

FOR YOUR PRAYERFUL CONSIDERATION

EXCERPTS FROM AN ARTICLE FROM THE JANUARY 2017 WVUMC MONTHLY CIRCUIT

The torrential rains and flash flooding of June 23 (2016) left in its wake more than 4,000 homes and businesses damaged or destroyed and at least 1,800 West Virginians without a home.

Approximately 500,000 people were without power in the aftermath of the storm, 14 water treatment stations were damaged and road and bridge repairs are estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$46 million dollars.

We're Still Here for You. Responding with Love for as Long as it Takes.

Disaster response ministry demonstrates a core Christian value: caring for people affected by sudden emergencies. Our Conference disaster response coordinators help assess needs in the days following a disaster, recruit work teams, and help organize and collect materials such as cleaning buckets, health kits, and other materials as needed.

You Can Help! Whether it's with prayer, monetary donation, or volunteer efforts, we will restore hope with your help.

Want to help? Opportunities are available! If you would like to volunteer or donate.

We are deeply grateful for and blessed by every one of your gifts!

Contact the New Vision with Hope, WV Disaster Recovery Leaders:

Rev. JF Lacaria: 303-561-8097 (c)

Rev. Jack Lipphardt: 304-639-7035 (c).

Check the [West Virginia Conference Facebook](#) for updates!

Flood Relief for the Summer 2016 Storms

Donations may be made through Annual Conference #935 for the special offering. Checks may be sent to:

Conference Treasurer's office:

PO Box 2469,

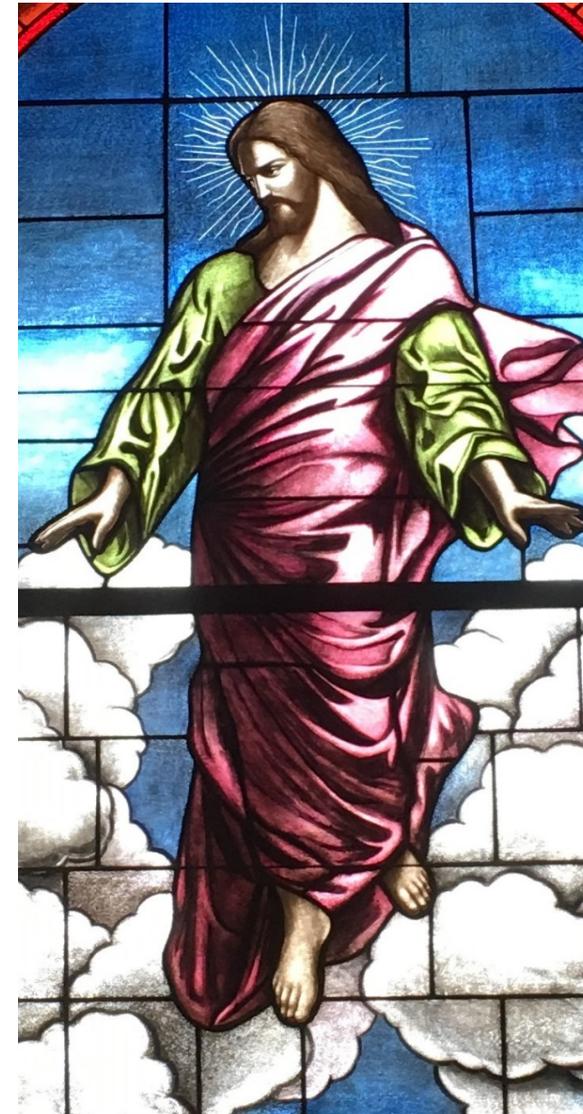
Charleston, WV 25329.

Thank you in advance for your generosity!

Thank you for your prayerful consideration! Hope is being restored with your help.

May God Bless you!

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2018



Stained glass window at St Paul's UMC, Parkersburg

**BY LAITY OF THE
WEST VIRGINIA
CONFERENCE
OF
THE UNITED METHODIST
CHURCH**

FIND THE ONLINE VERSION
AT: WWW.WVUMC.ORG
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DELIVERY OF THE
DAILY DEVOTIONALS



This devotional was written by the laity of the West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church except for the day before the Lenten Season starts and the Sunday Devotionals which were written all by Rev. Barry Steiner Ball. Please meditate on each daily reading and pray for God's Spirit to direct your life in a special way during this Season of Lent. Pray without ceasing during this Season of Lent for those children created by God who have become addicted to drugs or other destructive behaviors. We will learn how to help those in addiction by listening to what the scripture has to say about our Christian response to others and staying open to the direction of the Holy Spirit on our lives.

THANK YOU!

I want to thank Rev. Barry Steiner Ball for his contribution to the Laity Devotional this Lenten Season. Barry has worked for years with the Drug Task Force in Maryland, and has seen first-hand the devastation that opioid addiction has on the lives of those suffering from substance abuse disorder as well as their families.

The laity of the Conference thanks you for using this devotional guide. I hope you have given some thought about the opioid crisis in our state and country during this Season of Lent. Has God spoken to your heart to make a difference? Do you need some suggestions?

1. Pray about the things you can do, and ask for direction from God.
2. Start a support group for families of those suffering from substance abuse disorder.
3. Join your community action group fighting drugs and become an active participant.
4. Involve youth in your church, give them a place to belong.
5. Become a mentor for kids in your neighborhood.
6. Listen for guidance from the Holy Spirit, we have no better guide!

If you have questions about the opioid crisis and want to know what you can do, Rev. Barry Steiner Ball can be contacted at steinerball@gmail.com

I also want to thank each of the individual laity writers of the 40 devotionals, without your help this devotional ministry would not be possible. THANK YOU!

As you will remember, the Lenten season is made up of 40 days prior to Easter, not counting Sundays. The Sundays during the Lenten Season are considered mini Easters. I did use laity writers for the 40 days of the Lenten Season, but the devotionals for the mini Easters this year were written by clergy, Rev. Barry Ball. This I know is a technicality, but I believe this series of devotionals will give glory to God and provide inspiration to its readers.

May God bless you in your ministry!

Rich Shaffer, WV Conference Lay Leader, WV.Lay.Leader@gmail.com

VISITING THE TOMB

John 20: 1-9

Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

1. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2. She ran to Simon Peter and to Jesus' favorite disciple and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb! We don't know where they have put him." 3. Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4. They ran side by side, until the other disciple ran faster than Peter and got there first. 5. He bent over and saw the strips of linen cloth lying inside the tomb, but he did not go in. 6. When Simon Peter got there, he went into the tomb and saw the strips of cloth. 7. He also saw the piece of cloth that had been used to cover Jesus' face. It was rolled up and in a place by itself. 8. The disciple who got there first then went into the tomb and when he saw it, he believed. 9. At that time Peter and the other disciple did not know that the Scriptures said Jesus would rise to life.

John presents us with the narrative that lies at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus, who was crucified, has been raised. All gospel accounts of this moment vary on some points, but what is consistent is the day and that it is Mary Magdalene who is the first to go to the tomb. We watch as Mary, Peter and an unnamed disciple discover that Jesus' tomb is now empty. Imagine what Mary was feeling. Did she think someone had stolen Jesus' body or did she really know what had happened? Did she know that Jesus had conquered death and a new creation has begun?

When Peter enters the tomb he discovers it is empty and unlike the four-day dead Lazarus, who stumbled out of his tomb hindered by his burial wrappings (John 11:44), the cloths are still in the tomb. John tells us that the disciple "saw and believed".

Can you imagine the amazement and excitement of Mary Magdalene and Peter? Are we amazed and excited what God can do? Is our Hope and Faith built on the risen Lord?

Prayer: Gracious God, we are thankful for the chance to be on a Holy Journey with you. We are thankful for your Son, Jesus, who died on that cross for us. We can only imagine the excitement when they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Too often God we are tired, disheartened, sad and our excitement is no longer there. We feel like giving up but we know there are no situations that you cannot help us change. May we never lose our hope, our faith and our amazement of you. We know that Jesus Christ has indeed risen. Easter is forever. Amen

Belinda Toms, Director, Tyrand Parrish

What if...

Matthew 7:7-12

The Day before Lent, Tuesday February 13, 2018

What if we as United Methodists, located in every corner of West Virginia really took the time this Lent to fast, pray and listen for God's call to respond to the opioid epidemic?

Fast: What if we set aside food for a day or a meal? What if when we felt a pang of hunger we stopped what we were doing and prayed for those who hunger uncontrollably for an opioid? What if we took the time to think about how the addicted person hungers every day for this drug, to the expense of their health, their family and their future? If skipping a meal makes us miserable and irritable along with that little voice in our head that tries to get us to cheat on our fast – how does the person caught in addiction feel every day?

Pray: What if we set aside time to ask God for guidance. What if we honestly asked God our questions about addiction, shouted out our fears and frustrations about the addicted? What if we asked God to make clear what our (mine and yours) calling is to respond to this epidemic? What if we asked what our church's calling is? What if we intentionally prayed for the healing of those who suffer from substance abuse disorder, healing for their families and healing for our communities?

Listen: What if throughout this time of Lent we listened for God's call on our lives? What if we listened for a loud booming voice or a still quiet voice or God's guidance in a trusted friend or in the voice of a complete stranger? What if we listened for God's guidance in the crazy businesses of the day and in quiet of our nightly dreams?

Respond: When God calls the body of Christ – every body part must respond. Now is the time, we all have a calling we have all been blessed with specific gifts and graces that are needed to end the opioid epidemic. Is this scary? Yes indeed. Is this unfamiliar territory? Yes again. Is God with us? Absolutely!

It is not enough for us to open our church doors and wait for the epidemic to end. We must leave our sanctuaries and enter the battle. Onward Christian Soldiers!

Prayer: Lord, we pray for healing of those who suffer from substance abuse disorder, healing for their families and healing for our communities. Show us ways to respond to this epidemic. Amen.

Rev. Barry Steiner Ball

GOD LOVES ME

Psalm 51: 3-6, 12-13

Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018

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

⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

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

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

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

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

My friends, it is five days before Christmas and I have just listened to the message of hope that Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball gave next to homeless Jesus at St. Mark's church in Charleston. She calls us to reach out in love and to be love for those who don't yet know Christ as their Savior.

I went to my Bible and re-read my scripture from Psalms 51. God knew me, before I was born. God knew me, and I was a sinner. God desires me to be in a right relationship with Him. God wants me to have hope. God wants to give me joy. God loves me. He loved me so much that He sent his Son. In Jesus, I have hope, joy, peace, and love. Love that I am to share.

Jesus went from the manger to the cross and demonstrated the love of a willing spirit, one ready to listen to his Heavenly Father.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, with my whole heart allow me to show love to those who do not yet know Jesus. Allow the love that flows from me to bring these souls to you for your benefit. Amen.

Mary C. Bane
Mon Valley Lay Servant Coordinator

THE HEAVENLY WAR

Scripture: Luke 11: 14-23

Saturday, March 31, 2018, 40th Day of Lent

Orson Welles terrified millions of Americans in 1938 with his radio narration of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. The drama was so realistic that many thought aliens were actually invading our planet. It was only fiction; no one should have believed such a far-fetched tale. But they did.

The Bible clearly affirms that we are engaged in combat with evil that is intent on destroying us. "We aren't fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens" (Eph. 6:12). It is a frightening truth which no one should doubt or ignore but many do.

John affirms "the Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). But Jesus' authority put Him into conflict with the unyielding Jewish religious leaders. Luke 11:14-23 shows the mounting tension between Jesus and these religious leaders. Rather than approaching Jesus with open hearts and minds, they accused Him of using Satan's power and demanded a sign from heaven. As such, they reissued the third temptation Satan had put before Jesus, to use His power by casting Himself off the Temple pinnacle. Jesus soundly disproved their demands by giving this extensive teaching on spiritual conflict, the heavenly war.

Lives and eternal destinies are at stake. People cannot ignore Jesus. They must decide for Him or they are against Him. Neutrality is impossible. We either follow Christ into battle on His side, or we oppose Him and remain on Satan's side. These are the crucial issues behind this section of Luke's Gospel.

Jesus says, "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters" (11:23). In other words, neutrality is not an option. Jesus makes it plain: Either you follow Him or you are against Him and in Satan's camp. Those are the only options.

You may feel content enough without Christ that you assume that all is well in your soul. Not having a desperate sense of need, you will not seek Jesus Christ, to deliver you from Satan's power. So, Luke presses you to answer the question: Is Jesus Christ really the Messiah?

Jesus is truly Lord, He alone defeated Satan's power, and we must commit to Him and Him alone.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the gospel accounts that tell us what you said and did. Jesus, you have authority over Satan and his forces. Give us the courage to remain true to your calling. Protect us as we strive to do your will. Amen.

Krista Cather, Lay Leader/Lay Speaker, Memorial United Methodist Church, Williamson, WV

GOOD FRIDAY

March 30, 2018 Good Friday

Hebrews 4:14-16 CEB

14 Also, let's hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God's Son; 15 because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin. 16 Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

Good Friday, the day Jesus died on the cross. Jesus, our great high priest, made himself to be the sacrifice required to bring us into relationship with himself, with God, with the Holy Spirit. The High Priest of the Temple only once a year entered the Holy of Holies, entered God's Presence, to make atonement for Israel's sin. It was so terrifying that a rope was tied around him to pull him out if he became totally overwhelmed. And yet these verses tell us to hold on to our confession, our faith, and draw near to God's throne with confidence, since (or because) of what Jesus has done, and who he is. Not once a year, but daily, hourly, every minute of every day, we are called to His presence. He wants a deep, intimate relationship with us.

On this day that marks his death, we mourn, but with joy. The roots of the word joy trace back to the Latin *gaudere*, rejoice. We can mourn with rejoicing because we know that this is not the end. But we must go through this day, even as Jesus did. We must take into our hearts the sure knowledge that the human Jesus died: died for and because of me and my sin. That the human Jesus was tempted in every way, except that he did not sin, and so he passes through this life, knowing all that we know, feeling all we feel, experiencing all the needs, desires, disappointments, hurts, confusions, loneliness, everything. He passes through, and then he goes beyond.

Easter will come, but not until we take into our hearts all of Good Friday.

Prayer: Gracious God we pray for you to be with us on this day of darkness. Bring hope and peace to our innermost being as we mourn the death of your Son. Amen

Jane Arnold, Capon Bridge UMC

DENY MYSELF?

Scripture: Luke 9:22-25

Thursday, February 15, 2018, 2nd Day of Lent

You want me to do what? Deny myself? Take up a cross? Are you serious? I have stuff that I need to buy and stuff I need to do. How am I supposed to do all that and deny myself? And then you want me to lose myself? I've spent a lot of time trying to "find" myself. Our culture extols status, pleasure, self-satisfaction and material possessions. We are urged to buy trendy self-help books which allegedly help us "find" ourselves. In Luke 9:22-25, however, Jesus tells us that we do not truly find life until we stop living for ourselves and start living for Jesus. In Luke 9:25 (NIV) Jesus asks, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?" Living for Jesus involves much more than simply proclaiming our Christianity or attending church. We must open our lives and allow Jesus to fill our needs. When we rely on Jesus to meet our needs the "stuff" we cherished loses importance.

Living a Christian life is demanding and challenging. As weak humans, we tend to want our faith to be easy. The German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this cheap grace, "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross and grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." Bonhoeffer himself knew the true cost of what it means to follow Christ, as he was imprisoned and later executed for his opposition to Hitler's regime.

During this Lenten season, let's all accept the challenge to examine our lives and find areas where we can deny ourselves to better serve our Lord. What can we do? Take on a task at church we have avoided because it looks too demanding or is outside of our comfort zone? Increase our financial giving to the church? Participate in a mission trip? Let go of our fear of talking about our faith to those who do not believe? Each of us through prayer and personal discernment can identify areas of our lives where we need to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus so that we can truly live. Amen!

Prayer: Lord, show us where we can serve that will increase Your Kingdom. Amen.

Cheryl L. Davis

Certified Lay Servant

Elizabeth Memorial United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV

JESUS QUESTIONED ABOUT FASTING

Scripture: Matthew 9:14-15 Friday, February 16, 2018, 3rd Day of Lent

¹⁴ Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁵ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

Fasting in the Old Testament time was required by Jewish law. I am sure that is why Jesus was questioned about His disciples' habit of not fasting. Jesus was known to fast in times when faced with a spiritual need but as a rule He did not fast.

Why did His disciples not fast? He asked, would one fast when the bridegroom (Jesus Himself) was with them. That was a time to be joyful but knowing what was to come Jesus said His disciples would fast when He was taken from them. He made it seem as if fasting was for a time of sadness and stress. Oh my, if that is still true today, let the church fast!!

Many folks fast during the season of Lent. Is it as a means of growing closer to Jesus or a time of sadness over the crucifixion? I believe fasting should be a time of personal growth. Replace food (not chocolate, I know where you can get wonderful chocolate, peanut butter Easter eggs), drink, or bad habits with times of prayer and meditation and finding a closer walk with Jesus. But, do it privately and keep it between you and God.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to be more like You and when we make an effort to grow nearer to You, help us to do it in a manner that brings glory to You. Thank you for loving us and help us to love You better. Amen

Judy Raines
TEL Team
Trinity, Bluefield

TRUST

Mark 16: 1-7

Thursday, March 29, 2018, 38th Day of Lent

"When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. **2** Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb

When I read this story, there is one simple word that I hear over and over in my mind. Trust. This is something that we have been encouraged to have all throughout our faith journey. "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart and he will lead your path straight." When Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome embarked on their journey to anoint Christ's body, the scripture explains that they saw, "a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side..." How would *you* react if you were one of the individuals in this scenario? The young man goes on to say, "**6** 'Don't be alarmed... You are looking for Jesus.'" Would you believe him?

Too often in this modern age we find people alienating others because they are different in some fashion. When I say being different, that includes race, religion, sex, sexuality, socioeconomic status, or educational level. Many do this in an effort to stay aligned with the social constructs of modern society. Others alienate in an effort to boost their own ego. Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball delivered a message to the West Virginia Annual Conference of 2016 that I will never forget. She shared that the Bible was not God's final instruction guide for the modern Christian. He continues to speak to us today. Do you think that everyone accepted Christ with open arms when he first came to Earth? We know from studying history that this was obviously not the case. People saw him as a man who came to end hate, bigotry, and corruption. These people did not *trust* that Jesus was the son of God. They did not *trust* that his words were sent from God. As Christians, we struggle at times to realize that God speaks to us every day. You see God daily. You see him, in the grin of a small infant, the warm hug of a parent, and the love a child shows their parents. Let that speak to you.

In the end, my message to you is simple. Do not think that just because the way something went was not ideal, that it was not part of God's plan for you. Just because it did not go how it has always gone, doesn't mean that it's not a result of divine intervention. God's word never stops evolving. Neither should you.

Prayer: Gracious and merciful God, We come to you in an attitude of open hearts, open minds, and open ears. We confess that we have not listened to your word. We promise to trust your constantly evolving word and recognize that you are always surrounding us with your loving arms. In Christ's name, Amen

Max McGinnis, Huntington, YSF Chair

REMEMBERING COMMUNION

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 Wednesday, March 28, 2018, 37th Day of Lent

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

I think of this passage every time I take or serve communion. When I was younger my youth group did a 30 hour famine. The famine felt very long. At the end we made dinner and it was amazing. After not eating for what seemed like a long time, I thought about all of the people who didn't get to eat as much or as often.

Some people don't have bread to break. We are very fortunate and we should be thankful for it every day. We will often get caught up in our daily life and not realize how privileged we are. Think of all the great things we are given and be grateful. Sacrifices have been made through history, sacrifices such as Jesus's life the most wonderful thing that could've happened to us.

Count your blessings. Make sure that at this time of the year especially that you give thanks and remember the amazing journey that goes back centuries, to have us where we are today.

Prayer: Thank you Lord, for our amazing journey, we are thankful for Your many blessings. Watch over us and make us mindful of those less fortunate than we are. Amen.

Cozette Ries, Radical Discipleship of Appalachia Academy, Kingwood UMC

SHOW LOVE TO ALL GOD'S CHILDREN

Isaiah 58:9-14

Saturday, February 17, 2018, 4th Day of Lent

Verse 10. If you offer your food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday.

Offer your food to the hungry. How many times have you offered your food to the hungry? How many times have you been hungry? Growing up I was hungry a lot. We were poor so there were times when I went hungry. I wasn't sure where my next meal would come from. God sent people into my and my brother's lives who saw our need. They knew we not only needed to be shown the love of God, but also food. My brother and I didn't know that these people were helping us because of God. These wonderful people taught us that loving God makes you want to feed the hungry, take care of the poor and needy. God teaches us to do these things and we will be a light to others. Being a hungry child, and having people who loved God and provided food showed me the love of God. Now that I'm an adult with children of my own, I want to teach them that giving to the poor and hungry is what God wants us to do. Taking care of people is always a good thing. Even if they don't smell the best or look the best. God loves them just the way they are and so should we. Being poor isn't anyone's wish. I didn't wish to be poor as a child. Be kind to people and show them the love of God. You never know when it will change someone's life. Let's follow in the footsteps of Jesus and eat with the poor. We will be better people for it.

Prayer: Lord, help us to see all people as children of God who are loved by You, as well as also loved by us. Amen.

Teresa Prince, Westover UM Church

WHAT IF....

Read Luke 15:11-32

1st Sunday of Lent, February 18, 2018

We are all familiar with Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. All of the characters and actions in this parable resemble the characters and actions in our opioid epidemic. A child leaves home, parents worry every day, the lost child in their addiction lives in a "far away land," by the grace of God the child "comes to himself" and returns home. The parents and community celebrate the return of the lost child but the older brother is not thrilled with the return of the brother. Did Jesus have our family, church and community in mind when he told this parable?

Over the next several weeks we will use this familiar parable as our guide to honestly look at the opioid epidemic and ask "what if...?" The hope is we will not spend our devotion time wondering what if the parents did something different, or what if the prodigal son did not leave, but asking God what can I do to keep this from happening again? What can I do when I meet a child lost in a faraway land? What if I, what if we, as the church were involved in this parable...how could God have used us to prevent, comfort, care for, support and rejoice with the family of the prodigal son?

Read the parable again slowly. Give the characters in the story names of people you know who are directly involved with the opioid epidemic. Ask God where we should be in this parable.

What if God answers our petition?

It is not enough to open the doors of our sanctuary and hope the epidemic ends. We must leave our sanctuaries and enter the story.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for the parable of the prodigal son. Open our eyes to the prodigal sons and daughters all around us. As we pray for them, open our hearts to reach out to them and help them in their time of need as their lives are being destroyed by their uncontrollable actions. God bless them in their lost condition make them aware they need You. Amen.

Rev. Barry Steiner Ball

ALWAYS THE SAME

Matthew 26:14-25

Tuesday, March 27, 2018, 36th Day of Lent

Matthew 26:14-16; Then one of the Twelve-the one called Judas Iscariot- went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever.

The Bible says, "It is appointed unto men once to die," and to the average person, this seems a stark and hopeless situation.

Hundreds of philosophies and scores of religions, have been invented to circumvent the Word of God. Modern philosophers and psychologists, are still trying to make it appear that there is some way out other than the path of Jesus.

Numerous people have tried them all, and none of them lead anywhere but down.

Christ came to give us the answers to three enduring problems of sin, sorrow, and death. It is Jesus Christ, and He alone, who is enduring and unchanging, "the same yesterday, today and forever."

All other things may change, but Christ remains unchangeable.

In this restless sea of human passions, Christ stands steadfast and calm, ready to welcome all who will turn to him and accept his marvelous blessings of safety and peace.

"We should be as culturally relevant as we can be, and we should interact with the problems people are having today, but our spiritual calling is to take them to the Scripture, to take them to the cross."

God continues to use this incredible outreach in 2018, to propel our church forward and energize our members to live out the Great Commandment and to fulfill the Great Commission.

We are living in an age of Grace, in which God promises that "whosoever will" may come and receive His Son.

This period of grace will not go on indefinitely. We are even now living on borrowed time.

Prayer: Jesus, even if loved ones, friends, acquaintances change, You are always the same. Thank you for Your unchanging love.

Ken Shanes, Lay Leader, Mon Valley District-Certified Lay Servant

SPREADING THE WORD OF GOD

Isaiah 49 1:6

Monday, March 26, 2018, 35th Day of Lent

The 49th chapter of Isaiah begins by emphasizing the divine calling of the prophet. The prophet is certain that the message he conveys is not his, but God's, for he has no doubt that God wants to make him an instrument – a channel to deliver God's message of salvation to humanity. I suspect that some may want to use this passage to back up their personal views on the abortion issue, but that misses the point of these verses.

The prophet is voicing a strong conviction that God's knowledge of us is not limited by time, that he knows us thoroughly and understands how each of us can fit into his plan for the salvation of his most precious creatures. I see him also acknowledging his willingness to answer the call – to make himself available to be a vessel to convey God's grace to the people.

Contemplating Isaiah's message makes me believe that God has a place for me and for you in evangelism, whether we deliver the word by writing, by speech, or by deed. I don't believe that God has set out an individual step-by-step agenda and all we have to do is place our feet in the steps laid out for us. I believe that God has given us many tools for discerning how we as individuals fit into the divine order. We have our God-given intellect, our church tradition, divinely inspired scripture, the wisdom of our fellow Christians (indeed, God's word may come to us through wise people of other faiths, for God is the God of all creation.)

God uses music, poetry, relationships – the possibilities are endless. It's up to each of us to constantly look for the voice of God speaking in earthquake, wind, and fire, but also in the still, small voice that's sometimes easy to overlook.

But verse 6 contains a point that's even more profound. As we read the Old Testament, it's easy to be caught up in the tumultuous saga of God and the "chosen people", but in Isaiah 49:6 we are reminded of what they were chosen for. God nurtured Israel for many years to prepare the way for their ultimate purpose – the promise of salvation for the whole human race through the Messiah, the promised Anointed One, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Divine Creator and Sustainer, help us be, like the true Israel, servants through which your message of salvation will be brought to light and revealed to the world. Amen.

Neal Lacey, First United Methodist, Beckley

RAINBOWS, A REMINDER

Monday, February 19, 2018, 5th Day of Lent

Genesis 9:12-15 New International Version

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. . . ."

"Oh look!" Mom and I stood at the window, smiling at the stunning beauty of the rainbow in the sky. It stretched over the Stealey neighborhood of Clarksburg as big as all outdoors and as colorful as you can imagine. My mind flew right to this scripture and I said it right out loud from memory and my heart. Mom gave me a gentle hug and said, "I'm glad you remember that." It was a special moment that I will always cherish. As Mom and I enjoyed the beauty of God's love so brilliantly spreading across the sky, the bond of love between us shone.

Just as the love from parent to child shines, God's covenant of love to His children is steadfast and passionate, always present. We are nudged to be reminded of it every time we see the beauty of the rainbow. I love that He includes the animals, birds, fish, and all creatures great and small! His love is a divine, extraordinary gift for which we are thankful.

In the season of Lent we especially listen for Jesus, the mediator of the *new* covenant. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection make possible the divine relationship with our Creator. "Jesus took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'"

Paul told the Corinthians that God gives us the ability to be ministers of the new covenant. We can love others with God's gift of love, and help them to know God personally. God will guide us as we show His love and acceptance. In the Spirit of God's grace, we can help people – listen with caring hearts to others, deliver firewood to someone in need, call an elderly neighbor to dispel loneliness, say "that's all right" when someone messes up, and plan a happy surprise for someone. *Everyone* needs to know God's love. *Everyone* needs to know that His love is so great and so personal, and that He implants that love into every one of His creations – *you* and *every living creature* for perpetual generations.

Prayer: Dear Lord, how precious it is to know your love deep down within our very souls. Thank you for your love among us – family, friends, neighbors all the world around, and animals, too. Thank you for rainbows and communion that remind us of your covenant. Help us to pay attention and to share your love with grace and joy! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen!

Patty Moffett Austin, Cacapon Charge, Potomac Highlands District

WE ARE THE WORD

Tuesday, February 20, 2018, 6th Day of Lent

Isaiah 55:10-11 “The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.”

The people Isaiah was speaking to would have understood the importance of the rain and snow. Their land was very dry and not only was water needed for them and their animals, it was also necessary to grow the food they needed to sustain their bodies. Rain and snow ensured food for the next year as well as the seed for future crops – the difference between life and death.

In Scripture, Jesus is called the Living Word, the Bread of Life and Living Water - all the things needed to give us life and hope. He instructed his disciples to go forth and share this knowledge with all. Just as the rain and snow water all the earth, so we are to follow Jesus’ commandment to invite all who are hungry and thirsty to come and know him. Our obedience in sharing Jesus can also be the difference between life and death – joy and sadness -- peace and pain. At this time of Lent, it is important to remember his commandment to treat others the way we want to be treated so that the Word is sent out and prospers all who hear it.

Hear this **Prayer** written by John Birch: “You call us to love those whom you would love, and give us the words to say. You call us to bring wholeness to lives that are broken, and give us the words to say. You call us to bring comfort to those who are grieving, and give us the words to say. You call us to bring good news to those who are seeking, and give us the words to say. Your word, living water in desert sands. Your word, blossoming in parched earth. Your word, bearing fruit wherever it is sown. Amen”

Starr Weaver, Certified Lay Speaker
First UMC, Shinnston WV, MonValley District

WHAT IF....

6th Sunday of Lent, March 25, 2018

Read Luke 15:11-32

The prodigal son returned to the open arms of his father. Even though the son had left his father’s house, wasted half of his father’s money, worried his mother and father to death but when he returned home he was invited back into the full membership of his family, no questions asked, with a party.

The prodigal son’s older brother was not as pleased to see his brother. The older brother did not want his brother to be invited back into the family. The older brother had been loyal, the prodigal son had not, why should he get a second chance at being a family member?

If we are honest, really honest we understand the feelings of the older brother.

Today as you fast, pray, listen and respond ask God to help you really look at that part of your life that is like the older brother. Ask God to help you let go of those feelings so that you can rejoice when the lost are found, the blind see, the addicted are in recovery and the dead are once again alive!

Ask God to help you put judgements to the side and to see each person you meet as a child of God...maybe they know they are, maybe they don’t. If we begin to treat each person as a brother and sister, who are loved by God just as much as we are, maybe they will experience the love of Christ we are supposed to be offering them.

It is not enough to open our church doors and hope the lost will come in (or as the older brother, hope they won’t come in). We must leave our sanctuaries and find the lost, blind, recovering and dead.

Prayer: Oh God, help me put judgements to the side and to see **each** person I meet as a child of God. Help me let go of those feelings so that I can rejoice when the lost are found, the blind see and the addicted are in recovery. Thank you Lord for opening my eyes. Amen.

Rev. Barry Steiner Ball

READY AND WAITING

Revelation 1:5-8

Saturday, March 24, 2018, 34th Day of Lent

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. – 1 Thessalonians 4:16a (NKJV)

In our scripture reading from Revelation, John is talking about the second coming of Jesus Christ. He tells us, "...to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, He is coming with clouds and every eye will see Him..." Jesus Himself tells us, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,...the Almighty."

In 1996, country singer Colin Raye released a song entitled, "What If Jesus Comes Back Like That?" In the song Raye asks, what if Jesus comes back, "On an old freight train in a hobo hat," or "Two months early and hooked on crack?"

We are told in various places in scripture that when Christ returns it will not be in an obscure manner. Everyone will know it! Philippians 2:10-11 tells us that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (above) also describes Christ's return. Nor will He return in a lowly state as He did the first time. He will return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords! (1 Tim. 6:15 & Rev. 19:16)

The song also has the line, "Where will He find out our hearts are at?" This is where our focus should be. Where will our hearts be when Christ returns? Will He find us watching and waiting with our lamps full of oil waiting for the Bridegroom's return? Or will we be so consumed and distracted by the worries and cares of life, or lost in the pleasures and false promises of Satan's lies and deceit, that we are not ready? During this Lenten season, let us examine our lives and our hearts to see if we are ready for our Lord's return.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to be diligent in keeping ourselves ready for Your glorious return. Amen.

Roger Dahmer, Certified Lay Servant, Franklin, WV, Mt. Horeb UMC

TODAY'S TRUTH IS STILL JESUS

Luke 11:29-32

Wednesday, February 21, 2018, 7th Day of Lent

Jesus was speaking to a group He called an evil generation because they sought a sign that he was from God. It seems our generation isn't interested in a sign nor in finding the truth. If you want a sign, read Matthew chapter 24 and 2 Timothy chapter 3. It shows the world's view of truth and how we are despised for telling the truth.

Jesus told his listeners he was the greatest truth they could find. He said the Queen of Sheba traveled many miles to hear the wisdom of Solomon and at Jonah's message Nineveh repented. At the final judgement, both of these will ask why people didn't repent when they heard the truth Jesus spoke. God's word is on our phone, laptop, car and 24 hour television. If you "seek" Him, God is easy to find. Don't allow the world's view of truth to harden your heart against God. God's greatest gift is Jesus. Through Jesus we can know God's love, forgiveness and amazing grace in our life. Guard your heart, mind and life from the lies that the world calls truth. The Holy Spirit will give you power to live in the revealed truth of God's Holy Word.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we ask that our eyes be truly opened to Your truth. Open our spirits to the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we are faithful disciples of Jesus. In Jesus name and for His sake we pray. Amen.

Jeanetta M. Mick

Orlando Charge / Oil Creek Church

Lay Servant, Adult Sunday School Teacher

SUFFERING AND GLORY

1 Peter 5: 1-4

Thursday, February 22, 2018, 8th Day of Lent

1 Peter 5: 1a; ...and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed ...

A friend of mine struggled with a serious illness in the early stages of his life. He could not see the reason he was afflicted with a life threatening disease. During his recovery, God opened his eyes to see the God given plan for his life. As my friend found physical healing he also trusted in Jesus Christ for spiritual healing and grew in the grace and knowledge of God.

Peter, the Apostle, writes about this life transformation in this scripture. Gradually, as Peter witnessed the life of Christ, there came the knowledge that all of Christ's life – including Christ's sufferings – were his with Christ. As followers of Christ we must also know that the Lord is with us in the midst of our pain.

As Peter beheld the glory of Christ he came to realize that the sufferings of this present time are temporary compared to the majestic, eternal glory of God. The beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed through his followers made in His likeness, to reign with Him forever, disclosing his love and grace, and reflecting His glory.

Prayer: Thank you Jesus, for coming into this world and revealing the grace and love of God to us. Help us in our lives to use this gift for Your glory. Amen.

David Byrd, Lay member, Morris Memorial UMC, Charleston

PRIDE AND ARROGANCE

Ezekiel 31:10-13

Friday, March 23, 2018, 33rd Day of Lent

An initial reading of this passage indicates it is about a tree that grew beside a river. Birds made their nests in its branches. Wild animals gave birth to their young under it. Powerful nations lived in its shade. But as the tree became taller than all others, it became proud and arrogant. Because of its wickedness, the Lord sent an army to destroy it. The tree's boughs were broken off. Those who had lived in its shade abandoned it. Birds plucked off its twigs. Wild animals lay among its branches. Interpreters say the subject of this parable is Assyria or Egypt. But the message is about the danger of pride and arrogance. It serves as a warning for us.

The late novelist, poet and lay theologian C.S. Lewis is credited with saying, "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone."

Lewis also is credited with saying, "A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you."

Are we proud of a new car, a beautiful house or an accomplishment at work or school? Who is truly responsible for the good things in our life? Arrogance often accompanies pride.

It was Leo Tolstoy who said, "An arrogant person considers himself perfect. This is the chief harm of arrogance. It interferes with a person's main task in life — becoming a better person."

How do we treat those who are less powerful? Do we insist its "My way or the highway"?

Prayer: Lord, as we reflect upon scriptures this season, help us to recognize our pride and arrogance, realize the danger they pose, and choose humility instead. Amen.

George Hohmann, Conference Communications Team

DAVID'S THANKSGIVING SONG

Psalm 18

Thursday, March 22, 2018, 32nd Day of Lent

2 The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my savior;
my God is my rock, in whom I find protection.

He is my shield, the power that saves and my place of safety.

3 I called on the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and he saved me from my enemies.

Have you ever been threatened to the point of death? Well, me neither. But King David was, numerous times. Saul alone tried to kill David at least 12 times but David never retaliated. He continued to dodge the "bullets" that Saul sent his way. For 15+ years after he was anointed as a young shepherd boy his life was a series of trials and troubles. Through it all, he always knew he could turn to God, his rock, his fortress, in whom he found protection. As God delivered David out of his troubles, he will also deliver us. "I prayed to the Lord, and he answered me. He freed me from all my fears."

Ps.34:4

God wants us to know, we are never alone. Ever.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, watch over us as we continue to find ways to better serve you. Show us how to become more like David, to not be so quick to retaliate when we feel aggression from others. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Steve Mahaffey, Lubeck UMC, Washington, WV

VANILLA ICE CREAM

Romans 8:30-31

Friday, February 23, 2018, 9th Day of Lent

30: "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. 31: What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

These verses are located between two of the most famous verses of the New Testament. Romans 8:28; "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

AND

Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

How often do we search out the remembered and familiar verses and then skip quickly over the less spectacular, un- underlined, not marked in yellow, middle verses.

Romans 8:31-32 falls into that middle slot for me.

One of my most vivid memories of my childhood was buying "Neapolitan" ice cream by the 1/2 gallon at our local corner store. We would put our "dibs" on the creamy chocolate at one end of the carton or the luscious strawberry at the other. The vanilla in the middle was never desired like the end flavors. Does this happen to us in our Bible reading?

As we pause to study these less notarized, but definitely just as important verses, we see how precious and important it is to be:

Called- by God

Justified-by Jesus his son

Glorified- by the Holy Spirit

How wonderful to be a child of the loving eternal Father, who is always "for" us, who sacrificed his own son for our eternal salvation and who will give us everything we need. This encouraging and comforting middle passage could be our sole Christian mantra. It is just as important, just as rich, just as spirit filled, as the preceding or the following verses. Paul knew these middle verses were the "middle cement" that held the chocolate and strawberry together.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for giving us Your Living Word. It is a source of strength and knowledge. Open our ears that we might hear and respond to your direction for our lives. Amen.

Helen Markwell, Riverton UMC

FULL MEASURE

Luke 6: 36-38

Saturday, February 24, 2018, 10th Day of Lent

These verses are part of what is known as “the sermon on the plain” and follow shortly after Jesus speaks the Beatitudes. Jesus is giving His followers messages related to how best to get along in life. Key words “be merciful, just as your Father is also merciful to you.” (v 36) “Judge not that you shall not be judged” (v 37) “Give and it shall be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together” (v38) NKJV.

Those words, “pressed down” reminds me of another set of instructions in my everyday life, a recipe I use a lot for chocolate chip cookies. The instruction for measuring the brown sugar calls for it to be “firmly packed”. Not a skimpy measure.

Jesus is giving us a recipe for a rewarding life with God. Whatever we do we are to do with full energy and intent. In the full measure we use, it will be measured back to us. By our lives we are giving an indication of the mercy we expect from God. We may not see the results in this life, but in the life we inherit.

The floods of 2016 and 2017 have shown the measure of the people of West Virginia. People have shown mercy by showing up to muck out flood filled houses, churches and schools. People and companies have made donations of cleaning products and bottled water. They have given of their time and energy not just in the time of disaster, but in the years of rebuilding. This is a clear indication of a people who have heard the message of this passage. Floods and other disasters will continue. We are called to be a mercy filled giving people, in full measure. May this continue to be so.

Jesus set the bar high in His expectation of our devotion to mercy. He gave His life for us. Surely it is our responsibility to give our full measure of devotion in our lives as well.

Prayer: Almighty God, May we give a full measure of mercy to others through our actions. May we use the example of Christ who died for our sins that we may know eternal life. Amen

Jane A. Ensminger, Member Crim Memorial UM Church, Philippi,
WV Conference Commission on Archives and History

The Covenant Continues

Genesis 17:3-9

Wednesday, March 21, 2018, 31st Day of Lent

As I read the Genesis scripture for this meditation, two things jumped out at me. The first is the covenant God makes with Abram. There are many references to covenants throughout the Bible. Webster defines a “covenant” as a usually formal, solemn and binding agreement. In this passage, God promises Abram that he would become father of many nations. Abram had to agree that he and all his male descendants would be circumcised. Scripture tell us that both parties kept the covenant and all promises were fulfilled. In honor of the special occasion, Abram was given the new name of Abraham. This was the second thing that caught my attention. The new name signaled a new beginning.

A covenant with God is not just some historical thing we read about in the Bible. Hear these words contained in our Communion liturgy:

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ. By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new **covenant** by water and the spirit

We need to understand our own baptismal covenant in light of Jesus’ baptism. At Jesus’ baptism, God said: “This is my son.” While Jesus’ relation to God is unique, our Christian baptism means that God has also chosen us as daughters and sons, and knows us intimately as a parent. Our new name is “Beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.”

Through our “new” covenant, God has promised grace. We do not have to spend our time figuring out how to earn salvation and eternal life. We just have to accept this new thing God is doing and this new direction he wants to point our life in, to accept our status as his children.

It’s time to stop playing “Let’s Make a Deal.” If you are old enough to remember this old game show, you will recall that a contestant would be given many opportunities to trade something for another unknown item. If you were lucky, you might better yourself; if not, you might wind up with a donkey or a lifetime supply of vinegar tablets. You had no trust that the show emcee had your best interests at heart. I have always heard that if something sounds too good to be true, then avoid it because it is bad. God’s covenant is the exception to that rule. The love and grace that God promises does sound too good to be true; however, God’s love for us expressed through his son Jesus Christ is one deal we do not want to pass up. God is not in the deal making business. His covenant has always been, and will always be, binding. There is no need for further deals. We cannot do better. My pastor has said on numerous occasions that God sent Jesus not to change God’s mind about us, but to change our minds about God.

Prayer: Lord, help me to live into my baptismal name and to be mindful of your everlasting covenant.

Mark Stolter, St Marks UMC, Higher Ed and Campus Ministries Chair

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

John 8:31-42

Tuesday, March 20, 2018, 30th Day of Lent

³¹To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

During my 39 years of practicing law in different capacities, I have encountered countless variations of the "truth". As a young law clerk I swore in witnesses, with a hand on the Bible, using the oath:"Do you solemnly swear (or affirm) that the testimony you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" Truth was in turn shared through the words of the beholder with some renditions more credible than others. Notably, telling the truth in a court of law does not assure physical freedom; confessors often are sentenced to prison.

Jesus is proclaiming an unadulterated spiritual "truth", which can free one from sin, the ultimate bondage. He continues with an analogy regarding freedom through God's truth: ³⁴"Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever". Believers are freed from their slavery to sin and taken into the household of God. Even serving time in a penal facility does not inhibit the freedom offered by God! Physical barriers are no match for this truth. Those who are imprisoned by sin may be free in the truest sense through believing.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you are the provider of truth. Help us to hold fast the teachings of Christ so that we may experience true freedom. Amen.

Martha Hill

Laity, St Marks UMC

WHAT IF....

Read Luke 15:11-32

2nd Sunday of Lent February 25, 2018

The Prodigal Son wants to leave home. That is a natural and growing up response that is supposed to happen. Sons and daughters are supposed to leave home and create their own lives. Unfortunately, today many leave their home because their addiction to opioids has made it impossible for them to live in their parent's house.

When a child's life becomes ruled by substance abuse everyone's lives are affected...in bad ways. It would be a whole lot easier for everyone to prevent the addiction in the first place.

Today as you fast, pray, listen and respond ask God to show you how we can prevent our children from ever becoming addicted. How do we keep a child from ever falling into the grip of opioids?

What can the church do in the lives of the children in our community (not just the ones in our church, but those that live all around us) that will help prevent them from ever turning to drugs? Ask God to show you who the vulnerable children are in your community. Ask God to help you find these children and get to know them by name. Give God thanks for the adults who knew your name, who cared about your success when you were young.

Drug endangered children need loving adults to show them they are beloved children of God and are worthy of our time and concern. What if God answers our prayer? Are we willing to mentor a drug endangered child and help prevent them from becoming a prodigal son or daughter?

It is not enough to open our church doors and wait for the children to come to us clean, well fed and well behaved. We must leave our sanctuaries and find them!

Prayer: Dear God, show me how we can prevent our children from ever becoming addicted. Help me find these children and get to know them by name. Holy Spirit, guide us to know how to make a difference in the lives of Your prodigal children. Amen.

Rev. Barry Steiner Ball

A WARNING AGAINST HYPOCRISY

Monday, February 26, 2018, 11th Day of Lent

Matthew 23:1-3 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

One of the reasons my acquaintances have given for not going to church is that “THEY are just a bunch of hypocrites!” And I’ve known that they are right in that assessment, but Jesus is telling us here that it was that way in His circles too! He doesn’t suggest that we try to correct them but that we learn from what they have to say!

Some of the people around me have admired some of the things I’ve done and commented that I am “a good man” but I know differently.

I know that my own performance as a Christian falls short of what God calls us to do and I find it hard to admit to all of my shortcomings in front of the people who know me.

I have been destructive and cruel to people around me when I ought to have been walking in the Spirit and lifting them up.

I have known and wanted to do what I should but failed to do so.

I pray that my honesty in who I am reveals that I am not a good example for we have only one good example and that is Jesus Christ.

Yes, if you follow me into my church, you will be surrounded by hypocrites. Hypocrisy is just one of our sins that we freely confess to God as He does His work in us. We are learning to be the citizens of God’s kingdom and we have a long way to go. Even “us hypocrites” can love people.

Prayer:

We know ourselves to be sinners of every type, sinners who sin against you! We offend and obstruct our brothers and sisters through our inadequacies.

We embrace your work that changes us and transforms the world.

Lord let us be your humble servants here and now in building your kingdom that we may be your exalted servants there and then when your kingdom is fulfilled.

Amen

Stephen Prince

Highland Park, Jones, and Sabra UM Churches, Morgantown, WV

“TWO LITTLE WORDS”

Monday, March 19, 2018, 29th Day of Lent

John 11:33, 35 "When Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping also, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved...Jesus began to weep." NRSV

When I was a little girl attending elementary school in rural Cabell County, each week we had the assignment to memorize and recite a Bible verse. (It was a different time - the late 1950's / early 1960's - and the assignment was entirely acceptable in our community.) Each of my classmates and I ended up choosing John 11:35 as one of our required recitations. In the King James Version it was two little words: Jesus wept. How simple! We were children, and to us the most significant thing about this verse was what was recorded in our teacher's grade book: An "A" for two little words!

For my classmates and me, in that simpler time, the two words seemed to be simple. But now I see just how profound they really are. They reveal so much about the nature of God's love for us. Jesus is so moved by the pain Mary and her friends are feeling, their grief and despair because of Lazarus' death that he weeps with them. He empathizes with them. Their pain is his pain, too. Amazing! Not only does God know when our hearts are broken, but His heart is broken for us. Amazing! God loves us that much!

In this Lenten season, as we look deeply into ourselves and reflect upon God and our relationship with Him, let us remember two little words from the story of Lazarus: Jesus wept.

Prayer: Thank you God for loving us so much You weep when we weep. Lord, we praise you for your incomprehensible love for us. In response we will show the love of Christ to others we see today. Amen.

Marsha Murray, Community of Grace UMC, Huntington, WV

WHAT IF....

Read Luke 15:11-32

5th Sunday of Lent, March 18, 2018

Somehow, by the grace of God, the prodigal son “came to himself” and realized that the only way he was going to survive was to go home. Some might say he hit bottom and had nowhere else to go. When he was still a long way off, his father ran out to meet his long-lost son and invited him back into the family.

Today, once lost sons and daughters are being found and coming home. They are detoxing from opioids and completing rehabilitation programs. At this point in their life they desperately need our love and support as they begin their life long journey of recovery. We do not know what happened to Jesus’ prodigal son the day after the homecoming celebration. Did he live happily ever after at home or did he, for whatever reason, leave home again?

Today when you fast, pray, listen and respond ask God to show you how you can help support, encourage, and love those struggling every day in recovery in our neighborhood. Ask God to show you where they are and how we can get to know them by name. Ask God to show you how to walk beside a person who is in recovery so they will know they are welcome in our church family.

It is not enough to open our church doors and hope that the prodigal sons and daughters will come in and stay. We must leave our sanctuaries and find these persons while they are “still a long ways off” and walk with them all the way home...step by step.

Prayer: Living God, equip us to find the prodigal sons and daughters while they are “still a long ways off” and walk with them all the way home...step by step. Amen.

Rev. Barry Steiner Ball

FRUSTRATION

Jeremiah 18: 18-20

Tuesday, February 27, 2018, 12th Day of Lent

Verse 18a, They said, "Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah;....

This passage really showcases Jeremiah’s frustration with the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Instead of the particular story, I want to focus more on the emotion of frustration. It’s something all of us face nearly daily. It could be frustration with work, with your family, sports, or even spiritual frustration. Jeremiah was doing exactly what God told him to do, but still the people were rejecting him. Sometimes in our lives it seems as though we are doing everything right, yet still getting no results. This reminds me of my team’s cross country season. We never cheated at practice, we always gave it 100%, and everyone was there every single day. We had a lot of success throughout the season, but when it came for the state meet we fell short. This left us questioning what we had done wrong. When we get frustrated, it’s easy to want to throw in the towel and give up, but this passage in Jeremiah shows us that God knows frustration. He knows what we are going through and he also knows how to help us. Even if it may seem that everyone else is going to abandon us, God will not. He never fails, He is there even through our frustrations.

Prayer: God, please be with me today. Help me to be more patient when things get tough and to look to you who knows all of my emotions. Help me to love others the way that you have loved me. Amen

Jenna Soltesz

Bridgeport United Methodist Church

CCYM vice chair

Radical Discipleship of Appalachia Academy

THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE EVIL

Wednesday, February 28, 13th Day of Lent

Psalm 1:1-6(ESV)

Verses 1 and 2 “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

During the season of Lent we are invited to examine ourselves, and to reflect on where we have fallen short by walking in the “counsel of the wicked” (vs.1). And, through our self-examination we are invited to look at the cross, and Jesus’ sacrifice for us, and truly repent and once again “delight in the law of the Lord” (vs.2). The psalmist sets up the contrast between the “blessed” and the “wicked”, and the consequences they face because of their choice. Every day, we find that we too face consequences of our choices, and daily must choose “the narrow gate” (Matthew7:14).

The psalmist, shows us what happens when you make God’s Word your joy and the object of focus. He says a person who is blessed is “like a tree that is planted by streams of water” (vs.3). Water is the very essence of life! Jesus says in John 4:14 “but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life”. Jesus is our stream of living water where we plant deep roots. And, because we are abiding in him we “bear fruit in season that does not wither” (vs.3) because he is “the true vine” (John 15:1). Those who are blessed live in happiness, because God’s law gives them life abundantly.

However, on the other hand, the Psalmist shows what happens to the wicked, he says they are “like chaff blown away by the wind” (vs. 4) He also says they “will perish” (vs. 6). The wicked live in tragedy, because they chose to not seek the Lord and delight in his law.

So as we journey toward the cross, may we take time to seek the one who gives life through his death, and may we delight and reflect on his law daily.

Prayer: Jesus, you are our stream of living water where we plant deep roots. Lord help us to bear fruit abundantly for Your kingdom. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Sarah Allen, Walnut Grove UMC

IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE

Saturday, March 17, 2018, 28th Day of Lent

Luke 2:41-51c

Luke 2:49: “Why were you searching for me?” Jesus asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

In this passage, we find Jesus and some relatives traveling back from Jerusalem from the Festival of Passover. Jesus’ parents discover halfway through the trip that Jesus stayed behind in the temple courts. Jesus’ reasoning for staying behind was to sit among the teachers while teaching some of his own lessons.

When Jesus begins to speak in verse 49 about His whereabouts, He is shocked to hear that his kin didn’t know he had stayed behind.

When I read this verse--particularly the second half of it—I’m reminded of the joy I find when I’m in the house of God on Sundays, Wednesdays or any day. Being among fellow believers on a consistent basis helps with our faith walk and keeps us accountable.

There’s a song from Elevation Worship based out of Charlotte, North Carolina and the lyrics go “In Your presence there is freedom, In Your presence there is hope.” How those words could not be truer.

My job at Concord University as Sports Information Director pulls me away from church 8-10 Sundays a year on average, but after I miss a Sunday, the next Sunday I feel the presence of God a little bit more than normal because I’m in my Father’s house after not being fed for a week. Anytime, we enter the Father’s house we should have a special feeling about the reverence of God.

Another way I enter God’s presence is at conference youth events. I’ve been fortunate and blessed to work with youth in the conference since 2011. When I step back and see the young people of our church worshipping our Lord, not only does my facial expression light up, but so does my heart.

I hope during this Lenten season you can find more time to be in the presence and house of the Father.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the freedom of worship and opportunity to be in Your presence. May we grow during this time we celebrate your journey to Jerusalem, death and resurrection to save us from sin. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Wesley McKinney, Athens, WV

OUTWARD EXPRESSIONS OF HIS LOVE

Friday, March 16, 2018, 27th Day of Lent

Romans 8:8-11 (CEB) “People who are self-centered aren’t able to please God. But you aren’t self-centered. Instead you are in the Spirit, if in fact God’s Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn’t have the Spirit of Christ, they don’t belong to him. If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God’s righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.”

At the end of chapter 7 of the book of Romans, Paul expresses an internal struggle he has been facing for a bit of time. The opening of chapter 8 is a refreshing change to hear of the everlasting life we, as Christians, hold in Christ. The season of Lent is a time for us to take time to rid ourselves of something that is a distraction in our lives. During this time, we are able to reflect on ourselves and see if we are self-centered or if our focus is on others and relationships with Christ. In order to truly be able to belong to God and be pleasing to Him, we must allow the Spirit to move within us.

One of the best ways to avoid this self-centered attitude is to show outward expressions of His love and generosity. One of the most humbling books I’ve ever read is “Not a Fan” written by Kyle Idleman, a Teaching Pastor at Southeast Christian Church in Kentucky. In this book, Idleman discusses all the different ways people can become a follower and disciple of Christ and not just a fan. A couple years ago during Lent, I decided to give up being just a fan of Jesus. I wanted to become a genuine lover and disciple of Christ. This journey showed me how to open myself up to other people and watch and walk with them on their journeys to discipleship. When we open up and allow people to walk with us and support us, any self-centered thoughts or feelings are no longer present.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we are thankful to be able to live within you and to proclaim your word to others so that they may know you too. We ask that you help us to open up and be genuine with ourselves so that we can bring people closer to you. Help us control our self-centered ways and allow your Spirit to move within us. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Grace, peace, and blessings,

Lauren Shanholtzer, St. Paul’s UMC, Nitro

BLESS THE LORD

Thursday, March 1, 2018. 14th Day of Lent

Psalm 103: 1-12

Verses 1-2, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”

Psalm 103: 1-12 contains scripture with a beautiful message about how we should love the Lord, as it was He who removed our transgressions and abounds in steadfast love. These verses praise God for all of the wonderful things that He is, and they thank him for all of the wonderful things that He does.

During the time of Lent, it is imperative that we frequently thank God for his amazing works and how He impacts our life. Without Him, we would be nothing. Our God is one of love, forgiveness, righteousness, mercy, and grace.

Lifting up our continuous thanks and praises is the least we can do for the One that will give us everlasting life. Everything happens for a reason and God has a plan for us that is more amazing than even our wildest dreams.

Prayer: Dear mighty God, thank you for all that you have provided for me. Continue to bless me as you always do. Let me never forget to give all the glory and praise to you. Amen.

Ward Ries, Kingwood UMC, Radical Discipleship of Appalachia Academy

AN UNFAILING RESOURCE

Exodus 17:3-7

Friday, March 2, 2018, 15th Day of Lent

Verse 6, Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

The Israelites had a hard time learning their lessons, mostly to trust God. As typical of their behavior, we find them grumbling, complaining, and quarreling in today's scripture passage. They have traveled from the Desert of Sin and camped in Rephidim only to find themselves without water again. In their thirst they grumble and complain against Moses. And they put the Lord to the test as well by asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

The rock that Moses struck to bring forth water for the Israelites is like Jesus Christ who was smitten for us on the cross, "...for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ." (I Corinthians 10:4), and the water is the Holy Spirit whose coming was made possible by Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven.

The Israelites had an unfailing resource, yet they chose to grumble, complain and quarrel, making matters worse instead of relying upon God, trusting in Him, to make things better. They had hardened their hearts to the point that they could not submit to Him. They complained about water at the beginning of their journey from Egypt and 40 years later they were still complaining.

I am sure all of us have had our times of grumbling, complaining, and quarreling, failing to recognize our unfailing resource. How many places on our journey of life ought to be named "Massah and Meribah" or "Testing and Quarreling"? How well are you relying on this unfailing resource, the Lord, instead of testing and grumbling?

Let us pray: Lord, you are our unfailing resource, providing for us in our times of need. We thank you for your willingness to be the rock smitten for us on the cross. Amen.

Pat Mick
Chairperson, WV Conference Board of Global Ministries

PLOT AGAINST JEREMIAH

Jeremiah 11: 18-20

Thursday, March 15, 2018, 26th Day of Lent

Jeremiah 11:18 Because the Lord revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time he showed me what they were doing.

In the summer of 1990 the armies of Iraq invaded Kuwait as part of an effort to influence worldwide oil prices. I was a mid-level non-commissioned officer in the West Virginia Army National Guard and you wouldn't have expected me to be able to immediately know what my role in our nation's response to that would be.

Like Jeremiah, I attribute that knowledge to God and His work in my life. I am in my sixties now and have the benefit of hindsight in recognizing the long chain of events that have been manipulated in the course of my life.

In my thirties, the benefit I had was a youthful mind with the ability to read quickly and to remember what I had read and to be able to put it together with other sources. In the late eighties, I had worked with Army operations plans that were used to develop training programs for our National Guard units and one plan was to engage the Russians in a scenario in which they invaded Iraq from the north. In August of 1990 I recognized that situation as being tactically the same as what was happening on the ground. I was able to use this revelation to implement the prudent processes of being personally and professionally ready months before we received official notice.

God has used many people and events to shape who I am now. I have learned to recognize His power and the immensity of His knowledge in the world around me. I pray for His continued work in me.

Prayer: Lord, like Jeremiah, We have been young people in your service. You have revealed hidden things to us, things that are unseen by the world. You invite us undeservedly to benefit from your gifts. We thank you for this work you do in our lives and we determine to step out in faith, trusting in your control of our lives and fate. In Jesus' name we pray!

Stephen Prince
Highland Park, Jones, and Sabra UM Churches
Morgantown, WV

WHO DO YOU GLORIFY?

Scripture- John 5:31-47 Wednesday, March 14, 2018, 25th Day of Lent

John 5:44 How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

We as humans seem to glorify other humans. We glorify Casey Affleck as the best actor of 2017. We praise his acting ability and gave him an Oscar. Why are we not praising God's abilities and accomplishments? Why do we not glorify Him above all? Why do we not believe He sent His son to be our Savior and the LIGHT OF THE WORLD?

Let's get our priorities in order. Praising God is more important than glorifying human achievements. Complimenting and giving praise for human accomplishments are acceptable and polite as long as we remember to put no one or nothing above God.

Actors, singers, and even athletes are in the spotlight for just a short time. Their light fades but the light that Jesus gives us illuminates our minds, hearts, and souls. It gives us a guiding beacon that guides and leads us to our heavenly home with God.

Let us recognize and glorify God and His Son Jesus forever more!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, We thank you for the light of Christ who illuminates our path in this dark world. Help us to teach others to follow His light by glorifying YOU in all we do and say. Amen

Janie Thompson, Beverly Charge
Certified Lay Speaker

OVER THE CLIFF

Saturday, March 3, 2018, 16th Day of Lent

Luke 4:24-30: 24 "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. 26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. 27 And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." 28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. 30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Are You Willing to be Thrown Over The Cliff for Christ?

We all love a hometown hero. I know that every time I watch a NFL football game and hear the announcer or player say they are from WVU I feel a little bit (or a lot) of pride! Learning that a celebrity is from our state usually gives us a reason to feel proud. In our scripture today Jesus is speaking in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. I can just imagine the thrill that all of the people listening are experiencing. But, it quickly went downhill as we read the "rest of the story". Why? you ask, were they ready to throw Jesus over the cliff. Well, suddenly it wasn't just about them, the chosen ones. Jesus was telling them that he was sent for ALL. We don't always want to share with everyone do we? It is much easier to care about everyone just like us. Jesus is letting His people know that God loves all, Gentiles or Jew. He wants them to understand that He was sent not just for his hometown, but that God works among people through all nations. During our time of reflection in this Lenten season let us allow the Holy Spirit to move within us to touch lives of people out of our comfort zones. Let us remember that just as Jesus was sent for all people, so are we called to reach out to all people. May we allow the light of Christ to shine through us and bring someone out of their darkness. Go beyond your safety net and share God's love with the unloved and the unwanted. Go to the end of the cliff for Christ!

Prayer: Father God, We know that You sent your son for all. We also know that it is Your desire for us to share the love of Christ with everyone. We ask that Your Holy Spirit continue to work within us so that we may be faithful and courageous as we share Your love. In the name of Christ, Amen

Cheryl Bramble, Clarksburg

WHAT IF....

Read Luke 15:11-32

3rd Sunday of Lent, March 4, 2018

The prodigal son in Jesus' parable, had a father and we can surmise he had a living mother also. When the son left home was it on good terms or bad terms?

As you fast, pray, listen and respond today try to imagine what the parents of the prodigal son felt like as their child walked out the front door. Did they think they would ever see him again? Did his mom wonder if they would ever simply gather around a dinner table again as a family? Did the mom and dad blame each other for causing the son to leave? Or maybe, was there finally peace in the house after weeks of fussing and fighting?

How long did it take for the parents to start worrying about their child? Had they started to worry before he left or only after he really left and it was obvious he was not coming home soon? Was their lost child a passing thought during the day or did their worry consume them all day long? How did they feel as they thought about their son squandering everything they had ever given him? He had so much potential, so many resources and yet he seemed to be ignoring all common sense and wasting it all.

We have parents and grandparents living all around us today who have watched their children "leave home" because of their addiction to opioids. The very children they would give their lives for have walked out of the door and appear to be squandering their lives away.

Ask God to show you how we can be in ministry to these hurting souls. How would God have us get to know them and walk with them through their valley of shadows. Listen for God's answer, expect God to answer.

It is not enough for us to open the church doors and wait for the parents of the prodigal sons and daughters to come in. We must leave our sanctuaries and find them!

Prayer: God show me how we can be in ministry to hurting souls. Teach us how to get to know them and walk with them through their valley of shadows. Lord, open my ears as I listen expectantly for Your answer. Amen.

Rev. Barry Steiner Ball

JEHOVAH IS GRACIOUS

Tuesday, March 13, 2018, 24th Day of Lent

I recently saw the following, "joke," on the outside sign of the local church as I drove past:

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Jesus.

Jesus who?

Not funny, right? What if it said something else, what if it was like this:

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Teresa. (Insert your name).

Teresa (insert your name) who? And what if you were standing outside the gates of heaven when that happened.

Psalm 145:7-8. ASV

7 They shall utter the memory of thy great goodness, and shall sing of thy righteousness.

8 Jehovah is gracious, and merciful; slow to anger, and of great loving kindness.

In this Lenten season, we should never have to stand at the heavenly gates and our name not be known. God is righteous and good, gracious and merciful, has great love, and kindness.

We must remember because of his love God sent his son to be crucified and resurrected that we might have life Eternal. He gave us the opportunity to believe and confess that we might have life with him.

Prayer: Jesus, I pray that I know your name and You know mine. Help me build a better relationship with You so that You shine through me as I serve the lost and the least in my community. Amen.

Teresa Phillips, Limestone United Methodist Church, Saint Matthew Charge

DO YOU WANT TO BE WELL?

John 5: 1-14

Monday, March 12, 2018, 23rd Day of Lent

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well"? (NAB)

A man waiting, beside a pool. Been ill for 38 years. Disabled to the extent he cannot get himself into the pool's promised healing waters. And Jesus asks "Do you want to be well?"

The answer seems obvious, but is it? Do we want to be well? Do we REALLY want to be well? For physical pain, we readily run to a doctor, fill the prescriptions, take the pills but do we heed the advice? Will we do the exercises, or lose the weight? What if the pain is internal? What if it's dealing with a grand injustice that we feel has been done to us? What if it's losing a job; parent, spouse, child? What if it's addiction; depression? Do we seek counseling or get into a recovery program? Or do we make excuses because "it's too much effort" or "we know it wouldn't help". Do we know what's best for us? Or are we shutting out the possibilities that God has waiting for us if we would be willing to "get well". Our excuses for maintaining the status quo become comforting; the effort to risk different outcomes is unknown and scary.

Do you want to be well? Are we willing to give up our self-will to become a true disciple of Christ? Are we willing to exert the obedience required to have a relationship with Jesus?

The man at the pool was ready to be well. Am I?

Prayer: Dear Jesus. You know me and know I'm brimming with self-will. But I do want to be well. I'm scared of the changes it may require, but I want to be your servant. I want my inner voice to silence and hear yours in its place. Help me let go of "me" so that I can be well with you. Amen.

Gina Palmer, Buena Chapel, Canaan Valley

I LOVE YOU MORE

Matthew 18: 21 -35

Monday, March 5, 2018, 17th Day of Lent

Matthew 18: 33. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

Reading these verses, it sounds like it's all about forgiveness. Peter asks Jesus how many times must he forgive his brother. And Jesus responds with the story of the king who forgave his servant a huge debt. But the servant did not forgive his fellow servant. For me, the passage is about love. Verse 35 says we must forgive from the heart. That requires a selfless love that looks past our personal hurt at being wronged. It requires "us" to love "you" more than we love ourselves. I was reminded of this by my 3 1/2 yr. old granddaughter during a Facetime conversation. I told her, "I love you." She responded, "I love you more." Then I replied, "I love You more." She meant to say, "I love you more than you love me." But what she actually said was, "I love you more than me."

That's the kind of love Jesus showed us. He loved us more than himself. He denied himself, and took on our sins out of his love for us. A selfless love that also proves that God does, indeed, love us MORE than we love God. It's a heartfelt love that forgives us time and time again. Lent offers us a time to reflect on our actions and on the God's actions towards us.

Prayer: Lord, as I struggle to forgive with my heart, and not just with my words, grow my love for you and for others. Amen

Laura Fygetakes, First UMC, Beckley

BALANCE

Please read Psalm 147:12-20

Tuesday, March 6, 2018, 18th Day of Lent

My husband, Steve, is a Cyclist. With a capital C. And it amazes me. He rides miles and miles and miles on a road bike that has tires about an inch wide. A few years ago, he rode with a group of men from Huntington to Washington D.C. to raise money for homeless veterans in our town. There are seven mountains between Elkins and Petersburg. Imagine for a moment the amount of balance it requires to control a two-wheeled pedal-powered bicycle with one-inch wide tires moving down a mountain at 40 miles an hour in traffic. He was continually making hundreds of decisions regarding speed, direction, weight distribution, application of brakes and choice of gears.

Balance.

I was reading this morning about free will – the truth that God has given us the ability to make choices, and that those choices have consequences. A consequence can be as small as a hurt feeling that is quickly forgotten to as large as a life changed forever to as monumental as the world turned upside-down. We have free will.

And yet, Psalm 147:15-18 says this: “He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down hail like crumbs—who can stand before his cold? He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.”

God created the world. The sun rises and sets, the rain falls, the snow flies. It is so foundational that we probably don't even think about it. AND God has given us dominion in the world. Dominion. God-given responsibility. Our choices in the stewardship of what is around us have consequences.

Balance.

The sun rises and sets, the rain falls, the snow flies, but what we do has consequences. Even in something as foundational as creation. We must remember, like the bicyclist speeding down the hill, we all have been given the responsibility for the precious balance that keeps everything in working order.

Imagine for a moment if my husband had decided that his decisions and actions on the bicycle had no impact on his descent down the mountain. Disaster.

And so it is with us.

Prayer: Creating God, guide our steps, open our eyes to the world around us and to the consequences of our obedience to you. In your son's name, Amen.

Kim Matthews, Associate Director, United Methodist Foundation of WV

WHAT IF....

Read Luke 15:11-32

4th Sunday of Lent, March 11, 2018

The prodigal son left home and took his inheritance to a far away land. His parents are left at home wondering if he is safe, healthy and is he ever going to return home. Jesus says the prodigal son wasted his wealth and used up all of his resources just as a famine hit the far away land. It was so bad that the only job he could find was feeding pigs and his pay was to get to eat what the pigs did not eat.

Today, when we go into town we see prodigal sons and daughters everywhere. They may not have traveled hundreds of miles and we may actually know them, but they are truly living in a “far away land.” Their addiction to opioids has cut them off from their home and community and now they wonder around town like strangers.

Today as you fast, pray, listen and respond ask God to show you what our response should be for these strangers in a strange land. Should we feed them or ignore them? Should we provide a warm place to sleep or chase them off to another town? It is true they are dirty, they are an eye sore, they can be scary, they are wasting all that their parents and God have given them. However, they are someone's child and more than that, they are a child of God, just like you and me. Ask God to help you look past their appearance and see a lost child who have parents and a God who is also worried about them. What should the church's response be to the child whose only hope is what the pigs don't eat?

If your child was lost in a far-away land how would you want them to be treated by a local church?

It is not enough for us to open our church doors and hope the strangers in a strange land sober up, clean up and come in. We must follow God out of our sanctuaries and feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick and welcome the stranger.

Prayer: Dear God, show us how to help this situation. Amen.

Rev. Barry Steiner Ball

NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Saturday, March 10, 2018, 22nd Day of Lent

This passage has some very familiar and comforting language: “a new Heaven and a new Earth”: “the wolf and the lamb feeding together.” When I first read this, I was in my analytical “Bible Study” mode, and I couldn’t help but wonder if God, as quoted by Isaiah, is referring to a new terrestrial arrangement for the chosen ones or an ultimate heavenly Utopian realm as John outlined in his great Revelation. (John was obviously familiar with this scripture.)

I decided to set aside my amateurish Biblical scholarship for the moment and ask myself, “What can you glean from this scripture that will be meaningful in your life right now?” I confess that I “cheated” a little and read the beginning of Chapter 65. It is full of judgment and dire warnings. No optimism, no inspiring promises, no hope for a better future. But in verse 16 the mood begins to shift, and beginning with verse 17, things really look up.

I need to hear this often. Not everything in my life goes well all the time; my words and deeds are not always what they should be; I am not as faithful to the kingdom of God as I could be. As the apostle Paul said, I have “sinned and come short of the glory of God.” But I see here in Isaiah’s words the ultimate goodness of God – a “New Heaven and a New Earth”, not dependent on my works or my goodness, but built by the power and love of our divine creator.

This seems to me a foreshadowing of the incarnation and the ultimate healing of creation through the work of Jesus, our brother and redeemer. As I reflect on my own shortcomings in this Lenten season, it is very important that I be assured our creator and sustainer has very big plans for the ones who were lovingly created in God’s own image – that God’s loving care is with us now and will be manifested even more later on.

Prayer: Loving God, help us in our weakness as we struggle with our personal problems and the world’s distractions. Strengthen us through your Holy Spirit that we may be sustained and enabled to be your ministers as we await the fullness of your creation. Amen.

Neal Lacey, First UMC, Beckley, Member of Conference Justice and Advocacy

RETURN TO GOD

Hosea 14: 2-9

Wednesday, March 7, 2018, 19th Day of Lent

On Ash Wednesday we were called “to observe a holy Lent: by self–examination and repentance.”

During a time of crisis the people of Hosea's day were called to repentance. There was good news in this call "Return . . . to the Lord your God." They could return to God because they had an existing relationship, damaged as it was, with him.

They were told to ask God, “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously.” The reason given for asking forgiveness is somewhat surprising. They are to ask forgiveness in order to be able to worship God by praise rather than by sacrificing animals.

As part of their request for forgiveness they are to acknowledge that they cannot be helped by a foreign power, their own military strength, or the powerless false gods they have constructed.

God promises that when they repent he will heal them and love them and will no longer be angry with them.

And then he says something surprising. He compares his repentant and forgiven people to plants: to lilies, cedar trees, olive trees, grain, and grapevines. We remember the words of Jesus when he favorably compared the beauty of lilies to that of the expensive clothing worn by the wealthy king Solomon. Hosea reminds us of the sweet smell of cedar wood and the refreshing shade provided by trees in an arid land. And we remember the smell and texture and taste of warm bread dipped in olive oil. Our memories of sensory experiences from plants are a pale imitation of how God responds to our request for forgiveness.

As we disobey God, we push ourselves away from him and lose the experience of the close relationship we once had with him. But we are accepted as we return to him, ask forgiveness, and ask for his help in living in a way.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the blessed assurance of Your forgiveness when we are truly repentant of the sin we have committed. We ask for strength to do Your will and love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

Frances VanScoy, Conference Nominations, Wesley UMC, Morgantown

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Luke 18:9-14

Thursday, March 8, 2018, 20th Day of Lent

⁹ Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ ¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Picture this if you would. It is a meeting of the church council and they are discussing the needs and direction of the church for the upcoming year. The assorted church leaders are putting out great ideas and working hard to build up the church. As always, they talk of finances and membership; they decide on a new computer system and a new face book page, so the community will see what wonderful things they are doing and want to be a part; they discuss much needed repairs and updates to the facility. They want to attract more people and it won't hurt anything if some of these are the community big shots.

In the corner stands a little girl and she wonders when they will answer some of her questions. Who will be here when I have hard questions about my life and the lives of my friends? Who will comfort me when I am hurt and grieving? Who will help me find a way when I get lost? Who will protect me from bullies and predators that take over my life? Does the church care for those like me?

And the participants of the meeting, good, honest, caring, God fearing, kind, loving, respectable Christians never hear her because they are so busy leading the church that we forget to be the church. And the little girl falls through the cracks and is gone.

My prayer for this season of Lent, a season of repentance is quite simple. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Amen

Judy Raines, Trinity/Bluefield, TEL Team

CHILDREN OF LIGHT

Read: Ephesians 5:8-14

Friday, March 9, 2018, 21st Day of Lent

“You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, so live your lives as children of light. Light produces fruit that consists of goodness, justice, and truth.” Ephesians 5: 8-9 CEB

A lot of you will have to look this up on YouTube. I recently recalled a song made popular by Johnny Cash in my younger years called “*I Saw the Light*.” It was originally done by Hank Williams, Sr. circa 1948, but many artists have recorded it. The first stanza and refrain go: *I wandered so aimless; life filled with sin. I wouldn't let my dear savior in. Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night. Praise the Lord! I saw the light. /I saw the light; I saw the light. No more darkness; no more night. Now I'm so happy; no sorrow in sight. Praise the Lord; I saw the light.* Such simple but powerful words! Words that pretty much reflect the scripture printed above. Before Jesus – darkness, sin and sorrow. After Jesus – light and happiness. This truly is redemption.

As redeemed people, we not only see the light of Jesus, but Paul tells us that we become the light of Jesus. He also says that we produce wonderful fruit when we live our lives as children of light.

Light is goodness; light illuminates injustices; light reveals truth; light chases away fear. Each one of us IS the LIGHT of CHRIST to a dark and hurting world. In this Lenten season and forevermore, we need to live in every aspect of our lives as children of light, as the EASTER PEOPLE we truly are. We never know who may be watching us. In the actions revealed in our light, maybe someone will see the light of Jesus and also become a child of light.

Prayer: Father of the Light, we ask that our Jesus-light may illuminate your love, joy, goodness, justice and truth to everyone whom we encounter. We want to banish the darkness, and reveal the good fruit of knowing Jesus in this Lenten season and beyond. Lord, help us to be able to proclaim loudly, “I saw the light,” as we help others to be able to claim the redemption message as well. In the light of Christ that shines on us, we pray. Amen.

Patricia Ramsey, Lay Speaker and CLM candidate, Wellsburg/Franklin Charge