



Babcock State Park, WV

2019 Lent Devotional

by the Laity of the

**West Virginia Conference
of The United Methodist Church**





This devotional was compiled by the Laity of
the West Virginia Conference of
The United Methodist Church.

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.



THE DAY OF THE LORD

Joel 2:1-2.....Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

“Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sound the alarm on my holy hills. For the day of the Lord is coming.”

In times past, animal horns were blown like a trumpet to call people to worship or other events or to sound an alarm. In today's scripture, Joel announces that the day of the Lord is coming and says it will be a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Is that what you would have expected? Or would you have expected the day the Lord comes to be a cloud free day with abundant sunshine, a day of happiness and joy?

Joel's reference to darkness, gloom and blackness reminds us of God's judgement for our sins and the hope of reconciliation with God through our repentance and his grace. As we enter this solemn period of Lent, we must reflect on those areas where we have fallen short by not loving God or our neighbors. We must throw off our spiritual complacency, drop our defenses and open ourselves to an honest assessment of our failures. That is not easy to do!

As we do so, however, we become reconciled with God and free ourselves from the weight of the times that we have failed to live as we should. The forgiveness that flows from God's grace allows us to move forward as unburdened and free people. For which we say - Thanks be to God!

Prayer: True God, as we enter this period of Lent, strengthen us to do an honest assessment of our sins and failures so that we may be reconciled with you and healed by your grace. Amen.

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DO NOT PUT YOUR FAITH IN MEN

Psalm 51:1-17 Thursday March 7, 2019

Recently, a Christian leader I admire shared a personal tragedy that had occurred due to a family member's indiscretions. I remember wondering how it could be possible, since the entire family had seemed to walk so closely with the Lord. The story filled me with anxiety. If someone so pious could fall into sin, it could happen to anyone. It could happen to me!

Perhaps one of the most difficult things to accept about the Christian life is that no matter how hard we try, we will never be perfect. Have you ever admired someone – maybe a friend, leader, or pastor – for their piety, only to find out later that he or she makes mistakes just like the rest of us?

Even the most righteous among us will fall prey to sin. God's word tells us that we are born with a sinful nature, and that God would be justified to judge us harshly for the ways in which we act against God and other people. But because God loves us, God gives us a way out. When we confess our sins and ask for forgiveness, God can renew our hearts and restore our joy. It is through repentance that we open ourselves to receive God's mercy and allow for the continued transformation of our hearts and minds to more closely resemble God's.

Knowing that God will forgive us, however, does not mean we have license to sin whenever and however we want. Instead, repentance calls us to an even greater responsibility: To tell others how God has saved us. In confessing his adultery with Bathsheba, King David said, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you."

Sharing our personal experiences with God's grace helps us to recognize that we are not alone. We all will fall short of God's glory in some way or another. It's what we do afterward that counts.

Prayer: Dear Lord, forgive us when we sin and fall short of our commitment to You. Teach us Your ways that we may be in closer relationship with You. Amen

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AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

2 Corinthians 5: 20-21Friday, March 8, 2019

“So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making His appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Have you ever wondered, or maybe even pondered, what happens to those people around the world who have never heard about Christ . . . or have never thought about the origin of humanity? We, as Christians, know that our existence has come about at the hand of a supreme being, God, and if God indeed has created all of humanity, why has God left so many people in the dark? The obvious answer is found in the aforementioned verses of 2 Corinthians: “we are ambassadors for Christ.” We have been chosen to represent Jesus Christ to our friends, our community, our nation and, in fact, the entire world. The fact that so many know nothing of Christ, is laid right at our feet, yours and mine. If Jesus chose to bear the load of all our sins, past and future, is it too much to ask that we serve as ambassadors, or disciples, for Christ?

A good start will be to invite someone to church this Sunday! Make it so!!

Prayer: Gracious God, we have been given so much to be thankful for, yet we fail to acknowledge our trust in You. So often we fall short in representing You when just a few words of encouragement might make the difference in someone’s life. Strengthen us Lord, that we may become true disciples, true ambassadors for You. May we share the joy of Christ with all . . . our friends, neighbors and particularly those who have never experienced the freedom of Christian living. Amen

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YOUR REWARD IS IN HEAVEN

Matthew 6:1-6 Saturday, March 9, 2019

Matthew 6:1 "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Verse 1 applies the principle of righteousness to be awarded by God not by people. If one acts in a way that is designed to get others to notice. Deeds of righteousness performed for others to see will yield no reward.

Matthew 6:2 So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

Matthew 6:3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

Matthew 6:4 So that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Jesus applies the principle of almsgiving to our modern day situation of rewarding those giving charitable gifts to be honored by their names being associated with their contribution. It can be argued that not doing this could lessen the level of giving to many worthwhile causes. But- is this not the hypocrisy that Jesus indicts in verses 2-4?

Matthew 6:5-6 In these verses, the principle of prayer is along the same lines as almsgiving. Prayer should be done in private so as to be rewarded by God father than by people. Prayer is for communicating with God and experiencing God's presence.

Prayer: Holy God, we pray that our attitudes and motives be pure as we strive to serve You with hearts of love for our neighbors. In Jesus name we pray, Amen

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FIRST FRUITS

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 Sunday, March 10, 2019

Verse 8: The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power and with signs and wonders:

Verse 10: So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.

The children of Israel were slaves in a strange land and God, remembering His promise to them, brought them home to a land flowing with milk and honey. They were asked to acknowledge their blessings by bringing to the priests the first fruits of the land and their tithes. For them that the was the first fruits of their fruits and vegetables from the land, the first and the best not the scraps that were left after all was harvested. This was not really a sacrifice but an offering to the God who loved them, and always made good on His promises to them. They knew it was good to give God the first and the best for He was the first and best of all they were and He has never changed. He is today the first and best of all that we are and all that we have.

I am trying to decide “what is it that God wants from us?” What could be the first fruits of our lives in 2019? The Israelites had been in Egypt and were being treated terribly and God said I will lead you out of this place. God made sure they had no trouble crossing the border. (And no, I will not get political).

We may have no borders to cross, no slavery to escape from, no rivers to get across and no fires to pass through but God does have a plan for us. Could our first fruits be the harvest that comes from our plantings for the kingdom? Could it be the results of disciples making disciples? If so, many of us are falling down on the job. But God is still loving and still waiting for our first fruits. During this holy season of Lent let us strive to make good on our promises to Him as He has done for us. Let us bring to Him only our best and thank Him for what He is to us.

Prayer: Good and Gracious God, we bring to you all that we have. The blessing you have blessed us with, may we return to you for the building up of your kingdom. Amen

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SEEK REFUGE

Psalm 91: 1-2 (ESV)..... Monday, March 11, 2019

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”

In August of 2018, I officially started my college career as a freshman at West Virginia Wesleyan College. I'm sure many of you can relate when I say that it has been one of the greatest experiences of my life; however, it can also be one of the most terrifying. In the first week, I can't tell you how many nervous breakdowns I had. I specifically remember sitting in the library and saying to myself, “Why in the WORLD am I here?” I was suffering from MAJOR home sickness. All I could think about is how badly I wanted to go back to my hometown and transfer to Marshall.

That night I went to my dorm with red and puffy eyes (the result of the perfect combination of tree pollen and tears) and I jumped on my bed. I began scrolling through my Facebook to catch up on what all had happened back home. Through my scrolling, I stumbled upon Pastor Ross Thorton's daily words of encouragement. In his message, he was encouraging his viewers to throw all of their stress and worries away and find peace in the love of Christ. I felt every ounce of tension vacate my body. I remembered that I could find refuge in the love that Christ has for me.

So, in conclusion, I would like to remind all of you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, that no matter what stress you find yourself in, no matter how alone you feel, no matter how little hope you have left, God always has your back.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, We ask for you to watch over us as we continue through this journey called life. We know that this journey often has ups and downs. We thank you for bringing us to the highest highs; and we thank you for being with us when we are stuck in the lowest of lows. Let us continue to seek refuge in your loving arms. It's in Christ's name that we pray, Amen.

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WHO IS JUDGE?

Romans 10:5-13.....Tuesday, March 12, 2019

“For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Romans 10:13

Paul uses some very powerful language and gets right to the point in these verses. This section is only eight verses but it says so much. If we choose to live by the law then we will be judged by the law. I find it impossible to live by every law as listed in Moses' Books of the Law. But, even from the creation of the earth God knew we would be unable to follow every law that was given to us. Jesus and His dying for our sins was not a back-up plan. There are many examples of God extending His merciful grace to people in the Old Testament. From the very moment God laid the foundations of the earth He knew that His son would be the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world. Our Creator God has always been a God of mercy and love, but this did not become as apparent until Jesus came to earth as a living example of just how much God loves us and wants us to love Him.

Paul cautions us about thinking in our hearts that surely so-and-so is going to heaven or so-and-so is going to hell. These are not our decisions to make, they are God's alone. Our decision is to “love the Lord your God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind. And the second is like it, to love our neighbor as ourselves”! Jesus said these are the two most important commandments and these two summarize the entire law. Matthew 22:34-40.

We are to not only believe in Jesus, but to confess our belief before God and proclaim that salvation to others. Who is this salvation intended to include? Salvation is for both Jew and Greek. Verse 13 says WHOEVER believes, doesn't that mean ALL? Who gets to come to God? Who gets to determine if they have salvation? The only person I have any real control over as to whether they are saved is me. God welcomes ALL who come to him and confess their sin. God decides the condition and motive of the heart and God and God alone determines who is going to heaven.

Prayer: Dear Lord, instruct us in Your ways so that we do not sin and the motives and attitudes of our hearts remain pure and focused completely upon You. We thank you so much for the mercy and grace You show toward us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Scripture Luke 4:1 – 13 Wednesday, March 13, 2019

New Year's resolutions, do you make them or not? Have you made one in the past? You're probably thinking, why are we talking about New Year's resolutions? Isn't this a Lenten devotion? A New Year's resolution is a tradition, in which a person resolves to change an undesired trait or behavior, to accomplish a personal goal or otherwise improve their life.

One poll I looked up listed the top resolution for each state for our current year. The number one resolution for 18 states was; exercise to get into shape, coming in second was; to lose weight. However, one poll reports 80% of people don't make it to February with the resolutions and only 8% keep the resolution for a full year. Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness, he was tempted for 40 days by the devil. He ate nothing, when the days were completed he was very hungry. The devil told him you're the son of God make the stones into bread. Jesus replied, "it is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.'" "The devil continued to tempt Jesus. However, Jesus repeatedly quoted scripture and did not do as the Devil asked. Finally Jesus answered the devil and said to him, "It has been said, 'you shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

We face many temptations in our lives. In this Lenten Season let us resolve to become more like Jesus and resist temptation. Maybe, we can make Lenten resolutions to pray more, study our Bible more and share Jesus' love with others. I pray that we can be among those who keep resolutions more than 30 days and make it a lifetime accomplishment, for a closer relationship with our Lord and Savior.

Prayer: Father, God, help us as we desire to follow You, so that we become more like Jesus and less likely to run after the temptations that are presented to us each day. In Jesus name and for His sake we pray, Amen.

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WHEN OUR PLANS AREN'T GOD'S PLANS

Genesis 15:1-12 Thursday, March 14, 2019

"And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness."

Genesis 15:6

How do we believe what God's word says when we can't see how it came to pass? We are supposed to simply do as Abram did in the above scripture. It sounds so simple and in some ways it is, but not always. When we continue to plan, maneuver, and work to get life to go our way, we often go against God's plan. Abram had decided that his servant would be his heir. For years after God promised a child, there was no evidence that it would come to pass.

Our choices are few. We actually have one choice, to believe or not believe. Our mind tries to tell our heart and spirit to give up. But if we are sure of what God has put in our hearts, then we must pray for strength and keep walking in His directed path.

When I was told that I had two kinds of breast cancer, I knew God was still in control. There was no family history, no lump, nor pain. I wanted to do something that said "I trust you". I went to a shop and had a car plate made that said "God is Faithful". That didn't mean that God would do what I wanted. It meant that He would be there with me. After surgery, my recurrence rate came back so low that I didn't need chemo. At the time I was helping my parents and later became the caretaker for them. God truly blessed me with health to take care of them.

Remember these words and live them. "God is Faithful"!

Prayer: Teach us Lord to rely on You in our times of trouble and even more in the good times.

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD DRAWS NEAR

Luke 21:25-36Friday, March 15, 2019

“In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near.” (Luke 21: 31, CEB)

I often struggle with current events. There are so many issues and fears and threats and anxieties that I cannot begin to list them all. Part of this information overload is because we have become so inter-connected and news spreads farther and faster than ever before. Even so, I find it hard to shake the feeling that our world is becoming a darker and more dangerous place.

However, this passage acknowledges that there will be times when we witness things that are wrong in this world and we are afraid. We see the rising waters and feel the surging of the sea around us. Despite all of this, these will be the times that Christ and God’s Kingdom will draw near to us. God is with us always.

We cannot let our hearts be dulled by either the things that intoxicate us, or the anxieties of day-to-day life. Our focus must remain on Christ, and our hope that even in these times, we are close to God and He is still working in our world.

Prayer: This day, we pray for whatever fears and anxieties we hold in our hearts. Help us to give them over to our Creator’s love and care. May we always stay vigilant for the kingdom coming near. Amen.

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CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Philippians 3:17 to 4:1 Saturday, March 16, 2019

In Philippians 4 Paul encourages us to follow good examples, to emulate the behavior of those who are “citizens of heaven.” I’m reminded of the popular query of recent years, “What Would Jesus Do?”

In a recent Bible study, with my wife Helen beside me, I drew a chorus of chuckles when I commented that at one point in my life I had made a careful decision not to do what Jesus would do – when I decided to get married! That is something neither Jesus nor Paul would do, but I chose not to follow their examples, and I’m sure many of you agree with my decision.

What I take from this passage is that we should follow Jesus and Paul in their disdain for the glorification of “earthly” treasures. Jesus warned about “mammon”, which probably meant wealth and possessions. Paul warns against the “belly” or the “stomach”. This is not just about pizza, steak, or chocolate. It’s an admonition that our personal enjoyment of good things must not be allowed to interfere with our mission – to help build God’s kingdom and spread the gospel.

During this season we are called upon to emphasize our spiritual life, and our Lenten Discipline frequently includes at least some rejection of mammon and physical pleasure. We do this not because the things from which we abstain are necessarily bad in themselves, but because they can draw our attention away from more important things.

Prayer: Holy Creator, help me to be thankful for all the good things you have given me. May I use them to enhance my enjoyment of life while sharing them with others. Give me strength and wisdom to keep my primary focus on heavenly things, and not allow an obsession with earthly things to distract me. Amen.

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LOOK UP!

Luke 13:31-35 Sunday, March 17, 2019

“Go tell that fox, behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.” — Luke 13:32

My four year old grandson and I were in the kitchen. He sneezed and I said bless you. Thank you he replied. As I turned to look at him, he was looking up. I asked him, “What are you doing?” He said, “I lost it and now I found it.” He sneezed again.

How awesome! He didn’t even realize what he had done at that moment to calm the storm in me.

The courage to look up and seek strength from the One who gives us everything we need. The One who is always there.

In this passage we see Christ’s courage to face his situation head on. No backing down. Courage to send King Herod a message that He was not afraid of what he may do to Him. There was a plan and Jesus was going to follow it through to the end.

Just like this child. Wiser than his four years. The courage to look up and say I found it. Found what I was looking for. Find the courage to make it through whatever your trial may be today. Look up when life is getting you down. Be courageous to look to God for strength and guidance.

Look up!

Father we thank you for being there whenever we look up. Be courageous and look up! Find strength and guidance that only comes from God. Find God!

Prayer: Dear Lord, we are looking up to You for direction, comfort and strength. Thank You for being our ever present help in times of uncertainty and lapses of belief. Amen.

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SELECTIVE HEARING

Isaiah 55:1-9 Monday, March 18, 2019

“Come!” Don’t you just love getting an invitation to come to a feast, be it a dinner at church, a meal in someone’s home, a picnic with a group of friends? We definitely hear these kinds of invitations and we take off to be a part of a celebration of some sort or just a gathering of friends.

And what about when we hear our children in another part of the house calling, “Come?” Do we go running? Or we hear them outside yelling, “Come.” And then there are those times our spouse hollers, “Come.” Do we immediately drop what we are doing to go see why we are being called? Or do we have selective hearing?

Sometimes we want to ignore these. We are busy; we have things to do; we are engaged in watching a movie on television and don’t want to be disturbed. Maybe we are watching a ballgame on TV and we can’t take our eyes off of it or we are reading a book. We don’t want to be bothered. So, we pretend like we didn’t hear.

Aren’t we glad Jesus did not have selective hearing? Oh, he wanted to avoid the cross when God called him. He didn’t want to walk that path. But Jesus knew that God’s ways were different from his own; he knew that God’s plans were not his plans and He obeyed.

Jesus finished that journey to the cross for you and for me. He died upon that cross to save us from our sins and to offer us eternal life with Him and God in heaven. He didn’t have selective hearing like so many times we do. We hear God calling and say, “I can’t do that,” or “I don’t have time; maybe later.”

During this season of Lent let us prepare our hearts to hear the call to “Come” just as Jesus did despite our ways and our plans. Prepare to celebrate Jesus’s willingness to accept God’s ways and follow His call. Prepare to celebrate Jesus’ death on the cross because he died for you and for me.

Prayer: Today, we thank you Jesus for accepting God’s ways and God’s plans and for not having selective hearing. Help us to also not have selective hearing. Amen.

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GIVE HIM PRAISE

Psalm 63:1-8.....**Tuesday, March 19, 2019**

“Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.” — Psalm 63:3-4

When we are in church singing and worshipping God, it is easy to give our praise to him. By praying and reading the Bible, it is easy to give our praise to the Lord because it is all God-inspired.

However, sometimes our non-verbals can bring God the highest degree of praise.

As an avid runner, I often lift my hands to the sky after finishing a hard workout or a race to show praise for God, but also to show others who may be watching where the talents I have been given comes from.

One of the biggest praises I’ve ever given God was after a race I won in Morgantown last fall. I had been battling some health issues leading up to the race, and over the last month of training I had to gut out some of my runs despite the pain I was in. Through the grace of God, I was pretty much back to full health by the time race day rolled around. Even though, I wasn’t in the best shape, I took first place and as I crossed the finish line I lifted my hands to the sky in awe that God had allowed me to do something special that morning.

A photographer captured the moment and it remains one of my favorite photos in recent memory.

I saw this on social media at the beginning of the year and it holds so true, “I believe churches are meant for praising God, but so are 2am car rides, showers, coffee shops, the gym, conversations with friends, strangers etc.”

Praise God everywhere you are!

Prayer: Dear Lord, we give You praise and thank you for giving us talents and gifts we can use for the glory of Your Kingdom here and now. Amen.

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LANDMARK MOMENTS

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 Wednesday, March 20, 2019

Our scripture today reminds us of our past, and ends with a very familiar—and often misquoted—verse focused on the future. In this section of the letter to the church at Corinth, Paul talks about warning from Israel’s history and connects each of the warnings to Christ. This was certainly a new concept for those reading this letter for the first time. They knew the stories well, but would not have made the connection to Christ being involved in each of them.

Reflect back for a moment on your own life. What have been the landmark moments for you? Now that you have some time between now and then, where do you see Christ in those moments? As followers of Jesus we are all called to grow into His image. Most days that growth comes in small steps. Occasionally, a landmark moment will provide us an opportunity to take a bigger step on our journey—if we are intentional. As disciples, we should also help other followers to see Christ in these moments. That is what Paul is doing in these verses. However, we also need to be sensitive to the timing. People suffering a major loss, in the middle of a financial crisis, or dealing with other types of challenges don’t need us telling them, “Don’t worry, Christ is with you!” They need our support and understanding. So that one day, they too will see Christ in those moments.

Which brings us to that last verse. “No temptation has seized you that isn’t common for people. But God is faithful. He won’t allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it.” Read that again. It does not say we will not go through hard times, or that we will not be tempted. It says that when we are tempted, God is faithful and will provide us with a way out. Exactly like what Jesus went through during his 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan.

Prayer: Lord help us to remember the ways you have been with us in the past, during the good times and the bad. Strengthen our faith in you to be with us as we are tempted and pushed to our limit. And open our eyes to be your hands and feet and light to those around us who need a way out of their trials. Amen

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BE FRUIT BEARING LIVES

Luke 13:1-9 Thursday, March 21, 2019

Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

The faithful are killed as they gather to worship. A construction project gone horribly wrong, crushes its builders as they work. Two thousand years ago, just as is so often the case today, the fingers of those left standing in the aftermath of horrific circumstance point toward the victims. "Why did this happen? Surely the behavior of those victims must have displeased God! Why? Perhaps because what we seldom vocalize, but internally hold in tension is this: "If they didn't cause this, if this happened because life is an uncertain, fragile, fleeting thing, then this could happen to me. BUT, if their sin is at fault and I am "saved" then that must also mean that I am "safe." God will bless me even as he condemned those others." But Jesus tells us "NO." The worshipers were "not more sinful", the builders were not "more guilty of wrongdoing" than anyone else. "NO!" The survivors are not more righteous or blessed because they escaped calamity.

Sometimes sin influences the choices that cause tragedy. A drunk driver takes a life, a shooter takes aim in a crowded theater. Sometimes tragedy strikes randomly. Cancer ravages a body, fire or flood ravages a town. God's will? Of course not! The fragility of life is not God's whipping tool but it should certainly be a reminder that our time is limited.

To face this uncertainty Jesus calls us to live lives of repentance, to live every day as forgiven people. In the story of the fig tree in the vineyard, Jesus tells us of a God who wants to give us every chance to repent. A God whose purpose is not to cut us down but to nurture and encourage us to live joy filled, fruit bearing lives. Jesus offers us a repentance based on hope not fear.

Prayer: Nurturing God, Daily I repent and seek to serve you as a child forgiven. In those moments when fear of the unknowable entangles my spirit, free me, Lord to grow in your grace and love. And when my days in this life are ended, allow me Lord to step with assurance into your eternal presence, a child loved and redeemed. Amen.

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SIGNS OF GRACE

Isaiah 7:10-14.....Friday, March 22, 2019

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. — Psalm 121:2
(NRSV)

Remembering our times of poor decision-making can be painful. Perhaps we, like Ahaz, abandoned our faith in God, the consequences of which may have driven us to despair. Ahaz turned away from faith in God's ability to deliver the people of Judah from likely conquest by near-by enemies, even rejecting God's offer to provide a sign of God's willingness to do so.

I've noticed and guessing you have, too, our Lord God took the lead in seeking Ahaz, loving him and the people of Judah, even offering them a sign of assurance of His faithful deliverance. Even though Ahaz rejected God's help and compounded the sin by lying about why he didn't accept God's offer of a sign of His steadfastness, God continued His practice of prevenient grace. God directed Isaiah to prophesy the coming of Jesus, Immanuel (God with us), who would offer salvation to all. Preceding Jesus' birth would be the sign of Jesus' Mother becoming pregnant, though remaining a virgin.

We are approaching the 2019 celebration of Jesus' victory over all sin and its consequence of death by remembering our times of poor decision-making, confessing our sin, repenting from it and listening to our Lord God forgive us and deliver us from the oppression of sin. My life story is not as dramatic as that of Ahaz. However, when I speak with a "sharp tongue," am judgmental; ignore the need of someone; am lax in speaking encouraging words, etc., my poor decision-making indicates a turning away from our Lord God. Just as in the time of Ahaz and the people of Judah, God continues practicing prevenient grace through the Holy Spirit, lovingly inviting us to return to Him. The signs our Lord God provides today may not be as startling as that of a pregnant virgin, yet they convey God's loving grace, His availability to help us, whatever the challenge, and provide us hope.

Prayer: Gracious God, lead us to be grateful to You for lovingly seeking us, forgiving us and Your unwavering help to us. Thank You in the awesome name of Jesus. Amen

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GOOD NEWS

Psalm 40:5-10 Saturday, March 23, 2019

Not long ago I was listening to my favorite radio station, KLove. They often feature their artists and have them tell about one of the songs they have written and performed. This day's feature was an artist by the name of Mandisa and her song "Good News". Mandisa explained that she had prayed for her brother's salvation for a very long time. One day her brother called her and asked her how he could be saved. Mandisa explained that after she finished speaking to her brother she got off of the phone and screamed to the world the "good news"! She said she wanted to share it with the world. In our scripture today David is telling us to share with the world all the great things God has provided. In verse 10 he sings "I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation." Today I want you to ask yourself, have I shared God's love or have I kept it to myself? This Lenten season we need to share the Good News. God gave His Son for us because He loves us and we need to proclaim that love to everyone we encounter. Listen to these words from Mandisa's song "Good News:"

*"If you got it, share it
If you need it, receive it
Come on, tell everyone that it's all about good news
So much pain in the world
Dark in the world
Sure could use a little light in the world
So come on, tell me Your good news"*

My challenge to you in the next few weeks is to go out and shine your light in the world and tell those you meet the Good News of our Savior!

Prayer: Father God, You have given us so much. Nothing can compare to the Love you have for each one of us. Today we ask that you help us to share Your love with others. Place us in situations that we can shout or whisper the good news so that others will come to know and receive Your love. We ask this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen

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ONCE FOR ALL

Hebrews 10: 4-10 Sunday, March 24, 2019

Are you like me? Do you keep doing something the same old way, getting increasingly frustrated, yet unable to figure out what you are doing incorrectly?

I remember dropping messy jelly bread on the floor. I was told to wipe it up – I tried with a paper towel but it was still sticky, then I used a wet cloth – still sticky. Until I used something to take away the stickiness, it was still sticky.

The Hebrew people were taught to slaughter animals in the expectation that these innocent animals would carry their sins away for them. Their hope was to be brought into a closer relationship with God. But the guilt kept coming back; so they kept sacrificing animals.

Sending the sin into an innocent animal just wasn't working. As with my jelly bread, the initial appearance was that the stain, or sin, seemed gone. But the stickiness of guilt remained.

The answer to cleaning up our sticky jelly messes, those that separate us from God, is Christ Jesus. God doesn't want us to sacrifice an innocent animal. Giving our sins to Christ is the new way. Christ was born and accepted our sticky sins in His death. In the NIV bible, Christ said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." (v9). "And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all." V 10.

Christ was born to relieve us of our sin. God knows we humans get in sticky messes of sin over and over, but Christ died for our sins, once for all. So the next time I find myself facing a sticky mess that makes me feel separate from God, I am giving my sins to Christ.

Prayer: Loving God, Thank you for relieving me of my sticky sins. Thank you for the saving grace of Christ's life and death, once for all. Amen.

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JESUS CAME TO GIVE HIS LIFE FOR US

Luke 1 26:38..... Monday, March 25, 2019

²⁶ “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged ²⁷ to a man whose name was Joseph, of the home of David. The virgin’s name was Mary, and he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” . . . ³⁸ Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word.”

How many wait until the last minute to shop for Christmas gifts? We have known it was coming for a year yet we procrastinate. We do this with many aspects of our lives.

Scripture leaves us no doubt that God being a long-range planner - he can determine a whole series of events to come to maturity in his own good time. In fact, he has done this for the benefit of us all – planning, even before the beginning of the world, for us to become sisters and brothers of Jesus.

For the grand plan to come to completion, the cooperation of Mary was needed. And that is why the devotion of the faithful has long believed that Mary had to be specially privileged. Her response moves from one of fear, to total trust in God’s inscrutable designs.

Mary immediately offers her acceptance of God’s plan for her to be the mother of Jesus. She gets reassurance in answer to a query - the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and the power of the Most High will over-shadow her.

Some find it hard to select a gift out of Love in remembrance of the reason for the season. In one night Mary said, “Here I Am!”

Where are you?

Prayer: Lord, as we approach Easter Sunday, we celebrate the sacrifice Mary made to be available to do Your will for her life. Even though she was afraid, young and naïve, still she agreed to be part of Your great plan for her life. We pray to accept Your plan for our lives also. In Jesus name, Amen

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THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Joshua 5:9-12Tuesday, March 26, 2019

The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan. Joshua 5:12

Passover had not been celebrated since the night of the Exodus itself. Now, after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness--the trek that had started with Moses and ended with Joshua--God's people have reached the land of milk and honey. Through all these years, God provided manna for the Israelites. But now that they've reached the Promised Land, the people feast! And not just any feast--the Passover feast. They remembered God's faithfulness and celebrated a new beginning in a new land.

Have you seen the film *Babette's Feast*? This film depicts forgiveness and feasting. Set in 19th century Denmark, the film tells the story of a servant named Babette, who wins the lottery and decides to spend her winnings hosting a marvelous feast for her bosses (two mean sisters) and their acquaintances. All the guests are on the older (and unpleasant) side and they very reluctantly decide to attend the dinner. However, Babette's meal breaks down their negativity. The feast is beyond amazing—she serves delicacies never seen before in their small town. Course after course of heavenly food. By the end of the film, the guests are swept up in Babette's generosity to a place of forgiveness, love and joy.

So, too, we are swept away by God's love, forgiveness and generosity. In his commentary on this Scripture, Ralph Klein ponders these thoughts: "Every Sunday, God offers up a Eucharistic banquet for a bunch of ever-returning sinners, as if it was the first real meal after a barren week. Is not our deliverance at the table so real that we can taste it?"

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for all you provide for us—lives filled beyond measure with the blessings of Your forgiveness and steadfast love. May we always be willing to forgive and love others as you love and forgive us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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HIDE AND SEEK

Psalm 32:7 (NIV)..... Wednesday, March 27, 2019

You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

How many of us have played hide and seek? When I was a child my brother and I would play together a lot. We had to keep ourselves out of the house and away from our parents. Hide and seek was a game we played when our father was drunk. We would hide and hope he couldn't find us.

When I was little, my big brother was my protector. He would from time to time take the beating for me that I should have gotten. Protecting me was his job he felt.

But we have a protector that is much greater than a big brother. His name is Jesus. He will always protect us no matter how much trouble we get ourselves into. God sent His only Son to earth to take our place on that cross. If that isn't protection I don't know what is.

When I was young I was so happy that my brother protected me. I never thought who protected him. Living in a home where abuse happened daily you just learn to survive. My brother and I survived with God's help. You can get out of your hiding place because we all have a protector. Jesus is waiting He wants to protect us all.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us come out of our hiding places and fall into Your arms of protection and love. Amen

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RECONCILED TO GOD

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 **Thursday, March 28, 2019**

After you spend some time reading and thinking about this Scripture reflect on the following words.

“So then, from this point on we won’t recognize people by human standards. ...if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation.” Verses. 16-17

Through Paul, Christ is telling us that once we accept the love of God we are as new creatures, our “slates have been wiped clean.” All slates, which includes yours and your neighbors’.

Does this Scripture stir something in you? Do you feel the power in these words? Do you feel a little tug on your heart, a slight uneasiness in the pit of your stomach as the words sink in? Why do you think that is?

Look again at verses 18 and 19: *“God reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”*

Reconcile means to “reestablish a close relationship between” God and ourselves. It also means “to reconnect and become compatible between” yourself and others.

This is the time of year when we celebrate the sacrifice Christ made for us. It is also a perfect time for us to remember God’s request to reconcile our close relationships with Him. Remember the Scripture said that all things are new in Christ? That means our personal relationships with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are to be as new again.

And, we are to reconcile (or become compatible) with the people in our lives. All of the people in our lives. Can you do that? Can you begin again to live in peace with others, and put away all judgment? Can you treat all people as equals in God’s eyes? Can you love your neighbor as yourself?

Slowly and thoughtfully work through the Scripture one more time. Pray over it asking God to guide you and give you strength to follow the Words.

And have faith. God will answer that prayer.

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EATING WITH SINNERS

Luke 15:1-2Friday, March 29, 2019

"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Eating with sinners? How dare we... Jesus did it why can't we?? Let me tell you all a little story of what my husband and I did on Maundy Thursday, last year. Some of you know my husband Stephen Prince. He will talk to anyone. He doesn't care how you look, who you are, or how you smell. He is just that kind of man. I am proud of the man God has made him. Well this wasn't a normal Maundy Thursday service it was a VBS reunion with about 35 children and adults present. After the children watched a Veggie Tales movie Steve taught them about the last supper how the pizza they were eating was sort of like the bread Jesus served the disciples. After the children learned about Holy Communion and was served, they were set free in the yard to hunt Easter eggs. Steve came outside where I was talking with some of the members of the churches we serve. Steve had the juice and bread. Now just to let you all know our second church is just down the street from a well-known bar in Morgantown. Steve goes there for the Hot Dogs and gets to know the local people (talks to everyone like I said before). So He comes to me and said "Let's go to Gene's and serve Communion." My first thought is IT'S A BAR and I'm going to get kicked out of this place. But Steve said it would be fine and I trust my husband. So up the street we went. Steve and I went in and found the bar maid Lucy. Steve ask her if we could serve communion and explained to her what it was. Lucy was happy to accept communion and sent us on our way around the bar. Steve explained Communion, everyone in the bar accepted communion except 3 people.

We were doing what Jesus did eating with Sinners. We have to get outside the doors of the church and meet our neighbors. Go out meet people, eat with sinners. Do as Jesus did, He was a great example. Jesus didn't sit around. He went out to people that is what we need to do. Go where the people are.

Prayer: Heavenly Father help us to remember what you have taught us. Give us the courage and strength to go eat with sinners. Help up to meet our neighbors where they live in our communities. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

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GOD PROMISES A NEW BEGINNING

Isaiah 43:16-21 Saturday, March 30, 2019

..... *“I am making a new way in the desert and streams in the waste land.”*
Isaiah 43: 20

Lent is a time of preparation for Christians. God brought the Israelites out through the desert but he has urged them to forget that way and focus on a new way in Isaiah. The preparation took 40 days prior to Easter Sunday. This time is based on Jesus’s fast in the Wilderness after his baptism by John. In early church times, new Christians were prepped for a new life with Christ and were baptized on Easter Morning.

Now, Lent has taken on new meanings in our modern world. It is common to hear such comments as “What are you giving up for Lent?” Usually we make a promise of “not to” or “I will do this instead” which focuses on our habits of food and behaviors toward others. As a Christian, we need to shift our focus and cleanse ourselves of saying “I can’t”, “not me”, and “I haven’t got the time.” We need to step up to God and dedicate ourselves to a new way of thinking and living the promises of God and Jesus. WE need to carve a new path in the desert.

Prayer: Lord, help us to cleanse our heart of previous feelings, emotions and thoughts, and focus on starting a new way to view and practice being a true follower of God and Jesus. Help us look for new ways to carve your path in today’s world with the help and love of Jesus. Amen.

Prayer Focus: People struggling to change their lives for God and Jesus.

Sarah M. Fletcher

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TEARS OF JOY

Psalm 126..... Sunday, March 31, 2019

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.

When the Lord brought back his exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream! We were filled with laughter, and we sang for joy. And the other nations said, "What amazing things the Lord has done for them." Yes, the Lord has done amazing things for us! What joy! Restore our fortunes, Lord, as streams renew the desert. Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy. They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest. (NLT)

As I read this scripture I am reminded of the turmoil in America today. In many ways Christians have become exiles hiding within a world of chaos. We must choose to join the world or stand firm in our faith. Good has come to be viewed as evil and evil as good. Both children and adults are confused, choosing to create their own beliefs as many have never heard the precious name of Jesus. Tears of anguish echo across the land.

*My prayer is for restoration. Holy Father, Thank you for the blessings bestowed upon us each day and for the strength with which you lift us out of despair. Please open our eyes to the subtle temptations of evil lurking around every corner of this world. I pray for revival across not only this great nation but also the world. As your people return to you, yielding to your will, may our nation be restored. May we learn to love one another and weep tears of joy once again!
Amen*

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CHRIST THE SOLID ROCK

Philippians 3: 4-14 Monday, April 1, 2019

In these words from Paul's letter to the Philippians, he warns of several things that will not lead to salvation. Things that we should not have confidence in nor boast about, no matter how much assurance or comfort they seem to offer. He warns against entrusting our salvation to religious ritual; for no 100% service attendance, nor Sunday School participation, nor vast sums of tithes will make us worthy. He warns against trusting in lineage or positions; for not even belonging to the right groups, nor being born of faithful people, nor holding lofty offices among our peers will make us worthy. He warns against trusting in sincere motives; for someone can be zealously devoted to what they believe, but have beliefs that are not based in the truths of the Gospel. It is telling that Paul includes himself in these admonitions, starting out by saying that "if anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh," he has more. This points out that we are all probably guilty of some of this faulty thinking. If much of this passage tells us where not to put our trust, where then is the answer we seek? English pastor Edward Mote penned these words in 1834 as the first verse of a now familiar and beloved hymn:

"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

These worldly things that we want to take comfort in and boast about are but sinking sand. Paul advises to put them aside, count them as loss so that we may gain the even greater – GREATEST – prize of knowing God and the power of His resurrection.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we ask you to help us stay focused on you. Turn us aside, correct our course when we get caught up in our own worth and self-congratulatory ways. Help us to stand on the solid rock that is Christ our Lord, in whose name we trust and pray. Amen.

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MARY ANOINTS JESUS' FEET

John 12:1-8.....Tuesday, April 2, 2019

"Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house." — John 12:3 (The Message)

As we prepare for the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we know that Jesus died so we could live. He took the pain of our sins, before we were even born, upon his own body so we would not suffer. Mary took it upon herself to honor Jesus by washing his feet with the expensive oils and drying his feet with her hair.

How do we honor Jesus? Is there a specific way or manner to do this? Absolutely not! Honor Jesus through prayer, praise, and personal sacrifice. Often times people 'give-up' something for Lent. Instead of giving up why not give in or give more? Give more of your time to prayer, give more time to personal sacrifice, and give more praise. Add a new mission project to what you already participate in. Be more aware of those in your community who struggle day to day. Invite them to share a meal in the park, invite them to church, or just take a minute to speak to them. This is how you can honor Jesus.

One important idea to remember is that when you do these for the least of these you do this for Jesus. Don't stop doing things just because the season is over.

Prayer: Loving God, Thank you for giving your son for our sins. Guide our steps as we honor you in all we say and do. Give us the words to speak and the actions to do as we strive to be better Christians. In Jesus Name. Amen

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HIS LOVE ENDURES FOREVER

Psalm 118: 1-2..... Wednesday, April 3, 2019

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good: his love endures forever.”

My husband serves as the district chair for Buildings and Locations. One of the committee’s responsibilities is to approve and refer recommendations for the sale of church buildings and properties. I have often traveled into the countryside with him as he inspected the property and talked with surrounding neighbors and church members about the life and reason for the closure of the building. I always find this to be a sad moment but a recent visit was even harder. He was going to the church where my earliest memories of church as a small child were created. My parents and I lived a block from the church so my mom and I would walk to Sunday School when my dad was on national guard duty. Normally, we would go to the ‘big’ church downtown but that required a car that my dad needed to get to his assignment.

My husband began his tour of the building while I remained upstairs. In the silence I could almost hear the voices and giggles of a sanctuary filled with children. I could still see us sitting shoulder to shoulder for the official Vacation Bible School picture which I still have.

Tears began to stream down my face when I heard a still voice. “Deborah, I gave you this church, to love you as a small child. I sent others through the years to nurture and care for you. And, I will continue to love and care for you as you age. I will not leave you. My love WILL endure forever”.

Prayer: I give you thanks and praise O Lord and to the people of Epworth Church for the love and memories you provided to so many neighborhood children like me. Amen.

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HAPPY?

Luke 19: 28-40Thursday, April 4, 2019

There are times when the emotion and feelings are too great to hold inside. It may be at the football or soccer game when the long, unexpected advance down the field finally makes the point. It may be that moment when you hold that new child or grandchild for the first time and the tears flow. Or, maybe, at the moment when that loved one is gone and, in that moment, the enormity of being without them crushes you like a boulder and you break down in sobs. The pressure is too much to hold in. It requires relief.

When we read of Jesus' long trip from the Galilee "up to" Jerusalem, we know it was a difficult time. There were lots of other pilgrims making that journey for the Passover. The emotion was building such that few had seen before. Many didn't understand what Jesus had done or was about or what he would do but they knew something very special was happening. It could be felt in the air. The disciples and close followers of Jesus were even more excited (or dubious) at coming to the climax of their time with Jesus. It was "either put-up or shut-up" time.

Should we be surprised that "When (Jesus) came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" I think not. The joys and the wonders of all they had witnessed were too great. The joy, the emotion of the moment, had to come out or they would have burst!

So when the Pharisees scolded to "...tell this rabble to be quiet – we anticipate a riot!" (JCS version) Jesus simply replies "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." Now THAT's JOY!

Prayer: Father, through the Holy Spirit bring these things to our minds and memories. The sheer joy and wonder of the road to Jerusalem – the joy of being near Jesus as he teaches – and the love expressed in his touch. Nudge us to remember that the real people on the journey weren't certain of what they were witnessing; only that it was great joy. Father, this season please help us experience the joy and wonder of the entry into Jerusalem and of Jesus' love. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

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GOD'S SUSTAINING LOVE

Isaiah 50:4-9 Friday, April 5, 2019

"The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that 'I may know how to sustain with a word 'him who is weary.'" Isaiah 50:4

On December 8, 1997 my husband's wife (Deb) was killed in a traffic accident. I met Deb's husband (Rick) in August 1997. I worked as a Nurse/Patient Advocate at a local hospital. He was Chaplain there. My responsibilities and the Chaplain's responsibilities often crossed over as we offered support for patients and families, working in collaboration to provide spiritual and emotional support.

In January Rick was back at the hospital visiting members of his congregation, His grief was evident as he went about his responsibilities. We would see each other from time to time and I expressed sympathy for his wife's death. I was thankful for the Bereavement Certification I received in 1997. God began using my understanding right away as I offered support and a safe place for Rick to share his emotions. God had given me a "tongue of those who are taught."

Fast forward, 408 days after Deb's death and I became the "other woman" in my husband's life. I was not prepared for how his grief would affect me. Rick's grief became our grief. There was no sorting the yours and mine of it. The grief was ours. My heart broke as he slumped to his knees and let out guttural anguish over the sadness in his heart. Knowing that he had to process through his grief was no less traumatic. His emotions erupted, he slumped over exhausted, as I prayed for God to give him strength to empty his heart of the hurt and pain and use me to bring healing.

I could see God's sustaining attention and strengthening presence in this grief process. I have had an "open-ear to God" since I was a teen and His language of strength and encouragement flooded my own heart and poured as balm into the wounds of Rick's grief.

Days evolved into weeks and weeks into months. The deep sadness began to wane and waver. Today, we do grief seminars to offer the same hope of God's sustaining attention and strengthening presence to those in the dark days of grief.

Prayer: "Lord, help me to have an open-ear to your voice. Use me to bring a small patchwork of healing into the world through your word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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ANXIOUS?

Psalm 31:9-16 **Saturday, April 6, 2019**

Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am in distress... But I trust in you, O Lord. I say, "You are my God."

I tend to be an anxious person, a worrier. Concerns about personal situations, the world social, political and environmental problems and disunity within the church have all given me insomnia. I even feel anxious about feeling anxious since Scripture clearly teaches that we shouldn't, and we all know that guilt leads to anxiety. I don't enjoy these feelings. They make me physically sick, depressed, exhausted and miserable. After all, "An anxious heart weighs a man down." (Prov.12:25)

Of course, what I'm describing is not just my condition. It's part of the human condition. All of us feel stress and suffer physically and emotionally because of it. King David certainly did. In Psalm 31:9-10, 12, he described that suffering: "I am in distress...my eyes are weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief... my life is consumed by anguish...my strength fails and my bones grow weak... I have become like broken pottery."

We are so much like David. Like him, we are anxious, but also like him we are beloved by God. David knew he was not hopeless. He acknowledged that his God in whom he placed his trust is the God of truth and unfailing love. (Ps. 31:5, 14, 15) David's anxiety gave him grief, but his faith gave him hope and enabled him to see that, "My times are in your hands." Glory!

During Lent we do some serious self-examination. As we reflect upon what we discover about ourselves and our relationship with God, let's remember that our times are in God's hands. His redeeming love is our hope ... certain and sure... no matter what may happen.

Prayer: Father, We praise you and thank you for your unfailing love. Help us to remember that our lives are in your hands, even in life's most stressful situations. Thank you for saving us. Amen.

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A CHILD OF GOD

Philippians 2:5-11 Sunday, April 7, 2019

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” Philippians 2:5

Have you read Facebook recently? Skimmed through Instagram? Peeked at Twitter? Have you sat in a restaurant and listened to the conversations flowing around you? Have you tuned into the news? Have you noticed, the way I have, that many of us, including me, are convinced that we are RIGHT. We believe that our judgment, our conclusions, and our actions are right, and those who disagree with us are WRONG. And we fail to love.

Sometimes, in our tweets, our posts, and our conversations, we fail to see that the person in front of us, who we judge to be WRONG, is a child of God, created in God’s image, and beloved. Instead of seeing a person, we see an issue. We see what we believe to be WRONG, and we fail to love.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

As part of the work I do, I am privileged to travel through the Annual Conference. I meet many United Methodists, and I can tell you, we do not all agree. And yet, even so, I have been welcomed everywhere I go. Everywhere I go, people are feeding the hungry. They are teaching children about God. They are reaching out to their communities to share the light of Christ. Everywhere I go, people are being the CHURCH.

To me, having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus does not mean that we agree. It means that we love the way Christ loves. It means that we empty ourselves of thoughts of ourselves, and we follow in the footprints of Christ, even to a cross. We will always fail to love until we begin to see the PERSON in front of us.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in in Christ Jesus.”

Prayer: Creating and sustaining God, help us to walk in humility, dying with Christ, and living a new life. Help us to love all of those around us, seeing our brothers and sisters through your eyes. Forgive our judgment of others and our pride in ourselves, and free us for joyful obedience. We prayer in your son’s name, Amen.

Kim Matthews, CLM

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THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

Romans 9: 19-23 **Monday, April 8, 2019**

Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? Romans 9:23

I have always had an interest in pottery and plan to take some classes in the near future at our local Art Center. I enjoy working with my hands and get great satisfaction from seeing raw materials transformed into items of beauty and or utility. I have watched potters at the wheel as they manipulate the clay, forming pots or cups, pitchers and patens.

I have two pieces of pottery from my grandparents. One is a crock which was used for making pickles or sauerkraut. The other piece of pottery is a thunder-bowl, which would originally have included a lid. This bowl would have been stored under the edge of the bed and used as a portable toilet so the owner would not be required to travel to the outhouse in the middle of a cold winter night. Both pieces were very important in their function. The crock is a much more respectable piece of pottery and one you would not mind company seeing. The thunder-bowl on the other hand was kept hidden from sight under the bed and only pulled out when absolutely necessary and then only in private. Both are now on display in my family room, the crock holds dried flowers and the thunder-bowl is full of pine cones. I have elevated the status of the thunder-bowl to a decorator item. When these pots were made from raw wet clay they both looked identical. It was at the discretion of the potter what each lump of clay was to become. The clay had no say or input as to their use, shape or function.

God took a lump of clay and from that clay He created a human body, forming each intricate detail and then blew His breath into the person giving them life. Each of us were formed in our mother's womb and God knew us before we were ever born. We were created for a purpose. Some were created to be pastors others to be laity. But we have all been given the responsibility for the mission of our Lord to create disciples for the transformation of the world. Some of us work in settings of authority and others as individuals with no authority. But each of us have gifts and graces that provide the means to influence others for Christ. Listen during this Lenten Season for God to speak to you and then be obedient to that directing from the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for creating me for Your purpose. Help me to be effective as a lay person in my ministry for Your kingdom. In Jesus name and for His sake I pray, Amen.

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HOW LONG, OH LORD

Jeremiah 25:8-17Tuesday, April 9, 2019

“You have established your people Israel as your very own forever...”

2 Samuel 7:24(a) NIV

As we sat in the ICU waiting area, anxious for any change in my husband’s condition, it didn’t take long for things to get on my nerves. Someone was rattling cellophane food wrappers; someone else smelled of cigarette smoke when he returned to the room; the scratching of someone’s pencil on a crossword puzzle sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard; the morning’s last cup of coffee tasted bitter and turned my stomach. “Please let me know what to expect,” I prayed. “Lord, how long can this last?” Like a toddler in time-out, I just wanted the waiting to be over.

The prophet Jeremiah was called by God nearly 350 years after King David praised Jehovah with the words quoted above. But in that time, the children of Israel – God’s very own forever – had repeatedly turned away from Him. After 23 years of calling them to repent, Jeremiah delivered the word of God: Israel would be delivered into the hands of the Babylonians. Their one hope was that while the captivity would be complete, it would last only 70 years. Only 70 years? That is almost three generations – longer than most people’s life spans. It must have seemed to them that their punishment would last forever.

Time drags during periods of anxiety or anticipation. A five-minute time-out feels like forever to a preschooler. The last month of school seems interminable to both students and teachers. Mercifully, they know the end is in sight. Israel knew God’s punishment would be lifted after 70 years. We may all take comfort knowing we are his forever. And that’s much longer than 70 years.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, We are grateful that you love us and that you are slow to anger and quick to forgive when we fall short in obedience. We know that 1,000 years are only a minute in your sight. Help us to always look to you and to eternity in all that we say and do. Help us to extend that love and forgiveness to our brothers and sisters. Amen

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GOD KEEPS NO RECORD

Psalm 130..... Wednesday, April 10, 2019

If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness. — Psalm 130:3-4

You remember the Permanent Record in school. You were constantly being told that if you messed up, it would be placed in your Permanent Record. God doesn't keep a record! God forgives us of our sins.

Many of us go through life carrying a load of guilt. Some feel there is no hope because of something they did. A long-time friend commented to me that she was sure that when she died, the Lord would not accept her. She was weighed down with guilt. Shortly before her death, a close relative told me that this friend was convinced there was no hope for her because, as she put it, "so much had gone wrong" in her life. According to Psalm 130, however, we don't have to carry the weight of our sins. We don't even have to get rid of our sins. God has done it for us.

"If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness." God keeps no record. He has pushed the delete button on our sins, and because of the Lord Jesus, our Savior, God has wiped our record clean. The apostle John put it this way: "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins" (1 John 1:9). That's the good news for all of us!

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for not keeping a record of my sins. Help me to confess and to receive your forgiveness through Jesus Christ, my Lord. In his name, Amen.

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ARE YOU C-O-Z-Y?

Romans 11: 1-12 Thursday, April 11, 2019

Within the past few days, many in the United States have experienced below average temperatures and treacherous weather conditions. Our news media and weather forecasters have warned us to stay in and stay warm (cozy). In many cases this meant foregoing normal routines and forcing us to neglect our obligations to family, neighbors or friends. We needed to stay comfortable and safe.

The Israelites in Paul's time were feeling comfortable in their relationship with God. They began focusing on self-interest, "their eyes that could not see and the ears that could not hear." God did not turn His back on them. Because of their transgressions, the door was open to the Gentiles. Then when the Israelites turned their focus again to God, there were great riches for all.

Are we comfortable in our relationship with God? Are we focused on "self-interest"? Are we cozy in our beliefs? We need to look at "cozy" in a different way.

"C" – commune with God "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20)

"O" - step outside the box "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)

"Z" – be zealous for God "Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord." (Colossians 3:23)

"Y" – yield to God's will and yearn to work for Him "so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1:10)

Are you just "cozy" or are you striving for "C-O-Z-Y"?

Prayer: Our Father, help us each day to come closer to perfection in You. We know the path is not easy, but You are by our side at all times and in whatever endeavor we pursue. In Jesus' name we pray. AMEN

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PARENTING

Psalm 95..... Friday, April 12, 2019

And I was provoked—oh, was I provoked!

'Can't they keep their minds on God for five minutes?

Do they simply refuse to walk down my road?'

Exasperated, I exploded,

'They'll never get where they're headed,

never be able to sit down and rest.'" Psalm 95: 10-11 (The Message)

Parenting is one of the most challenging, albeit rewarding, experiences one can have. Undoubtedly, children can try one's patience! I can speak with some authority on this issue as I have been both the provocateur to my parents in my youth, as well as the frustrated, in my role as mother to four boys. My brood, whom I dearly love, did not always follow my advice and often seemed to intentionally defy me. The exasperation I felt when my motherly instruction was unheeded was surely warranted; after all, I only wanted the best for my sons! Similarly, as a child of God, I am sure our heavenly Father has been very frustrated with my decisions and actions, or lack thereof. My attention span for Godly matters can equal the limited concentration of the young. As our caring parent, God knows that if we do not follow His path we cannot attain eternal rest. God has irrefutable parenting skills and has offered us a great guidance system if we will just follow as directed.

Prayer: God, you have shown me the way to endless peace and yet I often fail to conform. Thank you for being my parent and never abandoning me even though I must try your patience when I ignore your directions. Help me grow. Amen.

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HUMILITY

Philippians 2:5-11 Saturday, April 13, 2019

I really hate being told in public whether face-to-face or on-line that I've made a mistake--that I've misremembered a detail or missed a deadline or done something I shouldn't have done. Inwardly, I realize that the words of the centuries-old prayer "We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done" apply to me, but I'm afraid to let my "enemies," whether real or imagined, see any sign of weakness on my part that they might use against me and therefore I'm often angry at anyone who points out such weakness.

But, I worked in Japan several years ago as part of my decades-long career in West Virginia. Humility permeates the culture in Japan, and I quickly (although reluctantly) developed a (false) show of humility in dealing with my Japanese colleagues. Since my return from Japan I've generally retained this external façade of humility while inside resenting my perceived need to do so.

Today's reading from Philippians 2 is often used theologically as a way of supporting the Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ was simultaneously God and a human man. But this series of doctrinal statements immediately follows instructions by Paul to the Christians in Philippi, and therefore to us, that we are to exhibit both the love and humility of Jesus Christ in our daily lives.

May we all grow in Christ-like humility during this season of Lent!

Prayer: O God, during this season of the Church Year set apart for reflection and repentance, help us become more Christ-like especially in the areas of love and humility. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.

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HOSANNA

Zechariah 9:9-12.....Sunday April 14, 2019

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your King comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. — Zechariah 9:9, NIV

Can you hear them? Men and women singing and shouting, children laughing with pure delight! Can you just imagine the crowds gathering around Jesus with joy? What a wondrous sight! The disciples have brought Jesus a donkey and its colt – never been ridden, mind you – and placed their garments on them. Jesus rides the colt gently, humbly down the hill toward Jerusalem. As the crowds surround Jesus they make the path – spreading their garments, gathering tree boughs to lay down, and rejoicing. Hosanna! Save us now!

The people are enthusiastic and excited! Here is Jesus, the man who brought Lazarus back from death! Jesus, who performs miracles! The people give Jesus their admiration and praise, their trust for salvation. The prophecies of Zechariah are now fulfilled. This is a powerful moment of light before the dark days ahead.

Some moments in life are just meant for rejoicing. This was the time for Jesus to openly present Himself as the Messiah. There was no longer the need for political caution; the time was upon Him. He came in the midst of the Passover multitudes, on the way to Jerusalem, bringing Love and Peace. How thankful we are. Love. Peace. Hosanna!

We know the sorrow and suffering that Jesus was to face in the coming days, but we also believe in the Resurrection that follows. We rejoice with faithful confidence that Jesus is indeed our Savior. How we love Him for bringing us Love and Peace and life everlasting. On Palm Sunday let us rejoice like never before. Let us sing, shout, and delight in praising our Messiah. Let our hearts be full, even overflowing with God's amazing love.

Prayer: Dear Lord and Father, we joyfully praise you!! We join together, thanking you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ. We ask your blessing as we share with others your message of Love, Peace, and life eternal. In the name of Him who gently came on a colt, Amen.

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CONTINUING EDUCATION...

1 Timothy 6:12-16 Monday, April 15, 2019

“Compete in the good fight of faith. Grab hold of eternal life – you were called to it,…” — 1 Timothy 6:12-13a (CEB)

Many of us have occupations that require us to have continuing education units to maintain our licensure or certification. On my renewal application I’m asked to declare that I’ve been honest and true to the core values of my profession, with no illegal or immoral activity. I’m sure this is on most renewal applications for all of us. They want to know that we’re continuing to learn and are behaving in a way becoming of our profession.

Many of us were baptized as infants and grew up in the church with many “a-ha” moments of spiritual renewal over the years. Others of us at some point in our lives became aware of our ever-present God and are “born again” Christians. However we became saved by grace through faith, it does not mean that we sit back and just let life happen from that point.

Paul writes in 1 Timothy that we are to “Compete in the good fight of faith.” He also says in verse 14 that we are to “Obey this order without fault or failure…” John Wesley teaches us to do no harm, do good, and observe the ordinances of God. In other words, being a follower of Christ means constantly working to maintain our “CEUs” of good Christian living to which we are all called: in all things – in all ways – in every aspect of our lives. This is E-T-E-R-N-A-L-L-Y more important than anything else we will ever do! It begs the question: ARE WE CONTINUING TO LEARN AND ARE WE BEHAVING IN A WAY BECOMING OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH?

PRAYER: Holy Father, all honor and eternal power belong to you. During this Lenten season, help me to focus on the things you have called me to so that I may grab hold of eternal life. Help me “compete in the good fight of faith” until Jesus comes again. Amen.

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JESUS' PARADOX – LESS IS MORE

John 12:20-26.....Tuesday, April 16, 2019

I'm a member of the first TV generation. Through the years I have wondered about the influence that TV, especially the commercials, has on our society. We are constantly told that we need more - clothes, shoes, gadgets, furniture, houses - always the newest and the biggest and the best - because they will make our lives complete. At Christmas and also now at Easter, we are urged to buy things that will be "the perfect gift." We are led to believe that we need these "things" in order to be happy and well thought of by others.

In this Scripture Jesus speaks of dying in order to live; of losing in order to gain. To me it is saying I need to lose the life that TV tells me I should have, and start living the life that Jesus has asked me to live. To ask myself - do I really need another pair of shoes or another electronic gadget? What will I receive if I lose that life? Jesus says I will receive peace, joy, relief from debt, guilt, stress, not measuring up, weight of possessions and, most important, a closer relationship with Him. During that last extremely cold week in January, churches opened their fellowship halls to the homeless. The people who volunteered at these shelters cooked, cleaned, counseled, did whatever was needed - without monetary payment - but they were rewarded by the knowledge that they had died - at least for a time - to the self-centered life we are encouraged to live and, because of that, their lives are now fuller and richer than ever. Ironically, one of the most popular books out now is by a professional organizer that shows you how to unclutter your life so that you will be happier and less burdened.

In 1776 the English tax commissioners accused John Wesley of having more than he reported. Wesley wrote back: "I have two silver spoons at London and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me want bread."

I share this prayer of John Wesley: "O merciful God, whatever You may deny me, do not deny me this love. Save me from the idolatry of loving the world, or any of the things of the world. Let me never love any creature but for Your sake and in subordination to Your love. Take full possession of my heart; raise there Your throne and command there as You do in heaven. Being created by You, let me live to You; being created for You, let me ever act for Your glory; being redeemed by You, let me render to You what is Yours and let my spirit ever cleave to You alone." Amen.

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“BROKEN POTTERY”

I Corinthians 10:14-17 Wednesday, April 17, 2019

In these 4 verses, Paul is reasoning with the Corinthians why they should only worship God and not be swayed to worship idols as well. Partaking in the cup and bread cements them together in worshipping God. Verse 17 states: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” In particular, this speaks to me of the unity of all of us through Christ in relationship with God.

So during Lent, traditionally a time of penance and prayer, we reflect on that relationship. We say, “Sorry” for what we’ve done that has broken that relationship. We ask for forgiveness and make amends with our prayers. Likewise, with communion, we have an occasion of grace where our broken relationships can be repaired. This point was visually brought home to me one Sunday several years ago.

When the chalice and paten are not being used to serve communion, they are displayed on a tall stand near the side of the sanctuary. This particular Sunday, the stand had been moved to a more visible place in front of the altar rail. Not accustomed to it being there, someone accidentally bumped into it. The chalice and paten were knocked to the floor. The pottery paten cracked and broke into 2 pieces.

In that moment I saw, “Christ’s body broken for you.” With some super glue, the 2 pieces were put back together. The paten isn’t perfect. The crack that runs across the diameter of the paten is still visible. But the paten is still functional. It serves as a visual reminder that our broken relationship with God can be mended through Christ’s brokenness. Our flaws may still show but we can be United as the body of Christ.

Prayer: Glorious Creator, you are the potter of our lives. Jesus, you are the super glue that puts us together again when our actions cause brokenness. Holy Spirit, we ask for your guidance so that we may be useful vessels as the body of Christ. Amen.

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GOD HIMSELF WILL PROVIDE THE LAMB

Genesis 22:1-14 Maundy Thursday, April 18, 2019

“God himself will provide the lamb.”

I am participating in Session #41 of The Academy for Spiritual Formation. One of the books for the retreat in February is Faith's Freedom by Luke Johnson. He makes the case for faith to be a verb, action, not just passive belief. He uses Abraham's faith extensively in his argument. And one component of faith is obedience. "Obedient faith" is Johnson's phrase. And in today's passage from Genesis is one of the two best examples of obedient faith. Abraham hears God say, "Go and sacrifice your son," and Abraham goes. No questions asked, just preparation and going, faith that this is what God said, what God wants. Action.

When Isaac questions his father "where is the lamb to be sacrificed", his dad answers "God will provide." What must have been going through their minds, especially consider Abraham's dilemma? Try and imagine that you are Abraham. Sit with that thought for a bit. Could I have taken my son Geoff, gone and built an altar of sacrifice, bound him and laid him on top of the wood he had carried, to burn him? That's what Abraham heard God tell him to do, and the journey was made for that very thing. But at the last moment God did provide. There was a ram in the nearby bushes.

Why do we read this on Maundy Thursday? I believe it is to be reminded of the other great example of obedient faith: Jesus, the Lamb of God. On this night Jesus goes to the Garden and prays. He prays to his father to let this "cup" pass him by. It is Passover after all, the night that celebrates God's sparing of the first born of Israel in Egypt, the night of Israel's deliverance. Why can't Jesus be spared as well: he is God's first born son. But in faithful obedience, Jesus says "not my will, but Yours". Obedient faith. Jesus knew that only by living and dying the faith he had in God, could he truly live. So on this night we remember that Passover meal and Jesus' agony of prayer in the garden, and each time we come to the Lord's Table we remember again obedient faith in the Body and Blood, as we eat and drink and so are strengthened and renewed to go and live "obedient faith."

Prayer: Creator God, so strengthen us by the example of your obedient Son, that we too may live lives of obedient faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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SACRIFICES FOR JESUS THE CHRIST

John 19:38-42..... Good Friday, April 19, 2019

Traditionally, we give up something for Lent, as an observance of sacrifice for Christ. Joseph of Arimathea, an “in secret disciple of Christ,” feared the Jews. He asked Pilate if he could take the body of Christ and prepare it for burial. Permission was granted. Joseph took the body. Then Nicodemus came with about a hundred pounds of Myrrh and Aloes. They wrapped Jesus’ body with strips of Linen and spices, as was the custom of the Jews. Then they laid the body of Christ in the Tomb Joseph had secured for himself. No man had been buried in the Tomb, which Joseph “lent” Jesus.

What these two men did, was indeed a sacrifice. If the Jews discovered what these men did, it would cost their lives. Joseph sacrificed his new, never used Tomb. He had no idea Jesus would only be there for three days. Nicodemus quietly paid for the burial materials. Was this an expensive sacrifice? No. The expensive sacrifice, would have been what happened, if the Jews discovered what Nicodemus and Joseph did.

We “give up” something for Lent. When Lent is past, we resume eating Chocolate, or the sirloin Steak we “gave up” for Lent. If the Jews had learned what Joseph and Nicodemus did, these men would likely have been stoned to death. That is a true sacrifice. They knew, if discovered, they would be killed for doing what they did.

Yet in true sacrifice, they did it. They accepted Jesus, The Son of God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, what have I given up for Your sake? As I consider the sacrifice You made for me guide my thoughts to realize the plan You have for my life and give me the courage to follow these leadings. Praise Your name, Amen.

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JOB'S FAITH

Job 19:21-27a..... Saturday, April 20, 2019

Job 19:25 "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth." (NRSV)

Many people are surprised to find that Job uttered these words. Job—who had an undeserved reputation for patience, who had undergone tragic losses that make us cringe when we read them, and who had well-intentioned friends around him trying to make him feel better when they couldn't possibly know what he was feeling—Job made this ringing statement of faith in his Redeemer.

Sometimes we don't know what to do with Holy Saturday. The excitement and drama of Palm Sunday are behind us; so is the solemnity of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We know that joy is coming in the morning, but we aren't quite there yet. Jesus is in the tomb. Even though we know that in the morning we will be celebrating the Resurrection, the sobering events of the preceding week are hanging over us as we try to empathize with those early disciples who did not yet know of the Resurrection.

All of us have times like this in our lives. We may have been through a period that was particularly good, or particularly bad—and we find ourselves in something of a spiritual quiet zone, wondering what will come next. We trust that God will guide us around the next bend, but we can't yet see what's there.

When Job said the words quoted above, he was sitting in a heap of ashes, scratching his sores with a pottery fragment, surrounded by friends whom he must have wished would go away. Job answered each friend's pious speech, but we have to wonder if they listened. If they did, this was Job's response: he stated his unshaking belief that his Redeemer would stand on the earth and that he would see this Redeemer with his own eyes.

Today in the life of the church, we seem to be pausing for breath, taking stock of where we are and where we are headed. Wherever we may find ourselves, let us--like Job—keep the faith that we will see our Redeemer!

Prayer: Dear Lord, we pray for guidance and strength as sometimes we struggle to keep our faith strong, we lose the conviction that we will see our Redeemer. Renew our belief and help us fulfil Your mission in the world to make disciples, Amen.

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AN EMPTY TOMB

Luke 24: 1-12 Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Luke 24:1-5

Imagine the women’s surprise when they come to the tomb with their spices to anoint the body of Jesus and they discover an empty tomb. Were they confused? Did they demand clarity? Experience tells us that death wins. The Easter message says that Jesus lives. The claim that the tomb could not hold Jesus, and the idea that the one who died by crucifixion has now risen is so outrageous that it might make you wonder whether it might—just might—be true. The message was so outrageous that Peter had to go and take a look for himself and finding the empty tomb with nothing but the strips of linen left as evidence that Jesus was once there and he had to believe it was true. The Lenten season is a holy journey with God. The resurrection of Jesus gives us a blessed gift that makes our lives more compelling. He died for us. It is only by putting our faith and hope in Christ that we are saved.

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. May we always trust in Your patient love as we strive every day to do better in our daily walk with you. In Jesus Name, Amen.

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NOTES:



A digital version of
this devotional guide
may be found on the
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