is the first time we hear David's name. Also, it takes place in Bethlehem, an important place in our Christian narrative. We know Jesse to be in the lineage of Jesus: Jesse is the grandson of Ruth and Boaz. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Isaiah 11:1

Ellie Hagner

March 26

Psalm 23

A psalm of David.

- ¹The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,^[a]
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

Reflection

Next to the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm is the most well-known and beloved passage of scripture. It speaks for itself in its simplicity and comfort to believers. Here, God is portrayed as a shepherd caring for his flocks, taking us to places of rest, like still waters and green pastures – not places we are likely to experience living in the city – but places where our souls can be restored. He is with us through the ups and downs of life, no matter where we are. Our society tempts us to want a lot of things, but this psalm reminds us we have enough with God as our shepherd.

He is also portrayed as the gracious host, inviting us to a banquet where we are safe and nourished. A friend of mine asks his father, who is a pastor, "Dad, how is your cup today?" He usually answers, "Full to overflowing." At the end of the day, I can usually answer the same. My cup is overflowing. The Lord is my shepherd. That's all I want.

Prayer

Thank you God for your presence in my life and for keeping my cup full to overflowing. Amen.

Page Hawk

March 27

John 2:13-22

[13] And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem, [14] And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: [15] And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; [16] And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house a house of merchandise. [17] And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up. [18] Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign showest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things? [19] Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. [20] Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? [21] But he spake of the temple of his body. [22] When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said.

Reflection

For Christians, Lent is a time of preparation for Easter, a holiday during which much of the world now commemorates Jesus' crucifixion and Resurrection with pastel colored plastic eggs filled with chocolate and jelly beans. To say the least, the common celebration, tasty as it is, sanitizes what is an unfathomably radical event. This passage from John's gospel portends the crucifixion and Resurrection. Putting myself in the shoes (or sandals) of the disciples, this incident in the temple probably reinforced for them that Jesus' path, and their discipleship, would involve extreme conflict and violence. They were not going to be welcomed as liberators or saviors, at least not by the established order. Radical change is always going to be met with fierce (and ultimately violent) resistance. Jesus had come to overturn established and accepted practices, which meant challenging the respected, the rich, and the powerful. The adherents to that established order were incredulous that Jesus would have them destroy this temple, which took 46 years to build, and in place of this impressive physical structure, recognize "the temple of his body." Jesus was offering a totally different premise, which would upset the prevailing order.

Radical change is always hard. Even when we recognize the need for change, it is difficult to choose a path that risks our popularity, our status, our wealth, and creature comforts. Who are we, as mere individuals, to question the established order, or prevailing norms? Not rocking the boat is so much easier, especially when the change that we know is required will be unpopular. In our everyday lives, we face challenges that test our courage, our willingness to act in a way that will involve some sacrifice to our place in the established order our day. But as we strive to do so, we do not do so alone.

Prayer

Lord, open our eyes to the path you have lit before us. Give us the courage to be bold for you, to be radical in sharing your peace and justice, even when the sacrifice seems the greatest. When our road feels lonely, remind us that Jesus walks with us. Amen.

Nate Brown

March 28

Psalm 27 (King James Version)

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

² When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell.

³ Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.

⁴ One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple.

⁵ For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me; he shall set me up upon a rock.

⁶ And now shall mine head be lifted up above mine enemies round about me: therefore will I offer in his tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the Lord.

⁷ Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice: have mercy also upon me, and answer me.

⁸ When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.

⁹ Hide not thy face far from me; put not thy servant away in anger: thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.

¹⁰ When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.

¹¹ Teach me thy way, O Lord, and lead me in a plain path, because of mine enemies.

¹² Deliver me not over unto the will of mine enemies: for false witnesses are risen up against me, and such as breathe out cruelty.

¹³ I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord.

Reflection

Psalm 27 is very comprehensive.

It covers time: the past, present, and future.

It covers structure: foundations, comfort (like warm heat on a cold day), and towers -- aspirations and inspiration.

It is a dual prayer: of both requests and thanksgiving.

It covers life: failures and successes.

It covers key emotions: fear, hope, anger, courage, and joy.

And finally, patience: often in short supply, especially these days. Please reread Verse 14.

All of this in just fourteen verses. All based on our good Lord.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father: Help us realize that You are all we need as we go about living our lives—each day and throughout the years. Grant us the faith to believe and know, really know, that we can depend on You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Beth Irons

March 29

John 11: 1-27

¹⁻³ A man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. This was the same Mary who massaged the Lord's feet with aromatic oils and then wiped them with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was sick. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Master, the one you love so very much is sick."

⁴ When Jesus got the message, he said, "This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son." ⁵⁻⁷ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, but oddly, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed on where he was for two more days. After the two days, he said to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." ⁸ They said, "Rabbi, you can't do that. The Jews are out to kill you, and you're going back?" ⁹⁻¹⁰ Jesus replied, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in daylight doesn't stumble because there's plenty of light from the sun. Walking at night, he might very well stumble because he can't see where he's going." ¹¹ He said these things, and then announced, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to wake him up." ¹²⁻¹³ The disciples said, "Master, if he's gone to sleep, he'll get a good rest and wake up feeling fine." Jesus was talking about death, while his disciples thought he was talking about taking a nap. ¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Then Jesus became explicit: "Lazarus died. And I am glad for your sakes that I wasn't there. You're about to be given new grounds for believing. Now let's go to him."

¹⁶ That's when Thomas, the one called the Twin, said to his companions, "Come along. We might as well die with him." ¹⁷⁻²⁰ When Jesus finally got there, he found Lazarus already four days dead. Bethany was near Jerusalem, only a couple of miles away, and many of the Jews were visiting Martha and Mary, sympathizing with them over their brother. Martha heard Jesus was coming and went out to meet him. Mary remained in the house. ²¹⁻²² Martha said, "Master, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you." ²³ Jesus said, "Your brother will be raised up." ²⁴ Martha replied, "I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time."

²⁵⁻²⁶ "You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world."

Reflection

I have not died before... clearly... so thus I cannot fully relate to Lazarus in this passage.

That said, however, there was a time in my life that I was very near death. Death of my soul, my present, my future and my life as I had known it for 14 years of marriage. I had what I thought was a great life with a strong marriage, albeit we had challenging times as all couples do, great children, great friends, a great house, and a clear future. And then suddenly, or perhaps not so suddenly for my soon to be ex-wife, everything changed... and changed again, and a couple more changes after that. I leaned heavily on my family, my faith, and hope for my future. I prayed daily, some days multiple times per day, for God to be with me and my children during this time... walking in front of me leading the way, walking beside me as a companion, and walking behind me with a gentle push as needed.

Finally, the storm that was divorce passed and I focused on starting a new life for my children and me.

And then it happened, when I least expected it, a new life. Sharon and I met at Saint Mark, fell in love, combined our families and started our new lives together... the two of us, our five kids, two dogs, a cat, and a hamster... smoothly and easily combined. Ha! A new present and new future life... and an extremely full life at that.

In the words of country singer Garth Brooks, “I thank God for unanswered prayers.”

I learned through my experience that you truly do not have to wait for the End. God is right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in God, even though he or she dies, will live.

Prayer

Dear Lord, I pray for Resurrection and Life daily. As scripture directs, we know that everyone that believes in you does not ultimately die at all. I have lived this. I believe this. Amen.

Brent Shoemaker (from 2017)

March 30

John 11:25-45

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.^[a] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,^[b] the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Reflection

To me, this part of John's gospel is about having faith and hope even in times of great disappointment or even anguish. Martha still believes in Jesus even though he had not been there in time to heal Lazarus, to save him from death. Even though bad things can and do happen to us, God does not abandon us.

March 30 (cont.)

Another inspiration I take from these verses is that just as Jesus calls Lazarus from the tomb, I think of him calling all of us from "death" to life, through him. This act by Jesus helped many of those present put their trust in him by actually seeing what he was able to do. Although we were not there to witness this miracle ourselves, reading these verses from John can help support and encourage us in our own belief, just as it did for those who were actually present.

Prayer

Gracious God, help us to have faith and hope in times of great difficulty as well as in times of ease. Thank you for the healing power of your love for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Amen.

Lyn Hill

March 31

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹² Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

Reflection

The books of the prophets, like Ezekiel, are a little different from the rest of the Bible. Similar to the letters to the early church, the prophets tended to address specific events affecting God's people. Where they differ from the letters is that the prophets' words were not generally written down, but instead passed down orally. What we have in written form represents what those who preserved the prophets' words taught: lessons about God and enduring truths that apply far beyond the immediate situation for which they were delivered. This passage, spoken after the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people of God to Babylonia is exactly that. Delivered at the bleakest of times, Ezekiel tells of his

vision of God reuniting the scattered and dried up people of Israel and breathing life into them anew. In Ezekiel's vivid description of the dusty valley of dried bones we hear echoes of the words that we heard on Ash Wednesday, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But dust is not where things end. Just as God did for the Israelites, God does for us through the death and resurrection of Christ. Even when we feel shattered, God works to make us whole again and breath new life into us. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

God of life, help us to always remember that you gave yourself so that we might be whole. When we feel like the world is turning us to dust, hold us close and breathe life into us anew so that we might live in to your glory. Amen.

Karl Kaufmann

April 1

Psalm 130 (New International Version)

- ¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;
² Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.
³ If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?
⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.
⁵ I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.⁶ I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.
⁷ Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
⁸ He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

Reflection

This is a plea from the soul, a cry of desperation! At some time in our lives, probably all of us have experienced this feeling. It's something that comes from deep inside of us. Reading what the Psalmist says gives me a visceral or gut wrenching feeling. "Lord I've tried everything else, now I'm asking you to help me." The Psalmist says, "I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits." This is when we must place our hope in the Lord.

Fortunately, the Lord does not keep a tally of our sins. Despite our sins, the Lord is there with unfailing love and mercy! What a comfort to think that is there for us!

Prayer

Dear God, Help us remember the words of the Psalmist that gives us confidence that, despite our sins and failing to do his will, God offers us unfailing love and mercy! Thanks be to God for that! Amen.

June Colilla

April 2

Romans 8:6-11 (NRSV)

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Reflection

Paul, the writer of Romans, doesn't shy away from a serious topic. Contemplating life and death might seem especially heavy if you are reading this devotional with your morning coffee or at night before you fall asleep.

It's simple, Paul says, to set the mind on flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. I could certainly use some more peace in my life.

I think I understand what he means here, or perhaps I am starting to understand what it means for me. When I focus too much on the things of the world: politics, chores, my own achievements and failures, I feel the life being sucked out of me. But when I breathe deep and am able to focus my mind more on the Spirit, I can feel life and peace start to come back in.

But can the two work together, flesh and Spirit?

In the best-case scenario, I think they can. I think when we allow God to guide us, when I allow the Spirit in my life, my flesh, my earthly life, can reflect my spiritual life.

The Lenten season is a time for reflection upon the things on which our minds are set. How do we embody the Spirit of God dwelling within us? If Christ is in us, Paul says, we *can* embody the Spirit.

How will you let Christ dwell in you?

How will you set your mind on the Spirit?

How will you receive life and peace today?

Prayer*

By your Holy Spirit, O God,
Give us hearts to love you,
minds to know you,
souls to bless you,
and strength to serve you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

* Adapted from the Book of Common Worship

Rev. Shelby Etheridge Harasty

April 3

1 Kings 17:8-24 New International Version (NIV)

8 Then the word of the Lord came to him: 9 “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” 10 So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” 11 As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

12 “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

13 Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. 14 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’”

15 She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 16 For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

Reflection

Many times in my life, I’ve felt that God was looking out for me - even when for years I wasn’t so in tune with that caring and direction. In this passage we see an instance of God watching over and sustaining his servant Elijah at a time when his very life was threatened. After prophesying that there would be a great drought, he was instructed to hide from King Ahab and those who hated and blamed him for the drought, which was long and extreme. As we learn, Elijah did not give up on God, and God did not give up on him. The Lord provided for Elijah as he does for those who trust and believe today, promising him safety, food, and water. Eventually God sent Elijah to a place called Zarephath - to ask a woman, a widow he did not know, for food and water. The widow was willing to share her water, but balked at sharing her small supply of flour and oil to feed a stranger. But hearing and believing the promise that her supply of oil and flour would be continually replenished, she took the chance and was rewarded in ways she would never have imagined. Curious how? The story continues beginning with Verse 17.

Prayer

Lord, I want to be open to you, I want to discern your will, I want others to see you every day through the words I speak and the actions I take. You have been generous and blessed me in so many ways that I have just taken for granted. Help me be generous to others without begrudging it. Help me be kind without judgment. Help me remember that any sacrifice I make pales against the sacrifice Christ made for me. Help me let go, and let you be known to others through my words and my actions, as Elijah did for the widow from Zarephath.

Faye Frankfort

April 4

Exodus 12:1-14

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. ¹²For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Reflection

Our Old Testament passage above describes details of pivotal events for the Israelites. They were enslaved for generations. Yet now their lives are about to begin again in ways they cannot imagine. The Lord carefully instructs the Israelites to prepare a sacrifice, share that meal with every neighbor, and to mark the doorposts of their homes as they get ready to exit and leave their old lives behind for a new life. From now on and for all generations to come, the people are told to remember and celebrate this day as a festival to the Lord.

Today, Passover rituals faithfully tell the story of the Israelites' exodus from slavery and the journey to the new life God has given to them. Through those rituals, the exodus story becomes a living document, which has helped form the foundation of their faith for generations and will continue to do this as long as that story is re-told.

For Christians, then, retelling the story of Jesus' acts and words at the Last Supper on the Thursday before Easter, which we know as Maundy Thursday, aligns us directly with the command in Exodus. There are significant parallels tying that story to our own liberation today: In Exodus, God's action freed and saved the Israelites. This filled them with hope that their present lives were not all that there was. It was not the end of the story of God's people. In the same way, as told in the Gospels, Jesus' sacrifice of his own life for us has freed all of us from many forms of slavery, giving us a similar new beginning. This is THE good news.

When we hear the words, "This is my body, given for you," and "This is the cup of the new covenant, sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me" as we celebrate communion, we are communally remembering and re-telling an exodus story, too. In this memorial celebration, Christ's resurrection has liberated us. Our old lives have gone away. We can be filled with

hope and knowledge that our present lives are not all that there is. Through Christ, our new lives have begun. Isn't that worth celebrating?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, how is this night different from all other nights? Through your life and resurrection, you have unchained us, have given us new lives, and have set us free to love and serve you. This is the good news by which we are saved. Thanks be to you. Amen.

Rachel Kaufmann

April 5

Matthew 21:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ "Say to Daughter Zion,
'See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"^[a]

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,
"Hosanna^[b] to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"^[c]

"Hosanna^[d] in the highest heaven!"

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

¹¹ The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Reflection

When I read these verses, I thought, how perfect that Jesus is entering Jerusalem humbly, on the back of a donkey and not on a stallion or carried in like an emperor. Also, that he is so certain that a request for the donkey by one of his disciples shows how he knows that he has a trusting following. His is well acquainted with the prophesy in the Old Testament and that shows in his knowledge and sensitivity.

Likewise, leaders in our world need to know these secrets of success. There is a need for humility in the presence of challenges, a need to convince followers and finally, a need to trust them. As a teacher, I needed to convince my students to follow me on the road to knowledge. I had to be not be the know it all, parading my knowledge, but gently taking them along with me by gaining their trust. I wasn't always successful, but when I was, they were happy, and I was happy too.

Jesus was a teacher. Follow his example and you will live a different life. Build trust in those around you and share what you have.

Prayer

Lord, you have shown me the way and when I am on that path with you, I will find the joy that those who greeted you as you entered Jerusalem found.

Cecilia Nunez

April 6

John 12: 1-8

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² There they made him a supper; Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said "Let her alone, let her keep it for my burial. ⁸ The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

Reflection

How will we spend our days? Jesus went to the house of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. Friends gather to eat but do not necessarily agree on values. Martha, ever the practical one, cooked and served the food. Mary used her time to lovingly wash Jesus' feet and anointed his feet with ointment. Each was a service given lovingly.

Judas, another guest, questioned Mary's gift, for he said that the money spent would be better given to the poor. This was indeed a worthy cause, but Judas had some less worthy reasons for his complaint. What influences our choices? Is it tax deductible or is this a worthy expenditure? We all make these decisions, but we do not always agree on the choices made by others. We are not always aware of underlying motives which influence us and do not know what influences others.

Prayer

Dear God, Thank you for allowing us to make choices in our lives. We choose who to vote for, we choose how to spend our money and our time. Guide us as we strive to make worthy choices. Help us to be aware of the needs of others and to resist other conflicting motives. May we use our lives as you have taught us. Amen.

Margaret Schweitzer

April 7

John 12: 20-36 (New Revised Standard Version)

²⁰ 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

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
'Till it's gone
-Joni Mitchell*

Even toward the end of his life, people were not sure who Jesus was. They wanted to see him because of the miracles and the spectacle, but they did not understand his true purpose. In this passage, they hear a voice from heaven and think it is only thunder. They ask who the Son of Man is after Jesus has told them he was the Son of Man many times before. Jesus explains that he must die so that we may have eternal life. Jesus knew that he had to be “lifted up” in order for people to fully appreciate who he is and become true followers.

Today, we are all like the Greeks in this passage. We wish to see Jesus. As the scripture states, the Messiah remains forever. Jesus is here. God and the Holy Spirit are here. We may not be able to see Jesus in the flesh, but we have his light to show us the way.

Prayer

Gracious Lord, we know you are always with us. Allow us to see your light and use it to guide our path, so that we may continue your work here in this life. Amen.

Greg Carr

April 8

John, Chapter 13, Verses 21-32

When he had said this, Jesus was deeply troubled and testified, "Amen, amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, at a loss as to whom he meant. One of his disciples, the one whom Jesus loved, was reclining at Jesus' side. So Simon Peter nodded to him to find out whom he meant. He leaned back against Jesus' chest and said to him, "Master, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I hand the morsel after I have dipped it." So he dipped the morsel and took it and handed it to Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot. After he took the morsel, Satan entered him. So Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now none of those reclining at table realized why he said this to him. Some thought that since Judas kept the money bag, Jesus had told him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or to give something for the poor. So he took the morsel and left at once. And it was night. When he had left, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify himself, and he will glorify him at once.

Reflection

All four gospels include a scene at the Last Supper when Jesus predicts his betrayal. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus says that it will be one of the twelve, but he does not specify who. Only in John is the prediction explicit that Judas will betray him. Even more perplexing is that it appears Jesus has chosen his betrayer. Jesus hands the "morsel" to Judas, and it is only then that "Satan entered him." Not only that, but he urges Judas to do it "quickly" and then tells the other apostles that God will glorify the Son of Man "at once."

Why does John uniquely grant Jesus such power of prognostication, and why does he seemingly empower Jesus to choose his assassin? I imagine long scrolls have been written examining these questions. I have not read them.

My sense, though, is that John is underlining Jesus' intentionality in dying for our sins, and that he is absolving Judas for his role, and perhaps by extension, all of us for our sins that also "betray" Jesus. Jesus is in total control of this situation. And he seemingly chooses Judas at random, a sign perhaps that any of us could be in the same position.

For me, I take this as another sign of God's grace.

Prayer

Dear God, though I often do not understand the mystery of your plan, I know you will guide me towards grace. Amen.

Rob Pergament

April 9

John 13: 1-17; 31b-35

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (2) And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, (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) rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. (5) Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. (6) He came to Simon Peter; and Peter said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" (7) Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand." (8) Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." (9) Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" (10) Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over; and you are clean, but not every one of you." (11) For he knew who was to betray him, that was why he said, "You are not all clean."

(12) When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" (13) You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. (14) If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (15) For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (16) Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. (17) If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them... "

(31b) Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; (32) if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. (33) Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' (34) A new commandment I give to you that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (35) By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Reflection

To me, this passage is a teaching moment for the disciples and us about love -- God's love for his Son, Jesus' love for his disciples, and hope for the disciples' love for one another. It is about a deep, abiding love that comes with faith and community with each other and the Holy Spirit. John sets the stage in the first verse, Jesus, "having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end." And the reader brings to the passage the knowledge that in Jesus' time in Judea, washing feet before entering someone's home was as common as the way we wash hands today before we eat, except then, the feet washing was often done by a slave or a servant. For Peter, the idea of Jesus washing his feet was incongruous, and he protested. Jesus reminds Peter that He is the disciples' Teacher and Lord, and in this act, Jesus essentially adds "Servant" to his titles, and he tells the disciples that they ought to follow his example by washing one another's feet. Jesus also tells the disciples that he will not be with them much longer and where he is going they cannot come. So Jesus gives them a new commandment,

Love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

By admonishing the disciples to serve each other and love one another enough to wash each other's feet and enough that others in their world will notice, Jesus is suggesting the foundation of his disciples'

community in his physical absence. And we know that such love and caring can become a channel for the Holy Spirit to work through those that love and follow Jesus.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank you for the love of Jesus for us, and please help me and the Saint Mark community, especially in this time of transition, to be recognized as disciples of Jesus because of our love. Amen.

Gail Dufek

April 10

John 19, 24-27

While the soldiers were looking after themselves, Jesus' mother, his aunt, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood at the foot of the cross. Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her. He said to his mother, "Woman here is your son." Then to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that moment the disciple accepted her as his own mother. - The Message

Reflection

John's retelling of the story of the crucifixion can send the mind in many directions, the corruption of the Jewish leadership, the cowardice of Pilate in the face of an angry mob, the bizarre form of capital punishment practiced by Rome, the apparent lack of compunction among the soldiers charged with carrying out the torture and execution, the gospel writer's need to enumerate the fulfilling of a series of Old Testament prophecies, and the contrast between concern for Sabbath law and the disregard the Biblical direction to seek justice and protect innocent life.

In the midst of these dramatic subplots come these brief and very personal last words. Who exactly the third Mary and the disciple are doesn't matter. The point is that these were the people who were willing to be with him at the end and with whom he probably had the deepest emotional connection. Some were blood relatives and some were not. All were taking both physical risks and bearing an enormous emotional toll to stand with the condemned man.

Like many dying persons, Jesus knew he was going to a better place momentarily and was more concerned about the welfare of his loved ones than his own fate. I think this is the gospel writer once again telling us that Christ is human as well as divine. That's what makes the sacrifice of his life real.

Prayer

Dear Father, on Good Friday and throughout the year help us to move beyond our self-centeredness and feelings of guilt for the sins which made your son's suffering on the cross necessary. Help us instead to recognize and focus on the love and forgiveness his sacrifice represents and the grace and redemption that is still ours for the asking. Amen.

Richard Ridge

April 11

Matthew 27: 57-66

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

⁶² The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard^[a] of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can."^[b] ⁶⁶ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

Reflection

The body of Jesus was given a more honorable burial, due to the actions of Joseph. In other societies, the Romans would commonly leave crucified criminals on the cross to rot there, and to serve as a warning to others. However, in Israel, because leaving a body on the cross was against the Jewish law, crucified criminals would be buried, typically in a common grave.

Joseph would have none of that! He was a follower of Christ but seemingly not very bold about that in the past. But, in this circumstance, Joseph boldly revealed himself as a follower to Pilate, not fearing any repercussions. Most Christians went into hiding during the time of the crucifixion, but this had an opposite effect on Joseph. The privilege of burying the body of his beloved Master pushed him to take that risk.

I often wonder if I would take on the role of Joseph (being a risk taker) or would I go in hiding like most others did?

Jesus risked everything for the job he was called to do.

Christ calls us to take risks for kingdom purposes. Every message that we hear now says the opposite: Maximize comfort and security -- NOW, not in heaven. This really hits me right in the gut. I love to shop. It, at times, helps me to hide from reality -- showing the person that I think others want to see rather than the true person that I am (still figuring out who that is).

For Lent, I've been asked to give up shopping for the non-necessities of life. I'm thankful for the person's wisdom that thought of this. I need to center my life more around Christ and not around "stuff."

By removing eternal risk, Christ calls us, his people, to continual temporal risk.

Time to step out of my comfort zone and take more risks ... the right ones.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, We don't want to believe that inner changes can't happen. Life is good, and we are finding our way in it by being patient and learning to read your signs of hope. Continue to guide our risks and our desire to be closer to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Teddy Ferguson

April 12, Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^[a] lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,^[b] and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

