

St. Paul Lenten Devotional

2020



Grace and Peace,

Our Spiritual Formation team invited me to offer an introduction to this reprinting of a previous Lenten Devotional, as we begin this Lenten journey together, with some basic reminders about Lent. It begins with Ash Wednesday, which occurs forty days before Easter, not including six Sundays (which are considered feast days). The number 40 recalls the Israelites' forty years in the desert and Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. Lent is an opportunity to go deep into our hearts and the souls of our communities, and to recognize the depth of our estrangement from God. In practicing the disciplines of Lent, such as self-examination and repentance, we seek to put things right.

On Ash Wednesday, we begin with self examination through the Ten Commandments and these questions:

Having no other gods.	<i>Do I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength?</i>
Making no idols.	<i>Do I put possessions, career, family, reputation, or health ahead of God? Do I treat money and power as gifts or gods?</i>
Revering God's name.	<i>Do all my words and actions glorify God?</i>
Keeping the Sabbath.	<i>Do I let work take over my life? Do I find my identity in work or in being God's child? Do I set aside a full day each week to rest?</i>
Honoring parents.	<i>Do my parents know I value and respect them? Do my children?</i>
Respecting life.	<i>How do I respond when I am humiliated, insulted, or treated unfairly? Am I quick to forgive, or do I hold grudges and seek revenge? Do I let my anger get the better of me?</i>
Respecting marriage!	<i>Do I support and affirm the relationships of others?</i>
Respecting property.	<i>Am I greedy? Do I have things that rightly belong to others? Am I a generous giver?</i>
Respecting truth.	<i>Do I gossip? Do I keep my promises? Do I exaggerate to impress? Do I face the truth about myself? Do I share my true self with others?</i>
Curtailling desire.	<i>Am I jealous? Am I thankful? Am I content with what God has given me? Is the grass always greener on the other side?</i>

Whenever I have opened my life up to Jesus, he has always surprised me with something incredible. May it be so for all of us as we journey toward the new life that is coming this Easter.

Grace and Peace,
Darren

***In memory of Rodney Beck, Rev. Merrill Challman, Rev. Billy Cox,
Sam Foster, and Louanne Oliver, St. Paul members whose words
of wisdom remain with us in these pages.***

February 26 - Ash Wednesday - Genesis 1:1-2, (3-2:3)

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Genesis 1:2

As we journey through Lent it can feel like a season of despair or gloominess. We begin on Ash Wednesday when we worship in a dimly lit sanctuary. We place ashes on our forehead to remind us of our mortality. Over the 40 days of Lent we practice more intimately prayer, fasting, and self-evaluation. We give up something - not because it would be healthy or beneficial - but so that we might get closer to God. Lent can feel like the dark days before the bright Easter morning. And in many ways it is.

Genesis 1:2 reminds us of the primordial darkness, the darkness before the joy of God's creation. Yet, even then in the darkness the Spirit of God is present. God hovers over the waters. God is near the formless emptiness. But out of that - out of nothing - God brings newness and creation. God

forms vibrant life out of the murkiness of the shadows. During Lent allow God to hover over you. Spend time in the darkness of self-reflection and self-denial. God is there. Ask God to bring life out of this season of darkness. For on Easter morning, we will celebrate the Resurrection of the one who said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12).

Prayer: O Eternal God, we find ourselves in the midst of a seemingly formless, empty, and dark season. Yet we know that you called all creation out of such an environment. We glorify you for forming the formless, providing fulfillment for the empty, and revealing light to the darkness. Heavenly God, remain present when we experience personal and communal emptiness or doubt. As you hovered over the waters, we ask for your hovering love and grace in our lives. We pray in your name, Amen.

- Rev. David Garvin

February 27 - 1 Cor. 1:25-30

Have you ever been involved in a group conversation and a "politically incorrect" topic relating to the Bible or to God comes up? Have you ever heard someone refer to Bible stories as "nice stories for little kids?" Have you ever wondered if that pop icon or fashionista wearing a necklace with a cross on it understands what that cross symbolizes? Is God truly at the core of our lives, or are we just satisfied with presenting the illusion of his presence?

We often rely solely on our work ethics, abilities, and skills to survive in this life. We create tools and technology to help us achieve more, faster. We "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps" and declare that we are masters of our own destinies. In our frantic lives we don't hear God calling us. Do we know what God's purpose is for us? Do we need God, or is he just a figment of our imaginations? We have so many questions for such an advanced society.

The knowledge that God offers is there if we surrender ourselves to him and experience a change of attitude. If we accept the purpose of God in the message of the cross and ask God for forgiveness, we will experience his grace. The cross symbolizes a simple, yet profound, message that saves. We cannot create, buy, or build our salvation. All we have to do is believe.

Prayer: God, reveal yourself to me today so that I may take steps to grow closer to you. I ask your forgiveness for my arrogance in foolishly thinking that I could control my life. Give me the humility to do your will. Help me to realize that it is only through your son's death and by your grace that I can be at peace, experience your boundless love, and have the eternal life that you have prepared for me. Amen.

- Lisa Todd

February 28 - John 3:14-18

The story of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent, found in Numbers 21:4-9, is quite an odd one. The people had sinned against God by grumbling and complaining about their circumstances (again). God sent poisonous snakes to bite the people as a judgment for their sins. The people repented and begged for Moses to intercede for them. Moses did and God told him to make a serpent replica of the serpents, the things that were torturing them, and place it high on a pole in the middle of camp. When the people were bitten, they could be saved by looking up at the symbol of their suffering.

In this passage of scripture in John, Jesus very clearly puts us in the same category as those ancient Israelites. It is our own sin that has gotten us into the mess we are in. We thought we knew better than God. We grumbled against our circumstances. We rebelliously struck out on our own and found that we were poisoned and dying from the choices we made. But God's infinite love for us reached out and provided the way of escape for us. Jesus, God's one

and only beloved son, became the symbol that is lifted up for us. He took on the image of what has been torturing us - our sin. Then he shattered the power of sin and its consequence, death, by his life, death, and resurrection.

This is the glory of Lent. We are shown so clearly and painfully our circumstances - "...yet condemnation is already the reality for everyone who refuses to believe because they reject the only Son of God." (John 3:18, The Voice Bible translation) But we are also shown the vast, overwhelming love of God: "Here's the point. God didn't send His Son into the world to judge it; instead, He is here to rescue a world headed toward certain destruction." (John 3:17, The Voice) And rescue occurs when we look upon the symbol of our suffering, the just consequence of our sin, in the cross of Jesus Christ.

- Lori Elbert

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February 29 - Psalm 51

"This anguished cry of confession from the depths of guilt finds GOD's absolution and renewal on the certain footing of grace alone."

From *Reading the Psalms with Martin Luther* ...

"**Psalm 51** is one of the foremost of the psalms of instruction. In it David truly teaches us what sin is, where it comes from, what damage it does - and how one may be freed from it. In this psalm, as nowhere else, it is clearly shown that sin is an inheritance, born in us, and that no works can help us against it, only GOD's grace and forgiveness. Through His Spirit, He creates us new again, as a new person, a new creation. Otherwise, says David, sin with its terror and despair is so mighty that it even crushes the bones, until GOD's grace comes to our comfort."

"Afterward, when by grace and the Spirit we have again become new, then we not only learn how to praise, but actually thank and praise GOD - yes, even

suffer and bear the cross. All of this David calls true sacrifice and worship. He rejects all other sacrifices that the raving saints bring."

From *The Wesley Study Bible* ...

"John Wesley was convinced that living truthfully is a mark of GOD's grace in our lives. GOD is actively at work, moving in and through the messiness of things, illuminating our lives, and prompting our desire to see what is really going on. Because we are created in GOD's image and our destiny is to be restored to the fullness of that image, we need to discern our responsibility in refusing and failing to live according to GOD's good purposes. We need to acknowledge that we are incapable of resolving things according to our own wisdom and power."

Suggested Activity: Read or sing Charles Wesley's "O For a Heart to Praise My God," #417.

- Dean Harper

March 1 - Mark 1:12-15

He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan ... Mark 1:13

the sign of jona
a voice crying to be heard
wash and change your ways

christmas star long gone
satan and jesus lock horns
duel in the desert

lost in the desert
forty days of temptation
beyond the pain-hope

- Joe Proctor

March 2 - Matthew 21:1-11

My favorite childhood memories of the church are always centered around Easter. Though I did not understand the Crucifixion and Resurrection in their entirety (I'm still working on those, actually), I understood them with the simple faith that children possess, which I now see can be a very strong thread. I believed. I wondered, too, but not in a doubting way, I don't think. I wondered in the way children wonder, with the assurance of an answer someday, when I could look into the face of Jesus and ask Him myself.

In the past year, I have made a great many new friends—dear people with kind hearts and warm hugs and ... no faith. When this started to dawn on me, when I started to realize the extent to which this group of wonderful friends I'd made lacked a spiritual belief system, I wasn't sure what to do with myself, quite frankly. I first felt sadness. And then a bit of fear. Lots of confusion. Perhaps these friends weren't the kinds of friends I needed? What if their lack of faith somehow I don't know, rubbed off on me or something?

But I don't think things are that simple, really. I don't think God led me to these people to show them my own insecurity, but to show them my strength and

faith in Christ. Here He was--Jesus Christ, King of Everybody and Everything--riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, in as humble a way as He could. And the crowd stood around and yelled and looked confused and screamed at Him and His disciples. I cannot imagine the barrage of insults and obscenities and hurtful things people must have said, driven by their own confusion and ignorance and fear. We're not so different today. The crowd isn't spread out on the road leading into Jerusalem—it's all over social media and in local pubs and sitting on your faithless friend's living room couch.

Jesus was not afraid of that. He expected it. He knew people wouldn't get it, and He rode in anyway, proud and assured and strong. He didn't decide to turn His back on anybody—the poor, the wicked, the sick, the outcast. And I don't think I can, either—not the disbelieving, not the snarky, not the mean, not the angry. They need God's love, too. They deserve it.

So I'm just gonna keep showing up and giving hugs. Maybe something will happen.

- Lauren LeBlanc

March 3 - Matthew 21:12-17

This is probably a familiar passage of scripture for many of us. Maybe we hear this story a lot because it shows us a very human side of Jesus: his anger, an emotion with which we are all too familiar.

Well, just for something different, I decided not to focus on the anger or "righteous indignation" in this story!

As I read this passage I thought about how the temple must have looked that day... cluttered with merchants and their wares, sheep wandering around, various handmade goods and foods piled on makeshift tables, chickens squawking (probably making a huge mess, not to mention the smell!). I'm guessing it was quite a cluttered mess in there.

I cannot stand messiness and clutter-just ask my family! I find it difficult to focus on anything if I'm surrounded by clutter. It distracts and completely

unnerves me. Jesus told the merchants that day, "It is written 'my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.'" I wonder if Jesus also found all this extra clutter in the temple to be a distraction and a hindrance, pulling people away from prayer and worship of the Almighty God. After all, worship was the reason they were there. Sometimes our lives are so busy and cluttered that we hardly know which direction we're going. Our minds are full of demands, complicated schedules, and worries. Let's make an effort this season to find some quiet time each day and "clean house" or clear out the things which are a distraction from our relationship with God. Such wonderful peace can come when we surrender everything to Him. He is big enough to handle everything that threatens to overwhelm us. Let's try to let go and just breathe in His Holy presence.

- Karla Temple

March 4 - Matthew 21:18-22

Labyrinth

I viewed the convolutions,
even tried the path
but lacking today's discipline,
and a senior desire to know, I
never reached the goal.

But now I wonder,
what might it be;

perhaps the walk
of medieval men
closer and safer
than that of
Crusaders;

or, as I have read, a
trek with Jesus,
to Golgotha,

that place and time
when one dies to
the old self
and real life begins,

where awareness is born
that God's love is
ours to share?

Too late now
to walk the path
but not to make it
within my heart.

- Rodney Beck, 03/10

March 5 - Matt. 21:23-27

Candy Bar Christianity

As a child, I really, really liked candy bars. The Heath toffee bars were the absolute best. My mom was a wonderful woman and a devout Catholic. She suggested giving up candy bars for Lent. When you're 7, Lent seems pretty darn long. I agreed to the candy bar abstinence but relapsed only a couple of weeks later. Initially, I kept quiet, felt like a failure, and experienced a feeling of guilt. Not eating something that was bad for me anyway wasn't **equivalent to Christ's death on the cross.**

As a grown up, I'm content to feed myself and take in more, not less, during the Lenten season. Instead of giving up, I ramp up my spiritual intake and try to get as close as I can to Jesus leading up to Easter. You can do it too. It's the equivalent of a hypoglycemic diet where you feed yourself 5-7 times a day. Connect with Jesus in the quiet of

the morning and then, periodically, several times throughout the day. Feast on the word. Talk with him before you go to sleep and review your day with him.

Get closer to him through quiet time and reflect on what he went through as the Lenten story unfolds. Candy bar Christianity will not help you understand the sacrifice Jesus made for you on the cross. **Christian nutrition, however, will help you grow in your understanding of Jesus's ultimate gift to us through his death and his resurrection. Feed yourself more during the Lenten season and get to know the son of God better than you have ever known him. After all, he died so you could live. That makes you pretty special. Think about it.**

- Chris Catt

March 6 - Matthew 21:28-31

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, 'I will not'; but later changed his mind and went. The father went to the second son and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, "The first," Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. - Matt 21:28-31

When I read these verses, my mind flashed back to my early college days and a discussion that went something like this: "How unfair it was to be a Christian all of your life and to have someone who becomes a Christian late in life and receives the same reward." The response was simple: that I was looking at it the wrong way. It took time for me to understand, and I did. The question is, where am I today, almost 40 years later, with that thought?

Easter is the time in the Church year where we recognize and celebrate the gift of grace. Grace is something we cannot earn - it is simply a gift, a gift that says God loves you no matter what! This can be a challenge for us because we want to earn that gift. Why? Because we can then feel better about ourselves and maybe even feel that, we are better than someone else is! That was my struggle in those college days.

The rest of the story as my faith has grown tells me this: While Easter is a highpoint of the Church year, we cannot stop after receiving this grace. Easter is only a beginning. To accept grace and do nothing cheapens the gift. God did not give this grace so we would love him more. He gave us the gift so we would know how to love. Love is action, and we are called to serve and help others in this journey called life. In doing so, we may make a mistake, or we may be misunderstood.

Over the years, I have become more comfortable with my humanness, the fact that I will make mistakes or be misunderstood. The fact is, I am no better than the tax collectors and prostitutes in the Gospel of Matthew. What I know today is that I have God's grace and with that grace, I can take the chance that I will make mistakes as I try to live my life acting in love.

Prayer thought: How wonderful it is that God gave us the gift of grace. Let me wake up each day celebrating that gift, ready to live the gift. Let me go to bed each night thankful that I have had the opportunity to live the gift.

- Rev. Glenn Todd

March 7 - Matthew 21:33-46

Thoughts for a Hard Winter

"If it were not for God,
Midst burdens of the day;"
Rich meaning does this thought impart
And lightens up your way.

Two friends walked in darkness,
Fear gripped them in the night,
But our God to them was faithful
Helping them in their plight.

Others touched by illness,
Both flesh and heart cast down,
Found the Great Physician near them;
To Christ let praise redound!

Others in deep sadness,
Not knowing where to turn
Lifted tired eyes to Heav'n.
They did God's love discern.

Needy ones so lonely,
Bereft of home and friends,
Found God's workers gracious,
Found grace that never ends.

"If it were not for God"
This song which many raise,
Gives to us a benediction,
And fills our hearts with praise.

- Rev. Merrill Challman

March 8 - Psalm 5

As we go through life, we have all experienced lies directed against us at some point. This could be as overt as someone who tries to deceive us by directly lying to us or one who tries to harm us by spreading lies and rumors about us to our friends, family, and/or coworkers. However, it could also be as subtle as the lies that are spread by the world and the devil or the lies that we tell ourselves. These lies may take the form of: "I don't need God. I can handle this situation on my own;" or "God used to help in Bible times, but He no longer helps people now;" or "God doesn't care what happens to people now;" or "There is no god. This all happened by chance."

In Psalm 5, the psalmist shows us an example of how our relationship with God helps us through these times of trial. Every morning the psalmist turns to God with his prayer and requests for help, and then he waits for God's answer and provision without acting rashly. We are shown that only through God's great mercy are we able to come to Him and that He will lead us in the right way of living. As the psalm comes to an end, it shows that all who trust

and love the Lord will receive God's protection from these lies. As I reflect upon this example in Psalm 5, my mind is drawn to the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Although he was arrogant as a youth, he was able to endure the hardships created by the lies and deceit of his brothers, Potiphar's wife, and others through his love and trust of God and righteous living. In the end through his faithfulness and trust in God, he receives blessing and honor for himself, his family, a nation, and ultimately God too. My request is that I may have that love and trust of God and be able to live that example on even the smallest of scale.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I pray for Your protection from the lies and deceit that can harm us and our relationship with You and others. Grant me the love and trust of You and lead me in the ways of righteous living for the glory and honor of Your name. In the name of my Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

- Bruce Elbert

March 9 - Proverbs 8:22-30

"The Lord created me {Wisdom} at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.....then I was beside God, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world" - Proverbs 8:22-30

Lent is a season of subtraction. The season begins with ashes and invites us into a time of stripping away all that distracts us from recognizing the God who dwells at our core. Reminding us that we are ashes and dust, God beckons us during Lent to consider what is elemental and essential in our lives. As a season of preparation for the mysteries of death and resurrection, it is a stark season. Yet a raw beauty permeates these days. In fire, wind, earth, and water we find the building blocks for creating anew. In Proverbs, Wisdom sings of her role in creation, of her presence as God began with the darkness and fashioned the world. She offers delight as she

beckons us, too, to create, to take what we find in the shadows of our lives and craft what never before has been seen.

I am not asking you
to take this wilderness from me, to
remove this place of starkness
where I come to know
the wilderness within me,
where I learn to call the names of the ravenous beasts
that pace inside me,
to finger the brambles that snake through my veins,
to taste thirst
that tugs at my tongue.
But send me
tough angels,
sweet wine,
strong bread: just
enough.

- Jan Richardson, *In Wisdom's Path*

March 10 - Matthew 22:23-33

The Sadducees come to Jesus in 'double-duplicity' - they neither believe in "The Resurrection" (they are 'sad-you-see') nor do they accept as authoritative any 'scripture' other than the TORAH (the first five 'Books of Moses' in the Old Testament). So they relate a story from "The Book of Tobit" (*Tobit* 3:8; 6:14, composed ca.225 BC by orthodox Jews in Egypt and found in the Old Testament Apocrypha).

Jesus' response is direct: ***"You ... know neither the Scriptures nor the power of GOD. For in the resurrection they ... are like angels in heaven. ... GOD is God, not of the dead, but of the living."***

Jesus not only believed in the resurrection, He Himself would demonstrate the reality of it after experiencing the ignominious death of crucifixion. And He certainly knew the power of GOD: ***"... the Son can do nothing on His own, but only what He sees the Father doing, ... Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever He wishes"*** (John 5:19-21).

Through your daily reading of these Lenten Devotionals you are either refreshing or increasing your knowledge of the Scriptures. Thus, you are fulfilling positively what Jesus negatively accused the Sadducees.

And, as you examine your own personal life, surely you are aware of the power of GOD. You had absolutely nothing to do with your very existence; it is a free gift of GOD through a loving act of your parents. You had absolutely nothing to do with the three things necessary for your sustenance - air, water, and food; they are gifts from GOD. Best of all, GOD loves you!

During this Lenten period may you indeed know both the Scriptures and the power of GOD in your life. He has demonstrated His power over death, and has promised you eternal life.

- Dean Harper

March 11 - Joel 2:12-14

Gratitude is underrated. Often we think of gratitude as a burden; thank you notes to write, social debts to repay, etc. Gratitude needs to be much broader than we usually think, a heightened awareness of all the ways we are supported and cared for by others. During this recent bitter cold weather we lost power for nineteen hours. As I eagerly awaited LG&E's repairmen to do their magic, I thought about all the people who serve us regardless of the weather: mail and newspaper deliverers, police officers and firefighters, garbage and recycling collectors. It was amazing to think of all the people who work in adverse conditions to serve us every day. Too often I take these things for granted. But when I do think about it, I am filled with the humble sense of my dependence on others.

Some people have difficulty asking for help because they do not want to be indebted to anyone else. We

have often admired stories of those who "pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps." Of course no one ever really succeeds alone. Despite a lack of family support or financial resources, there are always countless people in our lives who encourage, inspire, and care for us. It seems we impoverish ourselves when we attempt to claim success is all a personal achievement. We nourish ourselves with an awareness of those who have helped us.

Isn't this what God promises, that we are strengthened and enriched beyond measure when we recognize our utter dependence on Him and yield ourselves to that reality? In small ways we have opportunities every day to show God's abundant grace to others as we embrace gratitude and offer support, resources, kindness, and love to others.

- Sam Foster

March 12 - Matthew 22:41-46

Blessed are the poor in spirit, claiming nothing as their own,
But as given them by their Father, that his goodness may be shown.
Blest are they who share the sorrow of their God's unchanging love;
They shall know his presence with them, and his promised comfort prove.

Blessed are the strong but gentle, trained to serve a higher will,
Wise to know the eternal purpose which their Father shall fulfill.
Blest are they who with true passion strive to make the right prevail,
For the earth is God's possession, and his purpose will not fail.

Blest are they who show their mercy to the guilty and the poor,
For to them, set free from judgment, shall be opened heaven's door.
Blessed, the sincere and truthful, from the lie's deception free,
For the God of truth and beauty they in joy will surely see.

Blessed are the brave and peaceful, bringing peace where'er they live;
God shall own them as his children, and through them his peace will give.
All for love and truth who suffer, in your God rejoice and sing; He, the end of all your striving, he, your Father, Lord, and King.

- Norman Elliott (1967)

Submitted by Carl Helmich

March 13 - Mark 9:30-37

Lent has always been somewhat confusing to me. The teachings of Jesus leading up to his death are numerous, challenging, and sometimes just hard to understand in this life! The scripture for today has enough material to study for a year! But Jesus' instruction to the disciples that to be "first" we must be "last" and a "servant to all" really moves me. This idea is so contrary to the way our society tends to function. We usually evaluate people and aspects of our lives in terms of best/worst, strongest/weakest, richest/neediest, etc; with the desired trait being the first listed. Jesus tells us to go in the opposite direction! Not only does he say we must be last, but we are to behave as servants to ALL. He doesn't tell us to be last when we're too tired to be in charge or to behave as a servant only to our family and friends.

I think being first implies leading - like the "line leader" in preschool classes all the way to being CEO of a corporation. There is responsibility with being first. Jesus clearly was leader and Lord to the disciples. He met the responsibilities God put before him, to teach, to be a healer, to know the scriptures,

and even to rebuke when appropriate. But Jesus led with love, humility, and the heart of a servant who wants to please the master. So I do not believe Jesus means we are to hide at the end of the line or shirk leadership roles. What this instruction means to me at this time in my life is that I am to be the person God created me to be, living out whatever responsibilities and tasks are before me with love and humility for everyone I meet, and an attitude of joy in serving our Master.

This understanding is a never ending process for me, for I like clarity and control. I always loved being the line leader! Often I'm uncertain exactly where and how I'm to be used. But as we move toward the miracle of Easter, my prayer is to nurture the servant in me and to be aware of and even look for the "all" of whom Jesus spoke. And although the details aren't always clear and often change, I am certain that the example of Jesus and his love will guide and direct me to the place I need to be.

- Georgeanna Dunn

March 14 - Psalm 6

If you've ever dealt with grief or depression, the cries of this psalmist will sound familiar. I love the transparency of the psalms. The raw emotion of the heart. The honest cries of broken people fighting to trust in a God who is there, but often seems distant.

The psalmist asks to be dealt with in love, not anger, so the soul is not sent into despair. His bones are troubled. He is physically weak. Could this be an outward sign of inner soul trouble? His soul is also weary. How long, O Lord? He asks for mercy, for deliverance. Perhaps even doubting his salvation. Save me, so it will glorify you! He has no words, only tears. All of this grief is exhausting. Send a morning full of joy!

And then comes this sudden strength. Strength to fight the darkness. The confidence to believe the LORD has heard his cries and his prayers. He does not give in to the taunts of the enemy. He finds peace in the thought that it is God who triumphs, who puts his enemies to shame.

What caused this change of focus? Perhaps he came to the end of himself, to the bottom of his grief, to the emptiness, and there he found that God was still with him. That God will never leave or forsake his children. That God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. That God has won this battle. Perhaps the Lord spoke to him in his grief. Perhaps his countenance lifted because he is praying.

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." (James 5:13-16)

- Karen E. Danka

March 15 - John 4:1-42

Life's Lesson About Lent

To show our Savior
Our intentions so deep
That giving up of something valuable
We receive joy and not to weep

We may have choices
That you may want to lay aside
It is your personal stance and wish
That you decide to abide

The suffering of our Lord
You may take into account
That he died for us
Which does exultingly surmount

But you might say
That life gave you a blow
Removing your dreams
Which could have stunted your spiritual growth

In our family's case, a normal child
Was taken away
Because of oxygen deprivation
Brain damage was here to stay

For the rest of her life
She had to cope
With a world so demanding
Not understanding its wide scope

Her disability affected our lives
Trying to raise this child To the best of our ability
For three and a half decades we eagerly tried

We involved her in many activities
Emulating a normal life
Such as taking her to church
Showing joy and limiting strife

As long as we were capable
We took care of her needs
But alas we were growing older
It became more of a challenge indeed

After years of searching
We found her a place
Called "Blessed Assurance Community Services"
Through God's amazing grace

We were so grateful
For six and a half years
To this group home for the disabled
Subsiding our gravest fears

She was safe and secure
Our dream finally came true
Now we could pursue
Our interests that did accrue

However, one day the bottom fell out
We were back to square one
Our daughter was without a home again
It seems we will never be done

Yes, we had to give up
Normalcy, whose importance humans measure
But in return were given insight
Of compassion, a heavenly treasure

Life is not just a garden of roses
To that all humans attest
Something valuable was taken from us But we have
to continue to do our best

It is crucial that you give up
Something of your own accord
Not just what is taken away
Revealing how much you have faith and
love for the Lord

- Mary Vise

March 16 - Matthew 7:7-12

Today's passage of scripture is perhaps one that practically all people understand and seem to embrace. It tends to have a "universal ring" to it! It ends with what many refer to as the Golden Rule - to treat and do unto others as you would have others treat you and do unto you. This may seem to be an easy proposition. However, what happens in my heart and mind and action(s) when I find myself in some kind of difficult or seemingly offensive situation? Then it becomes hard! An example of this may be when someone intentionally or unintentionally offends me or mistreats me. My first reaction may be to lash out and reply in kind because I feel hurt and offended. It is in these situations where it is most important for me to step back and take a moment to realize that anger and retaliation are destructive forces, and kindness and love are always constructive and conducive to making any situation better, even one that may have started out as destructive. And, maybe

the other person really didn't mean to offend or mistreat me in any way. Many times there are misunderstandings that are totally made better by responding with love and kindness. I am allowing God's love to come through me when I practice the "golden rule" not only when it is easy but also and most especially when it may seem very hard to do so! A second iteration of the golden rule would suggest also that I would want someone to give me the benefit of the doubt and respond with love if I had unintentionally offended or mistreated them!

My prayer today is to allow Him to work through me by being kind and loving to everyone whether or not they have been kind and loving to me. I also need to remember to "ask" and "seek" and "knock." God and His help are always there for you and me. Amen.

- Walt Welder

March 17 - John 9:1-4

That last sentence, "Night comes when no one can work," fills me at first with dread. I read it like night is "The End," death, judgment, apocalypse. "Go spread the gospel before it is too late. If you don't, you'll be sorry," I hear Jesus say. This says more about how I was raised than it does a Lenten journey to The Kingdom of God. The disciples want to know who's to blame for this blind man's condition. Before Jesus tells them that night is coming, he tells them that the man's condition isn't a matter of blame or sin. The man is blind so that Jesus can display "the works of God in him," not to find fault with his actions or history. Later, we get to see the down and dirty-spit-based mud-miracle of Jesus loving this man into wholeness. Everybody else, by the way, has a lot of trouble with this man's healing. But we get to see the crudely real connection that our Rabbi creates with this man and the love that heals him.

And then, a Lenten hope comes in the message about the night. Jesus offers hope for blindness of all kinds, even the sort that has the disciples unable to see this sightless fellow as one whom God covers

with that crazy, Kingdom-of-Heaven sort of love. They are benighted by such blindness, as we all are, from time to time.

I begin to see the "night" as those times of my own blindness. Maybe they are doubting nights, scared nights, or lonely nights, when I blame and resent and nurture my pains and fears. I cannot love like Jesus does when I embrace such a night. And it can be night at any time of the day for any of us. We have to turn the world over on its head to love like Jesus does. It seems more natural to blame in an effort to prove that because someone else is bad that I am good. Christians blaming? Yep. After all, we are disciples.

Lent teaches us that night is all around, so we struggle to carry a light. It might be a small, feeble light, but it shares in the splendor of Resurrection Day. We can too.

- Mark Johnson

March 18 - John 9:1-4

"Night is coming, when no one can work."

A man enters church for the late service. He looks about fifty, plus or minus: stylish suit, not the newest but it's well cut, like his distinguished hair. His shoes have a high polish, and his tie is perfect, unique but not too colorful. He sits in the same place that he has done since he was a young man, just starting his family. The kids came up here and are now grown, on the success path.

His wife came earlier for Sunday School, but he'll meet her here. She knows where he will be. Everyone does. He's dependable, solid, has done well for himself. He pays his bills. He gives what he needs to. He is a pillar.

He is also dead. What he does here is what he learned to do, like the blind man in John 9:1, who learned to go beg for his bread. The guy in the suit

would think you crazy if you told him that he needed to let Jesus rub some spit-based mud on his eyes and go wash them in the pool of Siloam. He might have even seen the pool of Siloam once, while he was on vacation.

Rabbi, how can we save this man who has committed no sins? His parents didn't either, yet he has a heart of stone, a habit rather than a faith. Church is where he goes because he has always gone. It's just church, what you do to get along. He sits where he can hear the message. But it's not for him. It's for sinners, those outside the church.

Alive yet stone—beautiful, cold. A whited sepulcher.

Rabbi, the night is coming when no one can work. Can he be saved from his success?

- Mark Johnson

March 19 - Matthew 25:31-46

In today's passage, Jesus praises the faithful, stating "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." These faithful ones don't understand because they can't recall taking care of Jesus in this way. Jesus' response is, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

These verses are usually read to encourage us to take care of the people we encounter each day - to feed people, visit people, and clothe people - and

to do so impartially. Perhaps the bigger point Jesus is making is not just to take care of people, but to see them as children of God; to see the reason to offer care. Just as a parent is blessed when someone cares for their children, we show our love and devotion of God when we care for God's creation and the people in it.

Prayer: Holy God, guide me as I go through each day, seeing your light in every person that I meet. Inspire me to care for all people just as I would care for my family and for you. Amen.

- Rev. Katrina Paxson

March 20 - Isaiah 58:9b-14

When I was in high school, our youth group had a 24-hour fast. We gathered for a lock-in at the church, during which we consumed only juice. We stayed up most of the night and complained about being hungry. We broke the fast with a feast of ... lentil soup and tasteless bread. We were not impressed. Perhaps in Biblical times, youth considered lentil soup quite the repast, but as a bunch of teenagers in the 20th century, we wanted pizza as our reward. The meaning behind the fast was pretty much lost on us.

The NIV translation of the Bible entitles Chapter 58 of Isaiah, "True Fasting." As with my youth group, we often equate fasting with foregoing food for some period of time. During Lent, we often give up some daily indulgence - coffee, chocolate, ice cream - as a practice in sacrifice, a reminder of the sacrifice Jesus made for us.

Fasting, in its broader sense, is an act of self-denial or repentance for sin. While we might consider fasting as giving something up, Isaiah challenges us to view fasting from another perspective. We

are challenged to be social change agents, acting in solidarity with the oppressed, feeding the hungry, and refraining from malicious words and accusations. How is that an act of self-denial or repentance? We are called upon to put aside our own needs, desires, and preferences in order to see and respond to the needs of others. Isaiah assures us that our efforts to set aside our own desires and champion social justice will be rewarded, not because we will win a favored place with God (pizza!), but because by serving the needs of others, our own spirits will be fulfilled (mmm ... nourishing soup).

How might you act in defense of the oppressed? Are there opportunities in your daily life?

How will the pursuit of social justice require an act of self-denial in your life?

What will be the rewards?

- Sara Ferebee

March 21 - Isaiah 58:1-9a

"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" (v. 3)

There are many types of fasting, but spiritual fasting often involves abstaining from food while focusing on prayer. Fasting was an expected discipline in both the Old and New Testament eras. For example, Moses fasted at least two recorded forty-day periods. Jesus fasted 40 days and reminded His followers to fast; "when you fast," not if you fast. But is fasting always a good thing?

In response to their question, Isaiah said, "Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high" (v. 4). Meaning, their true faith had degenerated into empty religious rituals. True worship is addressing sin in our hearts and showing genuine compassion for the poor. Isaiah continued, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice" (v. 6).

God wants our service to go beyond our own personal growth to acts of kindness. "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house" (v. 7).

That being said, fasting can be a powerful tool to strengthen your faith, if your intent is pure. Jen Hatmaker, author of ***7: An Experimental Mutany Against Excess***, wrote a book about fasting. She took seven months, identified seven areas of excess and made seven simple choices to fight back against materialism. She tackled food the first month. Hatmaker said, "Fasting offers a major reduction of the endless possibilities that accompany each meal. The discomfort and inconvenience creates space for the Holy Spirit to move." She prayed, "Jesus, may there be less of me and my junk, and more of you and your kingdom."

When your life and heart get too crowded, there is not enough room for God. Make room for Him today. He is waiting. Only God knows the intent of your heart. "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am" (v. 9).

- Sally McMahon

March 22 - Luke 9:24-25

I love my life. By my way of thinking, I am blessed way beyond what I deserve. I have parents with relatively good health, I have kids who mostly make good choices, and I have a husband whom I truly love and trust and consider my best friend. I appreciate my great friends, I'm thankful for my church home; I wake up pretty confident that my days will follow a pretty predictable path. I really love my life! Actually, most of my daily prayers are about preserving it. I pray for the health and the good choices and love and trust, and I pray prayers of thankfulness and hope of a future pretty much along the lines of what I already have.

And now I'm reading this verse about "those who want to save their life will lose it." This scares me. I don't want to think about loss of what I love. I don't want to think of making a choice that will make the best things of my life something other than what they are right now. This is really hard for me!

I've heard people use the analogy of faith journeys and following a Christian path or being a "Work in Progress," and by anyone's measure I'm nowhere near where this passage urges me to be. Don't get me wrong, I WANT to be a good Christian. I want to follow God's will for my life and I want to put Him first in all things. What worries me is that I'm not very good at self-denial. It's really hard to think in terms of eternity and salvation when I'm craving sunshine and pizza.

When I was a kid growing up, our church would occasionally have visiting preachers come in and get us all worked up, pointing out the obvious advantages of following Christ instead of the devil. After he finished scaring us straight, there would be soft music and gentle ministers waiting for us at the pulpit ready to hear our profession of faith and to reassure us of our Christian-ness. Then we would go on our way, arrogantly assured of our forever with Christ.

I've just realized that I've been treating my salvation with a sort of entitled negligence. I'm not really working for it, I'm just assuming that it will be there when I'm ready for it because someone told me that all I have to do is just believe.

It's very possible that I'm interpreting this passage completely wrong, but what I'm getting out of it is something like this: This world is temporary and this stuff isn't mine to keep anyhow. Live my life for Christ, not for the temporary stuff of this world.

I know I have a lot of room for improvement, and that shifting my priorities is a life long thing. The good thing is, I'm thinking about it now. Simple things like writing these paragraphs are making me think in a slightly different way. I think maybe I just took another step on my own faith journey!

-Michelle Morris

March 23 - Isaiah 52:13-53:12

The prophet Isaiah originally addressed this beautiful but disturbing poem to the exiled Jews in Babylon, offering hope to their nation, personified as God's (suffering) servant. Many Jews today see this passage as predicting their experience over the centuries since then.

Christians have long interpreted Isaiah 53 as a prophecy of Jesus, who suffered and died for our salvation. The apostle Peter puts it this way: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 2:24-25).

The author of Hebrews writes, "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before

us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart" (Heb. 12:1-3).

Jesus' sacrifice brings forgiveness of sins and new life to all who truly repent and come to God through him. On Good Friday, God in Christ cleared the way for us to reset our relationship to our Creator, not just once but every day. As believers we are not spared suffering, but we gladly follow Jesus where he leads. It is because we realize, when we survey the wondrous cross, that "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

- Carl Helmich

March 24 - Ezekiel 18:21-28

Some twenty thousand Jews were exiled in Babylon for more than fifty years during the sixth century B.C. The prophet Ezekiel lived among them there. The younger generation liked to quote this proverb: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Ezekiel warned them not to say this, because they were no better than their parents. Even if their parents' sins had brought about the exile, they, the children, were not without sin. They were responsible for their own misdeeds: disobedience to God's law, crimes against fellow citizens, and neglect of their duty to God and neighbor.

Ezekiel speaks out against the doctrine that God punishes children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generations (Exod. 20:5). Certainly people's bad examples, misdeeds, and negligence can adversely affect their extended family, as well as their community and nation. But God judges each

generation on what they themselves do, not on what their forebears did or failed to do. (Jeremiah agrees; see Jer. 31:27-34.)

Ezekiel's warning comes with an appeal from God: "Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live" (Ezek. 18:31-32).

God promises: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). In all these verses, God is speaking to us today.

- Carl Helmich

March 25 - Deuteronomy 26:16-19

These four verses are the "Concluding Exhortation" that Moses delivers to GOD's covenantal people, all Israel, having reaffirmed His statutes and ordinances for their life in the promised land - **a land flowing with milk and honey (Deuteronomy 26:15)**. But who are these people? They are not those who suffered the bondage in Egypt; they have all died: **"Not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb ... and Joshua ...," says the LORD (Numbers 14:28,30)**. Thus, Moses must say, **"The LORD our GOD made a covenant with us ... Not with our ancestors, ... but with us, who are all of us here alive today (Deuteronomy 5:2-3)."**

If you were baptized as an infant, your parents and the witnessing congregation made a covenant with GOD that they would "nurture you and one another in the Christian faith and life." Later in life you were asked to "take these vows for yourselves" as the act of confirmation. If you were baptized as an adult, you made that "public profession of faith at the font."

So, today - this Lenten Season - you personally have obtained the LORD's agreement: to be your GOD; and you have entered into a covenant with Him for you to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, and His ordinances, and to obey Him.

And you have the most beneficial blessing possible: you have confessed/confirmed that Jesus the Christ, GOD's Messiah to Israel, the Anointed One, is your personal Savior. As a repentant Christian, all of your sins, your inability to completely obey Him, have been forgiven. **"Today the LORD has obtained your agreement: to be His treasured person, ... for you to be a person holy to the LORD your GOD."**

- Dean Harper

March 26 - Matthew 5:43-48

Yes, it is easy to love those that we sit with in church; we all think the same Christian way and I believe my fellow church members love me as I do them. Matt. 5:48 says, "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

A couple days ago, while standing in the check out lane at my local food store, I heard the checker and bagger talking, and I figured from their conversation they had not accepted Christ as their savior, so I tried my best to love these people as completely as God loves us. I know I'm not perfect yet, but I'm working on my spiritual development. I must keep striving to be more Christ-like.

Special to me. I have this quotation in my bedroom; it is from one of the books from the Mitford series by Jan Karon. It says,

"Father, make me a blessing to someone today, through Christ our Lord, Amen."

- Father Tim

I feel this fits in with Matt. 5:43-48. My hope is you find this special also.

- Louanne Oliver

March 27 - Hosea 6:1-6

Hosea's appeal for repentance is directed toward the Divided Kingdom. For in 931 BC GOD's chosen people, twelve tribes in all, are divided. In the south the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remain loyal to their king, Rehoboam, while the other ten 'tribes of the north' appoint Jeroboam as their king. The former two remain somewhat faithful to GOD, but the latter ten become idolatrous.

Some 200 years later the people of that northern part of the broken kingdom "have not been willing to put away their idols or forget their pagan Baal. If there is anything that especially affronts GOD, it must surely be the sight of men and women (who He has created) bowing in worship to sticks and stones (which He also created and which, therefore, have no intrinsic power). This is especially true because GOD has repeatedly and patiently demonstrated His concern, love, and protection to each generation of this nation to whom He has specially chosen to reveal Himself."¹

Hosea pleads, "Come, let us return to the LORD; ... He who has torn ... will heal; He who has struck down ... will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him." "Having spoken of the return from exile as a metaphorical resurrection from the dead, Hosea calls for pressing on to know the Lord."² On two separate occasions Jesus quoted Ö Hosea 6:6.

In Matthew 9:13, '... learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not [animal] sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' And in Matthew 12:7, '... if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice", you would not have condemned the guiltless."³ May we, too, learn what this means, and not be idolatrous.

- Dean Harper

¹F. LaGard Smith, *The Narrated Bible* (1984) Harvest House, p.758.

²Chapell, Ed., *Gospel Transformation Bible* (2013) Crossway, p.1152.

³Hindson & Dobson, Eds., *The Knowing Jesus Study Bible* (1999), Zondervan, p.1159a.

March 28 - Isaiah 49:8-16a

The Mirror of Lent

I do not like mirrors. I have mastered the art of looking at myself in pieces in the mirror so I can avoid seeing the things I don't want to face. I can fix my hair without acknowledging the gray that is more and more prevalent. I can do my make-up without noticing the encroaching -- umm, laugh lines. Mirrors can be painful because they continually tell us the truth if we have the eyes to see it.

But then there are those times when I sit in front of a mirror, but someone else is holding the brush and the make-up. I am often astonished by the beauty I see in my own reflection when someone else is doing the presenting. My self-perceived faults are minimized while my strengths are showcased to reveal beauties I all too often deny in myself.

Lent is a mirror. But it is not the everyday mirror that seems to point out all my faults; it is that special event mirror that reveals my true self I often miss. Laurence Hull Stookey states the celebration of Lent brings us to the mirror of Christ's love where we see, "who we are by nature, who we are by God's purpose and redeeming actions, and what we can become by divine grace." The truth of our situation is that we are all sinners, not a popular assertion these days.

Not one of us can live a righteous enough life to be made right with God on our own merits, we all fall short of what God created us to be. BUT God intended that we would be part of his family; our loving Heavenly Father intends that we rise to be what we were created to be. BUT God knows we cannot do it on our own so Christ Jesus made the way for us to be reconciled to God by dying in our place and shattering the bonds of sin and death in our lives.

In the ancient Church all new converts were baptized at Easter after undergoing an intensive time of confirmation. The whole Church would help them prepare by preparing themselves through self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, and a renewed commitment to study the scriptures. These practices became our season of Lent. These practices are the mirrors God uses to reveal our true selves. Sometimes they show us our faults, our short-comings, our sin. They always stand ready to reveal our true, real beauty that comes from Christ as beloved children of God.

Come to the mirror of Lent. Gaze long into its surface and see who you truly are; see who God has created and is calling you to be.

- Lori Elbert

March 29 - John 11:1-45

Jesus had been teaching at the Temple when he narrowly escaped being stoned to death by his opponents, so he retreated across the Jordan River. While there, he received word from his friends, Mary and Martha of Bethany, that their brother, Lazarus, was terminally ill. Jesus waited two days, then asked his disciples to go with him. He knew he was risking his life to go near Jerusalem, but saw it as his duty to go.

Lazarus had been dead for four days. Mary stayed at home with the mourners while Martha went to meet Jesus. Then Mary came with others and led him to the cave tomb where Lazarus' body was. Jesus asked the mourners to roll the stone away, then said in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus rose up and came out. Those present removed the strips of cloth that bound him, and he walked free. Many who witnessed this became believers.

God gave his Son the power to turn back the forces of death. This miracle was a sign pointing to Jesus' own death and resurrection, soon to come. So he said, "I am the resurrection and the life . . . Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (v. 26). He wished to give life not only to Lazarus but also to his followers, who may not have realized what power God his Father had given him. He prayed that the power of God might be at work in them and—through their faithfulness—at work in the world.

Death stalks us every day: the death of the body, the death of the soul. But we can face death down by living in the light of Christ, who guides us on earth and assures us of eternal life in God's presence hereafter.

- Carl Helmich

March 30 - John 8:21-31

I am a mother to two small, beautiful girls, and my days are filled with all manner of little person importance: battling for custody of various Disney Princesses, carting back and forth from gymnastics lessons and swim class, soothing hurt feelings and scratched faces. (Girls do a lot of scratching, I've learned.) My girls are my heart of hearts; they mean more to me than I ever knew a person could ask for. But they are demanding, and their constant need of my attention and service requires vast reserves of patience.

When I read John 8:21-31 (well, when I read many of the Gospels, actually), this is what strikes me, too—Jesus had to have such patience. I know that may sound like the understatement of the year, but even He reminds us that He descended from Heaven to become a man, a human being, and to take on all our little idiosyncrasies and characteristics. He wanted to be one of us, even though he would be set so apart and be so fundamentally different the entire time.

Jesus knew SO MUCH. He knew everything there was to know about God and man and the beginning of the world and where this world will end up. And yet, here he sat in the temple courts, patiently explaining to the curious people around him, “Yes, I am the Son of God. Yep. The actual guy. No, I am not a false prophet. Yes, if you want to meet God someday, you have to go through me. Yeah, it is the only way, actually.” If he was feeling particularly human that day, I cannot imagine how frustrating that must have been. He knew that many of them would not be able understand, no matter how hard they'd try.

I don't mean to make any comparisons between myself and Jesus— I know better than that. But in those moments, the hard parenting moments when I feel the years slipping even as the days are dragging, it is such a comfort to know that the patience I am given is a gift even God himself had to make use of, too.

- Lauren LeBlanc

March 31 - John 8:31-42

“You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”

In this passage from John, Jesus finds himself teaching in the temple surrounded by hostile questioners. Even those who profess to believe in him do not understand his teaching or who he really is. They are trapped by their Jewish traditions and beliefs and fearful that Jesus' teachings will rob them of their sense of righteousness as descendants of Abraham. As Jesus speaks of truth and freedom, they cling to what they know and are even prepared to kill to preserve it. They have become enslaved to their own judgments and false identities without even recognizing their blindness and bondage. Though John portrays the Jews as the villains in this Gospel story, it is clear that they represent humanity in general.

The truth is very hard to bear—the truth that I fear those with different ideas from mine who challenge

my assumptions; the truth that I cherish the things that make me feel superior to others; the truth that I am blind to my own faults and easily judge the faults of others; the truth that I cannot love as Jesus loves. What is this freedom of which Jesus speaks? How can I be truly free from my prejudices and fears so that I can love others who are different from me? As Jesus demonstrates, it is only from a place of humility that I am freed from hard-heartedness and self-interest. Jesus says, “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him” (8:28-29). God's freedom is not independence. It is the opposite: complete dependence and surrender to God. Thanks be to God for the Truth that makes us free.

- Cullen Hornaday

April 1 - John 8:51-59

Grown Men Do Cry

Simon Peter, "...burst into tears." Mark 14:72

Tears are more than a saline solution for washing out our eyes. At any given moment, our tears can reveal who we really are. They did for Simon. Simon's tears revealed his excruciating feelings of guilt. He had just betrayed his dearest friend, Jesus. Grown men do cry!

A grown man crying may sound absurd. Simon Peter, the rough and tumble fisherman cried. He betrayed his closest friend. Then collapsed emotionally, and cried a river of tears.

Allison Aubrey, a correspondent for NPR, has said, "Tears are universal." We all know what it is to cry. Aubrey further says, "Tears let our intimates in." The veneer is gone. People get to know us for who we really are, often weak, fragile human beings, still searching for a life with meaning and purpose.

"Jane Daly, an actress and acting instructor, points

to Tom Hanks' performance in the movie Saving Private Ryan in which he played a World War II Captain. She recalls the crying scene, and says, 'It just brings you to your knees.' " Tears are often the miracle medicine for change.

Grown men do cry. The right kind of tears are not the end, they are often the very beginning of something new, wonderful, and exciting. After the resurrection, Jesus sent for Peter, rebuked him and the disciples for their unbelief, then sent them out to change the world. And did they ever! From unbelief and tears to a life of love and service. What change! What power!

Our tears are not a sign of weakness. They may reveal an inner strength we never knew we had. Simon got his act together. His life changed. He then set out to become a fisher of men. So can you. So can anyone.

- Rev. Billy Cox

April 2 - John 12:20-24

As Jesus faced events preceding his "rigged" trial and execution, he was advised by Philip and Andrew that certain non-Jews had voiced an interest in him and wanted to see him. Scholars assure us there was a new wave of interest abroad. Certain members of the Sanhedrin took notice. It was as if they were saying, "Hey, this is getting serious. Something needs to be done about our Jesus problem!"

Whether Jesus responded to these "non-Jews," we are not told. Approachable as Jesus was, it would not be surprising if he later set up a time for a small group meeting. What it seems like is that the disciples and their message triggered in Jesus something he felt he needed to do. "People need to know more about me and about my mission. The disciples need to be cued-in to what is coming around the bend."

Jesus himself knew of the events leading to his "glorification." He spoke to his friends the mini-

parable about the grain of wheat dying in the ground, yes, but only to bring about a greater result. He wants his followers to know that the mission they had with him was about to call for his own death. In the scripture portion following this in John 12, we find him revealing to them even the mode of his execution; "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself." Martyrdom? Yes, in part that is what it would be. It was also glorification, something requiring sacrifice, something showing the quality of his love, something which enables us to call him Messiah and Savior.

Prayer: Lord God, help us to appreciate your Word more than we do now. We, too, "would see Jesus." We call ourselves Christians, but do we, in speech and in action, live so that people can see Jesus in us? Help us to remember the principle of sacrifice. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Rev. Merrill Challman

April 3 - Isaiah 55:10-11

God's Will is that all people come to know His love. Isaiah says that will be accomplished, but do we hold any responsibility? God has a plan for the world, but He also has a plan for each one of us. Our job is to spread His love. If we refuse to complete our assignment, God will find someone else to do so. He will go to His "Plan B." Does that take the pressure off us? It sounds like it might.

But, there is a down side. If God wants us, as individuals, to accomplish something, and we let it go undone, something and or someone loses. At these times, there are three who suffer: first is God, who is disappointed that His Will is not our priority; second is the target of that mission, the person or group who will not see God's love at this time; the third is ourselves. If we are not listening or doing our part, we are not receiving all of the blessings God has in store for us.

God has a personal plan for each of us (Jeremiah 29:11-13). His Will is not something we need to figure out for the future. It is not the plan for when we grow up, our children graduate, or we retire. Any time we come in contact with another person, there is the potential to spread God's love. It is God's will that we respond each time. What will we do when we see a homeless person along the road, a teenager sitting alone crying, a friend ill or a family member dying, the latest piece of gossip making the rounds at work, the church collecting for Bears on Patrol, or a family suffering because they have no heat? Are we going to show God's love by reaching out, or are we going to force God to use His "Plan B"?

Remember, God did not use his "Plan B" when He sent His Son to die for us.

- Janelle Frazee

April 4 - Psalm 143

O Lord God, I need your help. Graciously hear my prayer. You are righteous; do what is right for me. But do not put me on trial, for I, like all humans, am a sinner and deserve your condemnation. The evil one has put me into a prison. I am distressed and depressed. I remember how you delivered Israel from Egypt and gave the people water in the desert. I reach out to you. I thirst for you. Let me be aware of your presence in my life, or I shall die. Enable me to face each new day, mindful of your faithful love. I trust you and offer up my soul to you. Teach me the right way to go and the right things to do.

Save me, Lord, from all who would tempt and test me beyond my endurance. I feel safe when I am in your presence. Teach me to do what pleases you, for you are my God. Let your spirit lead me. You are

known as the protector of all who trust in you. O Lord, preserve my life and bring me out of trouble. Grant me justice tempered with compassion, and keep my enemies at bay. Indeed, destroy your enemies and mine, for I wish to serve you alone.

O God, answer my prayer as may seem best to you. Lead me, teach me, save me, and give me strength. Let your will be done through me, as one of many who seek to serve you. I thank you for your steadfast love. Have mercy on me and bring me out of all my troubles for your name's sake, and for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ my Savior, who died that I might live. Amen.

- Carl Helmich

April 5 - Palm Sunday - Phil. 2:6-11

Palm Sunday is the 'beginning' of the 'climax' of Jesus' earthly ministry, which 'ends' in His crucifixion. He enters Jerusalem as a peaceful King, seated on a donkey - not as a conquering warrior riding a horse. The symbolism was understood by some - most? - of the Passover Pilgrims:

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)**

And so they shouted, "Save us (**Hosanna**), O Lord!"
"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The **crowds that went ahead of Him, the whole multitude of disciples, and those that followed** were overjoyed. But Jesus knew what lay ahead for Him. As Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, **Jesus emptied Himself, ... He humbled Himself and**

became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore GOD also highly exalted Him ... so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend ... and every tongue should confess that Jesus The Christ is Lord,

Not only do **we** confess that Jesus The Christ is our Lord and Savior, but **we, too**, must be obedient **to the point of death**. How can we do this? Only because He showed us that death is not the 'end.' The eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection have written their testimony to us. John wrote **"... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life - ... these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of GOD, and through believing you may have life in His name"** (1st John 1:1; John 20:31).

- Dean Harper

April 6 - Holy Week - Mark 14:1-9

In the four accounts of the Gospel, there are three dinners at which Jesus is reclining **at the table** and **a woman** anoints His body with a **very costly ointment**. The first is recorded in **Luke 7:36-50** and is unrelated to the events of Holy Week. The second is recorded in **John 12:1-8** and occurred just **before** Palm Sunday. That one shares two details in common with our text for today: (1) it occurred in Bethany, and (2) the anointing was for the purpose of preparing Jesus' body for burial. This third one is recorded in both **Matthew (26:6-13)** and **Mark (14:1-9)**. It took place after Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.

The woman's act of anointing is looked upon by some who were there as a waste. The nard **could have been sold ... and the money given to the poor**, supporting one poor person for a year or about 300 poor people for one day. Then Jesus explained to everyone what had just taken place: **"She has done a beautiful thing to me. She poured perfume on**

My body to prepare for My burial." ^{NIV} Though her name has never been known, Jesus said, **"Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."** And so we have!

There is someone else at this dinner who deserves to be remembered. And that is Simon the Leper. Surely he was among those lepers whom Jesus healed, though that healing is not mentioned in any of the four accounts. (It is probably among the **many other signs Jesus did in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in their books** [John 20:30; 21:25]). Simon certainly no longer had a skin disease; otherwise, no one - except Jesus - would have gone to his house for any reason, let alone for a meal! Simon, too, was able to do a beautiful thing for Jesus; he invited Him into his home. Shall we?

- Dean Harper

April 7 - Holy Week - Mark 14:32-41

Having been advised to use a staff instead of a cane while on a trip West, I purchased one at a gift shop in Yosemite National Park. Before breakfast the next morning, I used it to do a prayer walk from our cabin to the restaurant. This area has no television or internet access, so peace and quiet are abundant! On this near freezing November morning, as I walked and prayed, the only sound I heard was a squirrel's feet gripping the bark of a tree as it scampered higher. Turning to watch, I observed the contrasting beauty of all sizes of evergreen trees and the leafless deciduous trees.

When in my daily life do I stop and get quiet enough to hear the tiniest sounds? How often do I appreciate the beauty that surrounds me? I thanked God that nature has a way of bringing me back to reality.

From my childhood, I recalled hearing the song, In the Garden, sung in church services. I thought of

how Jesus went to a quiet place in the garden to pray, even when he was facing death. When tragic times are happening around me, do I let them chip away at my faith, or do I turn to God and pray for help to get through those times?

The Lenten Season is a time that I am reminded to slow down. I can look at my life and realize some changes I need to make. Do I worry too much or get too busy and not take time to pray?

Does preoccupation with mundane things cause me to be unaware of who or what surrounds me? Am I unwilling to take the time to reach out to others who may just need a smile or kind word to help them continue through a rough day?

Answering questions such as these helps me stay focused on my daily walk with God. I had not expected the use of a staff to be such a blessing.

- Pat Taylor

April 8 - Holy Week - Matthew 26:14-25

Good Friday was only a few days away when an unnamed woman poured expensive perfume on Jesus' head while he was dining at the house of a friend. Jesus said, "She has prepared me for burial" (Matt. 26:6-13). The actions of the disciples during his last days were less noble. We next read that Judas went to the chief priests and offered to betray Jesus to them, for a price.

When Passover came, the disciples gathered with Jesus in an upper room for the meal. While they were eating, Jesus declared that one of them would betray him. All said, "Surely not I?" Jesus spoke to Judas, who pretended to be innocent but immediately went out into the night (John 13:30).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus predicted that they all would desert him, Peter disagreed. Yet before the night was over he had

three times denied knowing Jesus. Not only did all the disciples sleep while Jesus prayed, but when he was arrested they all ran away.

Judas, though he repented of what he had done, nevertheless took his own life in despair. Peter was bitterly remorseful, but repented and became the leader of the early church. Other disciples, especially after meeting the risen Lord, were moved to give their lives to his service, and did so.

What will we modern disciples do, after receiving his strength through word and sacrament? Surely the Lord would say to us, as he said to Peter beside the sea, "Do you love me? Feed and tend my sheep; follow me" (John 21:15-19).

- Carl Helmich

April 9 - Maundy Thursday - John 13:1-15

The dusty roads and the sandals people wore in Bible times guaranteed that your feet would need washing when you arrived as a guest for dinner. Thoughtful hosts provided water so you or a servant could wash your feet at the door.

During his Last Supper with his disciples in the upper room, Jesus suddenly stood up, took water and a towel, and began to wash their feet. By this symbolic act he welcomed them into his, and his Father's, home. He also gave them an example of how to treat their brothers and sisters in God's redeemed family. They were not to seek exalted status, but rather to serve one another. Their mission was not to have a comfortable life, but to risk their comfort, even their lives, in order to make God's saving love real to their fellow humans in God's world.

Footwashing was meant to bind the disciples together in mutual service and to prepare them for service to their neighbor. The church today does not often practice footwashing as a ritual, but its committed members do reach out to help the hungry and the homeless, befriend the friendless, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, bind up the brokenhearted, comfort those who mourn, show mercy and compassion, make peace, do and seek justice, spread the Word, listen to others, pray for all, and set a good example.

Our challenge is to let Jesus help us, then find ways to help others. As he said to Peter at the supper, he also says to us: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." That is where it all begins.

- Carl Helmich

April 10 - Good Friday - Matthew 22:34-40

Over my 40-plus years in various capacities of ministry, I have always been inspired by those who, in spite of their health, aging, and grief-type problems, continued to be conscious of, and then a witness to, the living Presence of Christ in their lives. But, this kind of a faith only is possible because it has endured the test of hope over despair, love over hate, and of faith over doubt--a hope and a love and a faith we then can experience as each of us practices the response-ability to always be present to the One who is eternally present with each of us.

One very biblical and spiritual word which I believe certainly applies to all of this quite well is the word "abide" (John 15:4-5). And abiding doesn't measure

how much you know about your religion or your Bible--that is, the rites, rituals, and routines of it; but, rather, in abiding you seek for, long for, thirst for, wait for, and then respond to a living and an abiding Presence--the Presence of God in Christ Jesus. Rev. Howard Olds used to say that if we are going to talk the talk of our faith, that we also need to walk the walk of it, too. Well, I think that Lent is certainly a time when we can even more intentionally not only talk the talk of our faith but, then, as a time when we can walk the walk of it to the cross, as well, with the living Presence of Christ--and, then, beyond!

- Rev. Ron Sauer

April 11 - Holy Saturday - Luke 24:1-12

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." v. 5

Of all passages in the Bible, this one may be the most important. It tells of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the central fact of Christian history. Jesus' resurrection is unique. Other religions have strong ethical systems, ideas about paradise and afterlife, and Holy Scriptures. Only Christianity has a God who became human, died, and was raised again. This one central belief unites all Christians, no matter how different our beliefs about lifestyle and theology.

Up to this point, the story of Jesus is easy for me to believe. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, taught in parables, had followers called disciples, made Jewish leaders angry and was crucified. Those details are in the Bible, as well as other historical documents. It is harder for me to believe that Jesus rose again on the third day. Even the disciples were skeptical that Jesus had risen from the dead (**v. 11: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."**) and that was right after it happened.

The books of the Old Testament contain many passages about the Messiah—all prophecies Jesus Christ fulfilled. For instance, the Messiah would be falsely accused (Psalm 35:11); he would be silent before his accusers (Isaiah 53:7); he would be spat upon and struck (Isaiah 50:6); he would be hated without cause (Psalm 35:19); and he would be crucified with criminals (Isaiah 53:12). The crucifixion of Jesus was foretold in Psalm 22:16-18, approximately 1,000 years before Christ was born, long before this method of execution was even practiced. The resurrection was foretold in Psalm 16:10 and Psalm 49:15.

The New Testament, specifically the four gospels, are harmonious when dealing with the resurrection. There are four truths to them: an empty tomb, angelic testimony, the witnessing of the women, and the disbelief of the apostles. The four gospels were written by different people, at different times and different locations. I used to think they copied from each other or that they were all there at the same time when all of these events occurred. I have always been a skeptic-until recently.

- Sally McMahon



April 12 - Easter Sunday

O Sons And Daughters, Let Us Sing!

O Sons And Daughters, Let Us Sing!
O sons and daughters, let us sing!
The King of heaven, the glorious King,
Over death and hell rose triumphing.

That Easter morn, at break of day,
The faithful women went their way
To seek the tomb where Jesus lay.

An angel clad in white they see,
Who sat, and spake unto the three,
"Your Lord doth go to Galilee."

That night th'apostles met in fear;
Amidst them came their Lord most dear,
And said, "My peace be on all here."

When Thomas first the tidings heard,
How they had seen the risen Lord,
He doubted the disciples' word.

"My piercèd side, O Thomas, see;
My hands, My feet, I show to thee;
Not faithless but believing be."

No longer Thomas then denied;
He saw the feet, the hands, the side;
"Thou art my Lord and God," he cried.

How blessed are they who have not
seen,
And yet whose faith has constant been;
For they eternal life shall win. Alleluia!

On this most holy day of days
Our hearts and voices, Lord, we raise
To Thee, in jubilee and praise. Alleluia!

The United Methodist Hymnal, Page 317

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As you walk through this season of Lent, we hope you will use this guide as a companion. May the Scripture readings and reflections enrich and inspire your own Lenten journey.

Thank you to all those who thoughtfully and prayerfully gave of their time to write a devotion.

The cover art is Seochan Cross by John Stuart . This piece and more may be found at <https://stushieart.com/tag/stained-glass-cross>.

Seochan (she-ock-awn) is the Celtic word for peace. The descending dove of the Holy Spirit is combined with the Christian Fish symbol for Christ. It is overlaid on a Golden triangle representing the Trinity. The Dove is surrounded by an everlasting circle which has the liturgical colors of the Church.



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