

# The 2019 Lenten Devotional of First Presbyterian Church, Durham

As Presbyterians, we believe that no one person of faith is closer to God than any other. The prayers of deacons are not heard more clearly by God. The good deeds of elders do not count for more in the divine eyes. Ordained ministers are not holier than everyone else. The traditional term for this idea comes to us from the Reformation, and it is the “Priesthood of All Believers,” meaning that the direct connection that priest enjoys with God is available to all who believe and confess Christ as lord and savior.

To the Priesthood of All Believers, let us add the Lenten Devotional of All Believers. For what you will find in this devotional is the embodiment of this Reformation belief. The inviting, challenging and faithful words of these devotions come from the breadth of the congregation, from members to friends, old to young, longtime members to brand new ones, ordained officers to the laity. I suspect that your favorite devotion will come from an unexpected quarter, for such is the way that the Holy Spirit loves to work in the world and in our hearts.

I hope and pray that this devotional will become a part of your Lenten journey – a daily moment away with God and one’s own self. Each day includes a given passage (or few) from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and then a short devotion reflecting upon it. I find that the devotional works best for me when it becomes a part of my Lenten routine, and so I urge you to make it a part of yours – first thing in the morning, over lunch, over tea with a loved one, right before bed. Lent is such a distinctive season in the life of faith, one in which we prepare for the eventuality of death and the impossible certainty of resurrection. These are big things, and we need a little time apart in contemplation.

Thank you to all of the contributors to this devotional. Special thanks to Brian Castle, who inadvertently filled in a few gaps. This is a new thing for First Pres., and there would be no devotional without the 40+ writers of it. Join me, friends, as we head to the cross together.

*John Weicher*

## March 6 – Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

### God, Our Marker

God, are you our marker? As the cross is traced on our brow when we rise from waters of baptism, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ’s own forever. It is a sign of the promise, and a guarantee of our inheritance in this life, and in the life to come (Ephesians 1: 13-14). “All newborn servants of the Crucified bear on their brow the seal of Christ who died,” we sing in Lift High the Cross.

Yet, on the other hand, today we receive on our brow a dark smudge of ashes as a symbol of our fragility and mortality. “Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust”: these words of the graveside, we hear as a gritty reminder of the brevity of life. Personally, this dark smudge of ash, bears an eerie resemblance to the skin markings my mother received to guide the radiation therapy used to treat her breast cancer. On one hand, her “tats” indicated the diseased area of her body where cancer was threatening her life. Yet on the other hand, they focused the healing rays to restore her health and to save her life; to give her new life.

God, you are marker! You mark our brow with signs of your son, Jesus, to claim and reclaim us; to laser-pinpoint the locus and focus of your healing love; and to remind us that in life, in death, and in life beyond death, we belong to you. Thanks be to God!

Marilyn Hedgpeth

## March 7

### Habakkuk 3:1-18

A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth. O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.

God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden. Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind. He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble. The eternal mountains were shattered; along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low. I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction; the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled. Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory? You brandished your naked bow, sated were the arrows at your command. Selah You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice. The sun raised high its hands; the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear. In fury you trod the earth, in anger you trampled nations. You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof. Selah You pierced with his own arrows the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter us, gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding. You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters.

I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us. Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

The “book” of the minor prophet Habakkuk is just 3 chapters long. It appears only in Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary where it appears twice: in this Lenten reading and again (Hab. 1:1-4; 2:1-4) on Oct. 6, 2019) the 17th Sunday after Pentecost.

Habakkuk lived in Judah in the last days of King Josiah (640-603 BC) and under the reign of Jehoiakim (around 609-598 BC). Babylon had conquered Judah. It was a bad time for God’s people. That sounds familiar. Too much news in our nation and the world today is bad. Habakkuk prays to God, professing his knowledge of God’s renown and his awe of God’s work. He makes five pleas. First, he pleads for revival of God’s work. Second, he asks God to do so Now. Third, he asks God to do so in God’s time, (recalling that God’s timing is God’s choice). Fourth, he asks God to make God’s work known (seen and shared). Fifth, Habakkuk asks that in God’s wrath, God remember mercy.

This last plea is a striking statement of Habakkuk’s heart/soul. Habakkuk is not appealing for God’s revenge on those hurting God’s people. He is seeking God’s action to change the troublemakers’ hearts.

Habakkuk’s prayer reminds us today that God is at work even now in those whose actions dismay, horrify and anger us and in those who are future agents of change. Can we pray as he did?

## March 8

Psalm 88: 8-12

8 You have caused my companions to shun me;  
you have made me a thing of horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

9 my eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call on you, O Lord;

I spread out my hands to you.

10 Do you work wonders for the dead?

Do the shades rise up to praise you? Selah

11 Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,  
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

12 Are your wonders known in the darkness,  
or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

My immediate response on reading this utterly despondent, miserable lament was a strange sense of relief. “The Bible is for me, too,” I thought. It’s an odd thought, but somehow finding deep wells of loneliness, rejection and anguish depicted in the Bible reminded me that my lowest days and most pitiful thoughts are well-known to God. Darkness and dejection—along with love, joy and hope—have a place in our holy scripture, because they all belong to the range of human emotion. The desolate parts of our lives are seen and known by our God. We need not, and cannot, hide this, or be ashamed of it.

Nonetheless, this is very tough stuff: “You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them.” The psalmist is in the depths of despair, and cannot be sure that God is listening, or willing to relieve this deep pain. Couldn’t Jesus have said and thought these same words? Didn’t Jesus also feel this acute and abject misery? Didn’t he wonder aloud, on the cross, why he had been forsaken?

Jesus is for me, too. He experienced the full range of human emotion so that we could learn about the Kingdom of God, and believe. And while he suffered, Jesus called out in his misery; he called out to God. The thin thread of hope contained in that call may be all we can summon on our toughest days. But if we can, like the psalmist, say, “Every day I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you”, it will be enough.

Kathy Colville

## March 9

Genesis 45:16-28 / Psalm 109:1-19 / Mark 6:13-29 / I Corinthians 8:1-13

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Liberty, Enlightenment, and Love

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” (1 Cor. 8:1)

Once, while living in another country I was at a feast and served a strange meat: dog! The Epistle raises a conflict in the Corinthian Church as to whether it was permissible to eat meat that had been previously sacrificed to pagan idols (something like eating meat previously used in a satanic ritual).

As Americans we love liberty to “do our own thing” and not be bound by outside restriction. As Presbyterians we cherish an enlightened outlook.

In Mark, Herodias, angered by the rebuke of John the Baptizer to her immorality, demanded his death. The Psalmist prayed to God for vengeance that, “May there be no one to do him a kindness...” In contrast is the loving attitude of Joseph who showed generous forgiveness to his brothers who had sold him into slavery.

Today our society is deeply divided in terms of national priorities and what is morally right. As we engage with relatives, friends, and co-workers who we may think less enlightened, we ponder our response. At one extreme is the temptation to seek retribution. But the pull of Christ and love is to seek some kind of kinship even with those with whom we disagree.

*PRAYER: Show us the way of forgiving reconciliation with those who we think are mistaken in their outlook. Help us connect even as we disagree. Amen.*

Bob Yoder

## March 10

### Psalm 91

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;  
he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his  
faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day,  
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.  
A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near  
you.

You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.  
Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place,  
no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.  
You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under  
foot.

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.  
When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and  
honor them.

With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

On my first reading of this Psalm today, I was quickly horrified. This passage makes  
promises it can't keep! My own life has been wonderfully full of good luck: health, family,  
safety, freedom. But, like all of us, I know people who have not been lucky. Plenty of people  
have made the Lord their refuge and still dashed their foot against a stone or two. Come to  
think of it, my fortunate foot has picked up a few small bruises along the way too. Does that  
mean I wasn't faithful enough? Maybe. Some of my bruises were self-inflicted. But what about  
the family who loses a child to illness or accident? The hard-working people who live in  
poverty with no access to resources? Some people who suffer terrible hardship are among the  
MOST faithful people I've known. Surely God isn't telling us they would have avoided hardship  
if they had only "made the Lord [their] refuge." Just as surely, God isn't telling me that I won't  
face hardship tomorrow.

As I read Psalm 91 again, it began to sound like a lullaby. A lullaby says to a child too  
young to understand words: "Here I am. I've got you. It's ok to fall asleep--you are held in my  
love." The lyrics could be anything; the message remains the same. "When they call to me, I  
will answer them; I will be with them in trouble," this Psalm says. It's ok to relax--you are held  
in God's love.

## March 11

### 1 Corinthians 1:1-19

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

"For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power." (1 Corinthians 1:17)

This idea of pronouncing the gospel instead of saving others is an interesting one to me. The information that this passage is conveying to me is that it is more important to know and understand the gospel than to be baptized. Paul explicitly states that the good news is to be understandable and digestible. The information must be made simple as to be understood among all peoples instead of the intellectual few. I think that this aligns with what I think is Paul's goal, spreading the Word of God. Paul also says that to fancy and fluff up the word is to lose the meaning of the power of the crucifixion. I think that this somehow aligns with Jesus's humble beginnings because making the message simple makes sure that it is not alienating. This passage is also a call to not worship lavishly, though that is a shame, considering our church's flamboyant tendencies. I think that the underlying message of this verse is that it is our mission to spread the word to as many people as possible, potentially uncomfortable as that may be.

## March 12

### 1 Corinthians 1:20-31

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

In the Beatitudes, Jesus extolled characteristics not traditionally associated with highly successful people, like meekness, mercifulness, and peacemaking. He says that those who mourn, are insulted, and are persecuted will inherit the kingdom of heaven. He flipped upside down our understanding of what a "blessed" life looks like.

In this passage, Paul reiterates how God takes the conventional wisdom of the world and turns it on its head. We humans often determine success by who has biggest house, the most powerful job, or the most followers on social media. But God challenged that notion of success by coming to us in places you would never expect to find the God of the universe. In humble places, like a stable. In places of service, like washing the feet of his followers. In places of sacrifice, like the cross. Those are the places God shows God's self to us. And in doing so, God teaches us how to show God to others: not by touting our wisdom, not by amassing wealth, not by seeking popularity and power. But in humility, service, and sacrifice for others.

Amy Dillon



## March 13

### 1 Corinthians 2:1-13

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

My father gave me a French Bible, La Bible De Jerusalem: les editions du CERF, when I joined First Presbyterian Church. It is a piece of art, this Bible, not just the phrasing, but also the case where it rests when not in use. When I read in French, I am transported back to my childhood. That's how I know early lessons sink in deep. Gardeners speak of staking a tree to help it grow well. Teachers bemoan the apples which don't fall far from the tree.

I know God from "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray dear God my soul to keep, thy love watch me through the night and wake me with the morning light" which my father recited to me nightly at bedtime. He rubbed or scratched my back, gentle and calming, as he recited those words. My father formed my beliefs as I grew up. He listened attentively. He took me seriously. He taught me how to play caroms and tennis and bridge and took me fishing with him. That might not seem godlike, but he involved me in his world through those actions, and let me know I belonged in it. He guided my choices in youth and young adulthood without threat or coercion. He always loved me unconditionally.

I married Neal, who, like my father, follows the teachings of Christ. He told me I am a gift of God, precious and unique in all the world. I am loved. From the confidence in God's love which my father and husband instilled in and modelled for me, I extend love to others. In doing so, I spread God's love in the world. That is how I attempt to pay it forward. Thanks to God!

Emily P. Kennedy de Wilkins

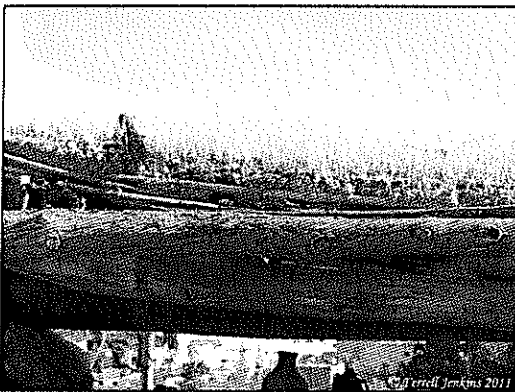
## March 14

### Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the paralytic— "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Two things struck me about this text: 1) the friends of this man must have really loved and cared about him. And 2) how can you dig a hole in the roof?

1. The Friends: One of the key ways we know God's care for us is through the care of the community... "We are God's hands." The man on the mat that was lowered through the roof of Peter's house in Capernaum was being cared for by his friends, who were desperate to get him into Jesus' presence...they couldn't get him through the crowd by way of the door, so they began breaking through the roof. It seems like this must have cause an uproar inside the house, right? Even Jesus' response was an expression of surprise and awe at their love for their friend, "when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic..." Jesus' response was not driven from his care for



the man, though he did care for the man, his response was in reaction to the faith and care of the friends of the man.

2. The hole in the roof: Thanks to Google, I found a picture of what the roof of the home that Jesus was in might have looked like:

Typical of a roof from NT times with grass growing on it. Nazareth Village. Photo by Ferrell Jenkins. From the inside of the house the



ceiling might look something like this:  
That's how they made a hole in the roof. Not really simple, but much more understandable when you see a picture.

Lenore Champion

## March 15

### 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

We all know that it is not a compliment to be called a wise guy. Most of us also believe that it is good to be called a wise woman or a wise man. Why then does Paul say, "If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God?"

He refers back to Job: "He catches the wise in their own craftiness and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end." He also looks back to Psalm 94: "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." Foolishness? Craftiness? Futile? Paul wants to remind the Corinthians that it is not enough to understand the world; it is essential to understand your place in God's world.

We must try to think of our minds as empty vessels that can be emptied, filled, emptied, and filled. We should aspire to a mind emptied of worldly thoughts and seek God's truths to fill the void. As the old hymn tells us, Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church. Christ belongs to God and God's spirit resides in each of us unless "the wisdom of this world" deceives us.

Barbara Fish

## March 16

Mark 2:23-3:6

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

1 Corinthians 4:1-7

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God. I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another.

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

Who are We to Judge?

Immigration is arguably one of the hottest topics right now in our country. In fact, it was a major campaign issue in the 2016 Presidential Election. This can be attributed to many things, but perhaps the two main factors are fear and bigotry. These dynamics can lead to misconception and judgement.

In 2017, CBS ranked Honduras as the most dangerous country in the world. The congregation my Dad was serving at the time had a partnership with a church in San Pedro Sula. About a year after it became too dangerous for the church to continue going down there, one of the host families had to flee. The father, Alejandro, was a mental health therapist who specialized in addiction. The drug cartel in Honduras had found out and started threatening he and his family. They made their way to the United States where they would try to seek asylum. This is not an anomaly. The majority of people crossing our southern border are trying to seek asylum. They are fleeing their countries because of poverty, dangerous living conditions, and fear of persecution. They aren't wanting to leave their country, but they have to for safety and/or financial reasons.

While it is against the law to enter another country illegally, should families like Alejandro's be harshly judged for wanting to have a more safe and abundant life? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. 4 I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me." Mark conveys a similar message when he writes, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." I leave you with this, who are we to judge?

John Curran

## March 17

Mark 10:1-16

He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Today's passage in Mark, Jesus engages in verbal jiu-jitsu with the Pharisees, one of the Bible's best collections of supervillains, much like fundamentalists suck the joy out of our world today (I should know—I was one for a while).

In the first half of the passage, Jesus takes a stand for the romance of God ("what he has joined together, let no one separate") as opposed the Pharisees and their love of documentation ("can we get a certificate of divorce, please"). This passage marks the first time in recorded history that men sought to use divorce as a sledgehammer to the interests of women.

The second half is much more inspiring to me. This is the famous "let the little children come to me" story, where the disciples earned a rebuke from our Lord after they tried to prevent those with children from meeting with Him. This is a defining moment for me, one that separates Jesus from other major religious leaders (I know, I know, it's not a competition). But I love that my God loves kids!

And what does He love about them? Their clear-eyed innocence. The main thing we all accomplish in life—and we do it to ourselves and to others—is destroying innocence. We do it when we don't love each other hard enough, when we pollute our minds, bodies, and the planet, and when we have loose tongues and hardened hearts, and when we judge others.

That's not what God wants for us. When we have that childlike innocence, we are free to experience the joy in each other that He created for us.

Brian Castle

## March 18

Genesis 41:46-57

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went through all the land of Egypt. During the seven plenteous years the earth produced abundantly. He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities; he stored up in every city the food from the fields around it. So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure. Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.” The second he named Ephraim, “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes.” The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end; and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do.” And since the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

For me, today’s Genesis passage is all about preparation. Joseph prepares for the famine, and I think this is telling us that we should think about preparation as well. Not preparation for a shortage, but a surplus. Soon, there will be a surplus of divine mystery and we cannot share it unless we are ready for it. Even Jesus prepares, asking for a boat to be made ready in case the crowd overwhelms him.

Today, Joseph’s story invites us to be like him, setting aside time to think and prepare for what is about to come. Jesus invites us to set aside a boat with him to use when things are overwhelming. We are invited to prepare so when the mystery comes we are ready to help others understand it as well as we do individually.

Sigfried Fullenkamp

## March 19

Psalm 34

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.

O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.

I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

O fear the Lord, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want.

The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?

Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry.

The face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.

He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken.

Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.

The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

This passage offers an almost unbelievable refuge - in our worse moments of having a crushed spirit and broken-heartedness, we have access to the infinite power of the Lord. No afflictions. No fear. Sign me up! We just have to be righteous.

Pause. What does being righteous look like in our lives? Merriam-Webster defines it as "acting in accord with divine or moral law; free from guilt or sin". As a Catholic, "free from guilt" is a foreign concept and "free from sin" seems impossible. Yet, passages 13 and 14 provide a path forward - Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. Peace is freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions, per the third definition in Merriam-Webster. This Lent, let's practice righteousness through what we say to ourselves, to others, and about others and, in our words, seek "peace" and mean it knowing God's eyes are upon us. Amen.

Jane Brown

## March 20

Mark 4:1-20

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

When we teach Godly Play in children's Sunday School, we use bits of felt, wooden figures, and symbols to share the stories of the Bible. The parables are a special set of stories, and each comes packaged in a gold box that looks valuable and old--something like a special gift. To begin, the storyteller knocks on the lid of the box and shares that parables are "sometimes hard to open."

Today's scripture is a favorite--the Parable of the Sower. In this story, Jesus invites us to consider where and how the word of God might or might not be reaching us at this time. Have the birds gobbled up God's word around us today? Is God's word falling on rocky soil and having trouble taking root in the withering sun? Is God's word being choked out by the thorniness all around us? Or is God's word falling on good soil and growing grain to share? Jesus teaches us to look on the path of faith and consider where we find ourselves.

The parables remind me that Jesus needed a method, an approach--the human strategy of a story--to try to contain and convey the complexity that is God in our lives and God at work in our world. It may not be easy for us to hear God's word. Our faith path may not feel clear or straightforward. We are called to seek understanding—to knock on the gold box that is a parable, the stories of Jesus, or the Bible. The season of Lent invites us to do just that and to contend with the mystery of Jesus on earth among us.

Kim Abels



## March 21

Mark 4:21-34

He said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

The text for today is Mark 4:21-34. These are three short parables about spiritual growth and the Kingdom of God. The first parable is about a lamp under a basket. This is not to be confused with the Matthew passage that says "You are the light of the world." In this case, the light is the ministry of Jesus, waiting to be revealed.

The second is the parable of the growing seed. It refers to how the Kingdom of God, like a seed, is sown, sprouts and grows, even as we do nothing to help it grow and do not understand how this happens.

The third is the parable of the mustard seed, where the smallest seed grows into the greatest of all shrubs. It is interesting to note that Jesus doesn't compare the Kingdom to a majestic cedar, but rather an invasive plant that will even grow where it isn't wanted. Kudzu might be a good example for us.

Jesus used these parables to teach his young disciples about how they will grow as spiritual individuals. The sometimes-mysterious nature of parables is not meant to confuse, but rather help us better understand that which is mysterious. The Kingdom of God is there, waiting to be inevitably revealed. It starts small but grows large and cannot be contained, even by those who oppose or ignore it. Jesus' message to his disciples and us is simple. "Keep sowing, because God keeps working."

Brent Curtis

## March 22

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

When Jesus and the disciples cross the sea, a great storm comes up and begins to swamp the boat as Jesus sleeps. The disciples panic and wake up Jesus, who immediately calms the storm and then questions their faith. My usual reaction to this story is to chuckle and think, "Oh, you silly disciples. Here you go again. Such little faith. Don't you understand?" But, today, I realize that I would also be chuckling at myself because I have shown little or no faith so many times.

So today is different. I would tell the disciples, "Yes, go ahead. A full-blown panic is in order. You're about to drown. And, quick, wake up your leader, Jesus, to see how he can help."

I can't blame the disciples for a certain level of anxiety when they are about to drown. However, I think we need to be mindful of the times we have lost faith, perhaps panicked, but found that in the end God was there for us and our faith was well founded. It gives me strength and comfort to remember those times that I have lost faith, perhaps because of work stress, a strained personal relationship, or a shocking event in the world, but eventually came back to trust my faith. Sometime it can even make me chuckle a bit.

Andy Henry

## March 23

Genesis 43:16-34 Psalm 43 Mark 5:1-20 1 Corinthians 7:10-24

### Mark 5:1-20

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

When I first read these verses, I found them a little depressing. They depict moments of doubt and fear, in particular fear of judgement, both from others and from God. The more I read them, however, I started to see less of the fear, and I began to see moments of hope. The line that best exemplifies the transition of fear to hope is Mark 5:19, when Jesus says to the Gerasene Demoniac, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what Mercy he has shown you." Throughout these passages, mercy is what changes fear to hope. Jesus shows mercy to the Gerasene Demoniac. Jacob shows mercy to his brothers. The psalmist shows his faith in God by asking for His mercy. And God shows us His mercy by welcoming us in whatever condition we come to Him. These verses also show us that we can best express that we are thankful for God's mercy by showing mercy to others. We are all imperfect beings, and we owe it to one another, and to God, to bring as much hope and show as much mercy as possible by sharing all the good the Lord has done for us.

## March 24

Psalm 63:1- 8

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.  
Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.  
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips  
when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;  
for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

As David cried to the Lord while he was in the wilderness surrounded by nothing much to hold onto, sometimes in life we find ourselves feeling the opposite where we are surrounded by many difficult situations that make us feel overwhelmed. On the outside life seems full and good yet on the inside we feel bare and empty. We feel as though we are drowning in the nothingness that life is sending our way.

David reminds us in this Psalm to look up to the Lord because the steadfast love of God is better than life. God's love for us is able to carry us through whatever situation we are going through. I am particularly drawn by verses 1-4 which say:

1 O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
beholding your power and glory.

3 Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.

4 So I will bless you as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

Grace Mbugua

## March 25

Exodus 7:8-24

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a wonder,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake.'" So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did as the Lord had commanded; Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes; but Aaron's staff swallowed up theirs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. Say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness." But until now you have not listened.' Thus says the Lord, "By this you shall know that I am the Lord." See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood. The fish in the river shall die, the river itself shall stink, and the Egyptians shall be unable to drink water from the Nile.'" The Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.'" Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them; as the Lord had said. Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the river.

This passage from Exodus excerpts the story of Aaron's magical rod. I remember hearing this story all the way back in Sunday School as a kid, thinking then that Moses was a pretty terrible leader, pushing off duties to his brother, Aaron.

These guys wanted to go into the Pharaoh's presence with some tricks up their sleeves, and God equipped them with a magic staff that would do all sorts of cool stuff, like turning into a snake or changing the water in the Nile River to blood. In the story, they successfully pull off these tricks, but the Pharaoh remains unmoved, since all of his dark arts guys can replicate them.

This makes me think about my life—one that's been full of doubt at times about God's sovereignty, plan for us, and most of all, His very existence. Too often, I wanted to see God pull off some sort of trick to make me believe. But that doesn't seem to be how he works in the modern world. It seems that the story of the world is the intricate interlacing of all of our stories—rich and poor, powerful and powerless—but there's only one Author. And the tricks are in the intersections and interactions, as they line up and pile up like one of those long trails of dominos.

When I pause, reflect, and let my mind free of my own ego and (supposed) intellect, I'm more able to see where, when, and how those dominos fall, and I have to laugh or cry in amazement about how it all makes sense.

Brian Castle

## March 26

### I Corinthians 7: 32-40

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry. But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancée, he will do well. So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

### Psalm 25:4

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

### I Want You to be Free from Anxieties

Paul states the words above at the beginning of the Corinthians passage. Who isn't anxious in these times! Books, courses, and websites headline: How to Combat (Overcome) (Deal with) (Beat) (Fight) (Cure) (Relieve) (Soothe) Anxiety. However, as I read on, Paul isn't discussing anxiety in general. He focuses on the anxiety of being married versus being single. He states that married people do well but are anxious about how to please a wife (or husband) and world affairs. Whereas, single people do better because they can have unhindered devotion to the Lord.

How many of us have pondered our relationship with the Lord in regards to being single or married? Does singleness bring less anxiety and more blessing and opportunity for unhindered devotion to the Lord? Does marriage bring anxiety and less time for the Lord? We can look at history and current events to demonstrate how many single and married people do not choose unhindered devotion to the Lord. We can also name both married and single people whose goal is to be devoted to the Lord.

How is this passage a lesson to us in this Lenten season? Where do we stand in our devotion to the Lord? Whether single or married, let's start where we are and pray the prayer in Psalm 25.4: Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

Marsha Butler

## March 27

John 17:20-26

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

### Thoughts and Prayers

What I come away from in this Scripture is that prayer is hard.

How many times are our prayers more about *our* will rather than God's will? I was seven years old and overheard my Mom and her friend talking and the friend described a recent trip to the store. She said "I prayed for a parking space and one opened up right out front." I remember thinking "shouldn't you aim a little higher?" But then again, I frequently prayed for April blizzards in order to avoid a math test at school the next day.

Years ago a family member was ill and I said that I was "going to pray that Kaye would get well." A cousin stopped me in my tracks when she said "but Michael, what if it is not God's plan that Kaye recover?" We often "pray in spurts" about our needs. Maybe we need to pray in quiet and sacred conversation, instead of beseeching for a "quick fix."

Lenten season can provide us time to reflect on the thoughts, the intentions, and the foundations of our prayers. Prayers may be like peeling back an onion. As we pray, as we talk with God, we learn a little more about ourselves.

A little more about faith. And a lot more about Him. Lent can be a time to expand rather than contract. A time to "do" instead of a time to "don't." Perhaps even time to "take it to the Lord in prayer."

Michael Honeycutt

## March 28

Mark 6:30-46

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered 5,000 men.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

Would there be enough?

We would get to Day 3 of our Cape Lookout sailing adventure, and all of the food that was vacuum-sealed and packed with ice, was now water-logged and inedible. There would be four of us campers on each 19-foot sailboat, with one motorboat of summer camp staff leading us through the sound, out the inlet, then into the ocean. By this point, we would all be hot, smelly, tired of each other, sunburnt, hungry and thirsty. The staff motorboat would come alongside our sailboats and throw us a bag of wet peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We all just settled for being hungry at this point of the sailing trip. But every time, without fail, a parent's motorboat would find our campsite after the day of sailing, and our hunger and thirst would be satisfied with all the junk food that you can imagine.

When I read the miracle of Feeding the Five Thousand, I think of our time on these sailing trips. We knew the food wouldn't last, and the staff had to figure out how to divvy up the few PB&Js that weren't as spoiled, just like the disciples were told to feed those who were gathered there with only five loaves and two fish.

Do we allow ourselves to look for the miracle when times seem desperate? It may not be hunger that we face. But when our resources feel depleted, or hope seems lost, or fear has its grip on us, do we allow our faith in God's provision to take over? Perhaps this Lenten season, we remember how Jesus provided physical and spiritual nourishment to so many, with seemingly so little.

Amy Wilson



## March 29

Mark 6:47-56.

When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

The disciples were stuck in the middle of the lake; it was very windy, and they weren't making any progress. Jesus saw this and walked on the water out to the boat. When he first walked out on the lake "He intended to pass them by" but when they saw him, they thought he was a ghost and they were terrified. When Jesus realized how scared the disciples were, he identified himself, jumped in the boat, calmed the people, the wind and the water and they continued on their way. They were amazed by this miracle. Once ashore, sick people came to him and touched his cloak and they were healed. Jesus performed 2 miracles in a very short time!

But I don't understand why, when he walked on water, he intended to pass them by. Did he just want to scare them so he could get their attention? He didn't need to get in their boat to get to the other shore – he could walk there. My interpretation is – I could be in a really tough spot, a rocky boat, not getting anywhere. But God is there, and I can share with God that I am afraid. God will keep me company in my sinking boat, help allay my fears and give me the strength to get to safety.

Mary-Jo Keenan

## March 30

### Psalm 110

The Lord says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool."

The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes. Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you.

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.

He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter heads over the wide earth.

He will drink from the stream by the path; therefore he will lift up his head.

Ash Wednesday is my favorite festival of the church year. I find comfort in the reminder of the smallness of my life in relation to YHWH's immensity. You are dust and unto dust you shall return.

In Psalm 110, we find ourselves far from the humility of Ash Wednesday. God is familiar; a companion, as they were to Abraham in his cycle through the borders and holy sites of the monarchial kingdom. YHWH is the sword at your right hand. The champion who leaves corpses and shattered heads behind. The divine warrior fights for you, Melchizedek. The victory will culminate, as in Canaanite mythology, by ascending to God's home at the top of the mountain to the headwaters of the rivers that give life.

Is this Sarah's song? The awakened womb. "Dew" like when you were young. Is not YHWH the giver of life?

Only recently have I begun to understand the need for household gods. When the day can turn on small details, like the lost shoe that cascades through time and space. Or the cold that upends a week. Who is watching out for you, your family? Light a votive candle to Asherah – I mean Mary – the Queen of Heaven.

We don't go to war, or rather raiding, every Spring. This isn't the Iron Age. You may still need someone to fight for you, in the day to day. Psalm 110 is a reminder in this season of humility that no situation is too humble for YHWH. They will fight for you.

Michael Schultz

## March 31

### 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 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.

What would it be like to wake up as Jesus? Not just your average, “child of God,” but THE child of God? The one who inherited his mother’s cat allergy and his Father’s capacity to love the world so much it hurts. What would be the first hint that you aren’t who you were when you went to sleep? Instead of cursing your alarm clock, would you breathe your first conscious breaths marveling at your human form? Your lungs moving oxygen and carbon dioxide in and out of your body effortlessly; even bodily pain, evidence that this vessel carrying your soul always works towards your greatest health without your asking and without needing your thanks?

What would it be like to see another person if you were Jesus? Would you tear up taking coffee from a barista because in their smile you recognize the Divine, reflected in the human need for connection, even fleeting connection with a stranger? What would it be like to look at yourself as Jesus? To look your deepest shame full in the face and speak its name, without taking that name as your own. To see the tender place in your heart that proves your inherent goodness. A birthmark, joyfully given by the Creator who made everyone in Her image.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us Jesus died so that we might see the world with his eyes. We aren’t the people we were when we fell asleep last night. Friends, let us wake up each morning searching for the first, smallest clue that God is in us, and has been with us all along.

Abi Warmack

## April 1

Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

These verses describe two of the miracles that Jesus performed. In Tyre, he responded to a mother's continuing plea to rid her small daughter of demon possession. Jesus healed the child even though she was a Gentile. He looked beyond her status as he saw the intrinsic worth of all people. In Decapolis, he restored a man's hearing and speech. Each life was made whole; one in his body, the other in her spirit. Life began anew for them.

For the last several years, I have read about mass incarceration and worked with justice-involved individuals at Orange County Correctional. I have come to realize that the emphasis in our justice system is on punishment with little forgiveness for past misdeeds. Following incarceration, these individuals continue to "pay back" society as they struggle to find jobs and housing. A belief in redemption seems to be lacking.

In contrast, the miracles of Jesus would suggest that he believed in second chances and new beginnings. To me, the power of the Easter story---a story of redemption and hope---is that growth and change should be possible for all of us.

Jane Williams

## April 2

I Corinthians 11:17-34

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. **When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?** Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

"What!"

Paul is incredulous. The Corinthians have turned the Lord's supper into just another meal, the standard kind they're used to. Those with more get more, and those with less get the rest. We hear so many stories in the Bible of banquets. The wealthy recline at their tables (so strange to think about!) and the good among them remember to leave scraps for their servants and slaves.

The new Christians in Corinth were certainly used to a particular gathering. Which is what made the Church gathering so different. In the outside world, they were divided. Here, they were one. It wasn't a rich man's table or a charity table, it was the Lord's table. And Paul can't believe they've forgotten that. (Something tells me those who were going hungry had not forgotten how it was supposed to go.) But when you're doing something radically different, it can be hard not to fall back on the old ways.

Emily Hansel

## April 3

Psalm 147:1-11

Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel.  
He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.

He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.  
Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground.  
Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre.

He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills.

He gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry.

His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

I have several Bibles that belonged to my parents, all King James versions, which contain priceless family records. I treasure them for what they symbolize to me: family. My great-great-grandfather, John Wiley Reed, is mentioned in the book *Sketches of Tennessee's Pioneer Baptist Preachers* as "one of the best and most logical reasoners on doctrinal and theological questions of any of the preachers in this...county." But theology has evolved since his day, and I'm more interested in the progressive point of view.

I'm not the only one who finds the Bible often confusing and contradictory. I know that just saying that sounds heretical to people who accept the Bible as the inerrant word of God. But I think God (whoever God is, whatever God is) is much bigger than the Bible. There are many religious groups like the Native Americans, the Buddhists, the Hindus, and others, who understand God maybe better than Christians do, and who have made a heart-connection with their Creator without ever having heard of the Judeo-Christian Bible.

What does this tell me? That the theologians and scholars of this century are right in inviting us, the seekers, to look for God in other sources such as nature. (Who can look at David Smith's bird pictures from his and Judy's trips all over the world, those exotic birds in all their variety and glory, and not believe in a loving and sometimes mischievous Creator?) Moreover, I feel closer to God when I am helping others or thanking them for helping me. I believe that God acts through human beings just like you and me to lead this world ever closer to birthing the beloved community that Jesus envisioned and prayed for, the realization of God's kingdom on earth.

Carol Wills

April 4

I Corinthians 12:12-26

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

As I read the 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26 passage, I immediately recognized similarities between the passage and the middle school youth group closing chant:

We're a group, in a chicken coop.  
One community, in total unity.  
Individuals together, like birds of a feather.  
Different talk, same walk.

This year, I am a youth advisor to the middle school youth group. Last fall, the middle schoolers made this closing chant together during the first couple of youth groups and it is the closing ritual we say together every week at the end of youth group. I think it wonderfully sums up the power of the church community and the youth group community in particular. Although we all have different talks - different personalities, different spiritual gifts, etc. - we are all walking together through this complicated thing called church. Many of the youth are at the beginning of their faith journey, the beginning of their walk with Christ. I think at this time more than any it is important to emphasize the two things the 1 Corinthians passage emphasizes - individuality and community. Each of the middle schoolers is a beloved child of God created in her image. And each middle schooler is also a youth embraced by the community of FPC. I hope that FPC, and youth group especially, can be a supportive and affirming group for middle schoolers who are navigating the beginning of their faith journey. Together, I hope the youth and the church will support each other as they strive to grow in Christian faith together.

Sarah Beaverson

## April 5

### Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

When I was a child, I loved hearing and reading the stories in the Bible. We owned several children's Bible story books and my mom would read at least one story to me and my sisters on Sunday afternoons when we were not yet able to read them on our own. As we learned to read, mom would allow us to read the stories to her. What a great joy it was!

Two of my favorite stories were of Moses and Daniel. The older I got, the more the details in their stories intrigued me. To my delight, one of the passages assigned to me for my Lenten devotion was about Moses. I knew it was time for me to read it again, perhaps aloud, and so I did. Wow!

I suspect you have read the story of Moses more than once. But when was the last time you read it and paid attention to the slightest of details? I invite you to read Moses' story, again, with fresh eyes this Lenten season. With God's help, Moses eventually acknowledges his true identity, accepts his leadership call, and achieves his purpose. Moses' life story is filled with surprises, twists and turns, ups and downs, and successes and failures. What about your life? This Lenten season, may we all look deeper into, and hear anew, the details and circumstances of our own life stories, and ask ourselves, how is God using me, my story?

Valerie McMillian



## April 6

Mark 9: 14-29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

There's nothing about the weather in this story. But if I could choose, I'd paint it gray and stormy.

Jesus returns with Peter, James and John from the Mount of Transfiguration to find the rest of the disciples surrounded by a crowd of people and arguing with some scribes. The disciples have tried and failed to cast a demon out of a boy. Jesus is furious—with everyone, it seems. Nevertheless, the boy's father approaches him. "If you can do anything..." Jesus snarls back, "'If you can do anything!' How? With such half-hearted faith!" The father begs, "I believe; help my unbelief!" It's more desperation than shaky faith, I think. This man has borne immense heartache year after year, watching helplessly while his son's body is repeatedly battered and twisted to complete exhaustion by his grievous affliction. The disciples have not been able to help. Please, Jesus, if you can do anything....

Things are still a long way from great for anyone at the story's end. Even so, despite his exasperation Jesus has come through for the desperate father and son. The boy stands unsteadily. He is better, though not exactly bursting with health. The father has reason to be cautiously hopeful.

We don't have the pristine "good news of the gospel here," but rather a gritty, unfinished version of the good news—actually the version I know best in my own life.

David Verner

## April 7

### Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

I am a little weary these days. My soul is weary from the overwhelming heaviness of the current ills swirling in our world near and far. From war-torn Syria to our own NIMBY-filled Durham, we are surrounded by conflict, distraction and oozing “-isms.” Our federal and state leadership are acting out of hate, fear and self-interests, finding ways to exclude and deny basic human rights and dignity to our Black, Latinx, Gay, Transgender and neighbors of least means. In our own progressive city, we challenge inequality and inequity, anti-immigration, and elitism. It feels that we are constantly in battle mode against the forces around us—engaged in the mighty but fragmented movements—which can leave us feeling fatigued, heartbroken, and hopeless.

In these days, we need reminders like those found in Isaiah 43:16–21. This text is seen as “a piece of war poetry that has as its context in Israel's past domination by Pharaoh's Egypt and its (then) present subjugation by the super-power Assyria. Isaiah reminds his readers that the Hebrew God was one who vanquished military violence in the past and that He would do so again. Yahweh, wrote Isaiah, ‘drew out the chariots and horses,/ the army and reinforcements together,/ and they lay there, never to rise again,/ extinguished, snuffed out like a wick.’ Isaiah dares his readers to imagine a new future of peace that he likens to streams in the parched desert.” (Journey with Jesus)

God has been and always will be with us forging new pathways. When we are weary of what has been and anxious about what is to come, we can remember that God is with us in the struggle for renewal and regeneration. God is here with us now—in this moment, this present. So, we must not feel defeated, but be alert and awake to the promise of new creation and new ways through the darkness and the ugliness.

In the midst of this troublesome time, I am learning about new tools for coping through the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course at Duke Integrative Medicine. This course offers resources for cultivating peace and energy of loving kindness for the self and all beings. I am learning to be more deeply attuned to the tragedy and the beauty of this time, in this life, in this body, with the energy of God pulsing through each of us and the Universe. The instructor teaches that mindfulness connects us to life energy or “Prana,” changes the mind and can structurally retrain the brain, creating fresh paths of messaging and response. While our minds build clear new paths, the old paths of thinking and behaving out of fear, anger, insecurity or selfishness grow over and become impassable.

This to me is God's energy alive in us, moving us forward and opening new trails for peaceful ways of being together in this world. I rediscovered Mary Oliver's poetry, a little piece of serendipity to me. Oliver paid keen attention to the present and stood in the wonder and the hopeful glimmer of God's gifts in life and creation.

“Still, what I want in my life/ is to be willing/ to be dazzled—/ to cast aside the weight of facts and maybe even/ to float a little/ bove this difficult world.” — Mary Oliver (from *The Ponds*)

Laurie Williamson

## April 8

2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

As Paul instructs the Corinthians in his second letter (known as "Two" Corinthians to some), I see this passage as a directive to walk the line between confidence and humility. All too often, followers of Christ come across as arrogant. Rather than walking through life knowing they've received the finest gift, instead they are bulls in life's china shop, acting like they've taken something of value instead.

There's a fine line here. As Paul describes the triumphal procession we live in Christ's wake, I'm taken with the imagery of the march and how it resembles the end sequence in Star Wars, where the victorious rebels receive medals from Princess Leia. Then there's the blink-and-you'll-miss-it part: "Who is sufficient for these things?" (cue Chewie bellowing to the heavens with frustration). The answer is, of course, none of us. He goes on to explain that our confidence—and competence—come from God alone, not due to our own virtue.

One of the things I love most about being a Presbyterian and being one at FPC is that more often than not, we seem to walk the line of confidence and humility correctly. I see it all the time, in those who take a hymnal to Croasdaile to brighten someone's memory of church-going and choir-singing Sundays; those who run meal trains to newly-expanded families, and especially those who greet the stranger with a smile and an invitation to lunch after the service.

I was one of those strangers not too long ago, as were most of us, and my memories of the love and humility on display here are still vivid, probably because I see this happening as a matter of routine to others.

Brian Castle

## April 9

Psalm 119:25-40

25 My soul clings to the dust;  
    revive me according to your word.  
26 When I told of my ways, you answered me;  
    teach me your statutes.  
27 Make me understand the way of your  
precepts,  
    and I will meditate on your wondrous  
works.  
28 My soul melts away for sorrow;  
    strengthen me according to your word.  
29 Put false ways far from me;  
    and graciously teach me your law.  
30 I have chosen the way of faithfulness;  
    I set your ordinances before me.  
31 I cling to your decrees, O Lord;  
    let me not be put to shame.  
32 **I run the way of your commandments,**  
    for you enlarge my understanding.

33 Teach me, O Lord, the way of your  
statutes,  
    and I will observe it to the end.  
34 Give me understanding, that I may keep  
your law  
    and observe it with my whole heart.  
35 Lead me in the path of your  
commandments,  
    for I delight in it.  
36 Turn my heart to your decrees,  
    and not to selfish gain.  
37 Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;  
    give me life in your ways.  
38 Confirm to your servant your promise,  
    which is for those who fear you.  
39 Turn away the disgrace that I dread,  
    for your ordinances are good.  
40 See, I have longed for your precepts;  
    in your righteousness give me life.

### Reflections on faith and running

It's easy to think of faith in passive terms. We are Christians. We believe in Jesus. We have a soul. But in Psalm 119 David evokes much more active language in his plea to the Lord. His soul is clinging. It's melting. Therefore, he makes a promise.

**Verse 32:** This language got me thinking, quite literally, about the parallels between running and an active faith. David begins by recognizing the state of his soul.

**Verse 25:** His soul is fighting entropy, and comes alive at your word. Any runner knows the hardest steps are the ones that get you off the couch, where it is so easy to cling to the dust.

**Verse 27:** Now off his spiritual couch, David promises to meditate on your wondrous works. This suggests a long-term commitment to the rhythm of faith. He wants God to know that, once he gets going, they will be completely in step. Running is its own meditation. Sometimes, somehow, you can actually forget that you are running.

**Verse 35:** People who don't run wonder how those who do can delight in it. Similarly, David is delighting in the discipline of following the path set forth by the Lord.

**Verse 40:** Perhaps this is the "runner's high" portion of David's plea. Give me life. The reward, both immediate and longer-term, for an active faith. What else would he ask for a soul clinging to the dust?

This Lenten season, I don't want to be content to just be a Christian. But to run to God, to truly exercise my faith. And I may also go for a jog here and there.

Will Chambliss

## April 10

Psalm 119:41-56

Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise.

Then I shall have an answer for those who taunt me, for I trust in your word.

Do not take the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in your ordinances.

I will keep your law continually, forever and ever.

I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts.

I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame;

I find my delight in your commandments, because I love them.

I revere your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.

Remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope.

This is my comfort in my distress, that your promise gives me life.

The arrogant utterly deride me, but I do not turn away from your law.

When I think of your ordinances from of old, I take comfort, O Lord.

Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, those who forsake your law.

Your statutes have been my songs wherever I make my home.

I remember your name in the night, O Lord, and keep your law.

This blessing has fallen to me, for I have kept your precepts.

I find this Psalm of David quite interesting. For the last decade, I've functioned daily as a creative professional, like several others in our congregation. Years ago, I was writing in the service of a particular creative director, and I shared that I was struggling to generate the required content for the client. He replied, "How could you? I haven't sat down to give you the guidelines." And sure enough, once we'd discussed what was driving this particular endeavor (and what wasn't), I felt free—free to create, free to relate, and free to be myself, all within the constraints of the client.

The Psalmist finds sustenance in God's law, because these precepts allow him to "walk about in freedom" and "delight in your commands" and "find comfort" in "your ancient laws." Life is hard when we go ping-ponging on a reactionary journey, filling in the tabula rasa of our birth. But when we first fill it with a framework defined by Christ, we can proactively seek peace, feed our brothers and sisters who are hungry, be just in our actions and treatment of others, and walk humbly as we do all of these things.

That's the kind of fulfillment and purpose in life that the Psalmist is speaking to us about thousands of years later. This is very much one of the more centering passages in the entire Bible—it just has to be. And just think about how much more complicated and distracting life is now. David, we know, carried a slingshot. I wonder what he would have thought of an Apple Watch.

Brian Castle

## April 11

Psalm 119:57-72

The Lord is my portion; I promise to keep your words.

I implore your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.

When I think of your ways, I turn my feet to your decrees;

I hurry and do not delay to keep your commandments.

Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget your law.

At midnight I rise to praise you, because of your righteous ordinances.

I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts.

The earth, O Lord, is full of your steadfast love; teach me your statutes.

You have dealt well with your servant, O Lord, according to your word.

Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments.

Before I was humbled I went astray, but now I keep your word.

You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.

The arrogant smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts.

Their hearts are fat and gross, but I delight in your law.

It is good for me that I was humbled, so that I might learn your statutes.

The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

“It is good for me that I was humbled, so that I might learn your statutes” (v. 71)

Fifty years into a life full of certainties: a member of an established family; principal of a successful business; fifth-generation member of a beloved church...things changed. Major changes in the economy crippled the business, the beloved church became divided and angry. Comfortable certainty was replaced with uncertainty and an awareness that unwelcome change was coming.

At this low time, I joined a small spiritual formation group. We shared our faith with each other and, as we worked through concerns and disciplines together this small community of faith carried me through. Change...sometimes painful...happened. Things that had been certainties disappeared. The essentials of a life of faith remained.

George Bernhardt

## April 12

Mark 10:32-45

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

James and John have been following him for three years now, and they still don't get it. We're more than five weeks into Lent, and we still can't grasp it. So, let's all go over this again. Jerusalem. Arrested by the leaders of his people. Death sentence. Handed over to the imperial overlords. Taunted. Tortured. Publicly executed. Then, wait for it... resurrection. That's the plan. Got it?

Nope.

James and John instead start doing what Jesus' followers always seem to be doing – them back then and us here now – figuring out who's sitting where, who gets to do what, who'll chair the task force and who gets their name on the bulletin. In their defense, and in ours, too, what Jesus is talking about is barely comprehensible. Forget about the grand miracle of resurrection for moment. The absolute misery of what's coming is hard to swallow. Compare the total abandonment with the crowds Jesus has been attracting – the size and influence the church used to have. *THEN* add that miracle back in, and wow, it's way easier to schedule meetings.

Perhaps it takes even the most faithful of folks a few years to grasp the reality of the situation. Perhaps it takes us almost seven weeks, some ashes, a parade and a nice meal to even place a pinky toe at the foot of the cross. May we all have the guts and wisdom to stand there by this time next week.

## April 13

Exodus 10:21-11:8 / Mark 10:46-52 / 2 Corinthians 4:13-18

### 2 Corinthians 4:13-18

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke" —we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, reflects on the hardships that he faced in his ministry, difficulties that would have stopped most people. But then he says, "just as we have the same spirit of faith... we also believe, and so we speak.... We do not lose heart." (2 Cor. 4:13-16) Paul's boldness and persistence in proclaiming the gospel came from his strong faith.

Moses must have had a similar strong faith when he appeared before Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelite people (Ex. 10:21-11:8). Even when Pharaoh threatened his life, Moses continued to speak the words that the Lord gave him, confronting Pharaoh with boldness.

And what about Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, who shouted loudly to get the attention of Jesus, who was passing by on the road (Mark 10:46-52)? Others told him sternly to shut up, but he would not, and his bold faith and persistence were rewarded.

We may find ourselves in situations in which we are outnumbered and opposed by those in power. Whether we are led to speak out for economic justice or social equality or political representation for those who have been neglected, or even for religion in a secular world, we will encounter strong forces that aim to threaten or silence us. But the examples of Paul and Moses and Bartimaeus, and of Jesus himself, nearing the end of his journey to Jerusalem and crucifixion, are clear: Be strong in faith, don't lose heart, and speak, and act with boldness.



## April 14 – Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

### Making Holy Week Holy

For centuries Christians have called the seven days before Easter, "Holy Week". The weeks begins on Palm Sunday when Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The drama of this week is the fundamental subject matter of the four gospels as "passion narratives with extensive introductions." Without this week there could be no Gospel of Jesus Christ at all. So it was that the earliest Christians were especially concerned to remember the events of this week. Everything in the life of Jesus—his birth, his preaching, his teaching, his healing—everything before this week, looks forward to it; and what happened in the Church after this week would have been impossible without it. This is the reason why it seems fitting to call this week holy. We call this week holy because it is the story of the way God brings to a climax His special work of reclaiming His lost creation, his whole human family in the death and resurrection of his beloved Son.

So Palm Sunday is the beginning of the week so filled with saving events that we call it "Holy Week." But those seven days will be holy—and help to make us holy—only if we participate in the events that fill them. I encourage one and all to immerse yourselves in the full panoply of our worship celebrations which make this week "holy." What a wonderful, formative experience of faith for all of us including our children to be part of our family of faith celebrating the heart of the Easter, Paschal mystery. Today we begin a wonderful week of celebrating God's grace.

Sam Miglarese

April 15

Isaiah 42:1-9

Is the Servant a nation, an individual, or both? I would hope that more often than not we try to be both at the same time. I believe the less we believe that nations can exist without individuals, or that (most) individuals can exist without nations/communities, the better off we'll be. If we hold both close and of equal unique value, then the people, in the eyes of God, will be able to fulfill their covenant more readily. Here the righteousness of the individual is tempered by the needs of all in the nation, and the righteousness of nation will be humbled by the needs of people. The blind then can see and the prisoners released from the dungeons.

Psalm 36:5-11

It is without fail that these days whenever I read a Bible passage that evokes Heaven, earth, and God's people I am reminded that God has created everything on earth for our mutual survival. That God has saved both humans and animals alike, that He has provided rivers for us to drink with delight. He has created clouds and mountains so that we may more easily imagine the majesty of heavens. I continue to grieve in anger that humans, in their arrogance, would despoil these rivers, tear down the mountains, and disrupt the climate, sky, and clouds so severely that we put all animals, plants, and humans at grave risk. There is clear retribution to be had for us to engage in this insanity, and I truly believe God calls on us with steadfast love to address this.

John 12:1-11

John writes with such directness and straightforward language, yet still writes about such miraculous events. I have to admit that I often smile as I think of Lazarus, recently of the dead, sitting at dinner with Mary and Jesus—I can't not imagine a Monty Python routine coming out of this scene. It is later in the passage that my mood turns more serious. While Lazarus has been brought back from the dead by Jesus, Jesus himself is unsure whether he achieve the same miraculous return. In this contemplation, we are given the opportunity to meditate on when, where, and how we should show our love. When should we shower our family and those close to us with time and money, and when should we instead be giving it away? The world around will always let us know in a thousand ways they need more of us. How do we divide ourselves and not tear ourselves apart? I wrestle with this every day.

Hebrews 9:11-15

How appropriate that I'm asked to reflect on this passage right after writing on John 12:1-11. Now through Paul we are again asked to think about sacrifice—this time sacrifice through the eternal Spirit for all time. How should respond to this? Clearly not by shedding the blood of animals or other humans. Nor should we do so by shedding our own blood. If we cannot begin to match this sacrificial act of Jesus, then how are we to respond? Should we make no sacrifices at all? No, clearly that is not the answer either. By the grace of God, we go forward in the world and both honor ourselves and do honor to others through meaningful sacrifice. We can honor the blood that Jesus has shed through the faith we show and the good works that come from this inspiration.

Eric Wiebe

## April 16

Isaiah 49: 1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

*The Lord called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother's womb he named me. (Is. 49:1)*

I have thought a lot over the last few years about "my calling." Reading this passage from Isaiah confirms what I didn't recognize for a large part of my life. God has called me to teach white people about the white privilege and how the systems and institutions that keep this privilege in place adversely affect the lives of black and brown people.

I grew up in a small southern town, living in a trailer on a dirt road for almost half of my early life. Until I was a freshman in high school, our schools were segregated. These were my norms. When I left my hometown for Los Angeles at the age of 19, my eyes were opened. For a year, I was the token Caucasian in a Japanese trading firm and had a firsthand view of what it was like to be "the Other." It was exhausting and I was always happy to get home in the afternoons to be around people that accepted me as I am.

I returned to North Carolina in 1984 and restarted my college career. I "fell into" the African American Studies Department and found my major. I learned our "real" American history from sources that were not just written by the victors.

During this Lenten season, I will continue to ask God every morning to give me clarity on this path. When I make myself open to listening, I know what to do. The passage goes on later, in verse 6, to say, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." With God's help I will continue to share my knowledge to try to make our world a better place for those who are oppressed so that we may all truly live together as one.

Kathy Krahenbuhl

## April 17

### Psalm 70

1 Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me!	Let those who love your salvation say evermore, "God is great!"
2 Let those be put to shame and confusion who seek my life. Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire to hurt me.	5 But I am poor and needy; Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. Let those who love your salvation say evermore, "God is great!"
3 Let those who say, "Aha, Aha!" turn back because of their shame.	5 But I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God!
4 Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.	You are my help and my deliverer; O Lord, do not delay!

Psalm 70 begins and ends with a heartfelt plea: "O Lord, make haste to help me! . . . hasten to me, O God! / You are my help and my deliverer; / O Lord, do not delay!" (v. 2, 6). The urgency and desperation of the speaker reminds us of all the times we have called to God for help. It puts us in a dependent position, one of weakness that we usually keep hidden from the world and maybe even from ourselves. But here the psalmist says, "I am vulnerable, and I need you God."

And haven't we all felt this way at many points this year? Are we not, like the speaker here, surrounded by enemies, beset with a sense of danger, frightened that our world is becoming increasingly chaotic? It is, as the psalm says, a world full of "shame and confusion... hurt... and dishonor."

But the psalm also reminds us that God is our source of strength and hope: "Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you" (6). Most of all it reminds us that we are in a relationship with God, who listens, responds, and cares.

In *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris describes the psalms as like "a stone that has been held in the palm of countless ancestors" (p. 100), a smooth stone in our pocket that we rub for comfort and to remind ourselves that God is with us and we are not alone in our suffering, but part of a community that has felt the same anguish over centuries, and turned to the same God for help. Lent allows us time to reflect on our need for God and to rejoice in the Easter promise of God's undying love for humankind.

Lea Bingham

## April 18 – Maundy Thursday

John 13.1, 21-30, 36-38 [Read all of John 13 if you can]

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me."

The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

Betrayal. Who hasn't felt betrayed at some point in life? Who hasn't known the sting of finding that a person you trusted, thought you knew, thought had your back, thought could be counted as a friend . . . is the very person who turns on you.

Betrayal hits us especially hard when it seems to happen within the context of church. And yet, betrayal was present at the very first "communion" meal. Jesus was betrayed by all of his disciples at one point or another. And yet Christ went on to suffer that betrayal and to come out loving those who betrayed him; even to the point of losing his own life to save theirs. It's easy to love a friend, Jesus told the Pharisees, loving an enemy . . . that's the real challenge.

On this Maundy Thursday take some time to contemplate the betrayals you have suffered and to consider those who you have betrayed. Remember Jesus' love. A love that allowed betrayals to be part of the story, but did not let betrayals win out.

*Prayer: Jesus who was betrayed like I have been. Jesus who I betrayed. Help me.*

*Show me the great mystery that redeems betrayals.*

*O Christ of my heart, stay with me this day and night  
as I look at the darkness of myself and others.*

*And walk us all, again and at the last, through the cross of betrayal  
into the dawn of Easter's new day, always toward that love that does not betray. Amen.*

Cherrie Henry

## April 19 – Good Friday

John 19:13-18, 25b

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor."

Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Jesus' family gathered at the foot of his cross. His mother, his aunt, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene were witnesses to the intense pain and death of their beloved. While others had fled in fear, or in agony, these women stayed. There was nothing they could do to save him. Their hearts must have broken a hundred times over. Their darkness was so very deep. But their love for Jesus kept them at the foot of the cross, sharing in his pain, making sure that he was not alone as he died.

Many of us do what we can to avoid the darkness of this day. Like the disciples, we run from the foot of the cross. Good Friday cuts too deep, stirs up too much pain, makes the darkness of our own lives feel even darker. What could be "good" about Good Friday, we ask, and stay as far away from the cross as we can.

But if we avoid standing at the foot of the cross and witnessing Jesus' suffering out of love for us, we have denied him. If we cannot face the extent of Jesus' love for us through the cross, we cannot fully understand who he is as our Savior. The hymn "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" places us where we need to be. In verse two, Elizabeth Cecilia Douglas Clephane reveals how profoundly we are affected when we allow ourselves to fully face the power of this day. She writes:

Upon the cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see  
the very dying form of One who suffered there for me;  
and from my stricken heart with tears two wonders I confess:  
the wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.

I pray we all find the courage to stand at the foot of the cross on this day.

Mindy Douglas

## April 20 – Holy Saturday

Luke 23:50-56

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

I wonder how the conversation went between Joseph and Pilate, a man of some power and one of a great deal more...

Did it take a lot convincing from the council member to secure access to the body? Was the governor more than happy to get rid of the blasted thing? Was Joseph even admitted into Pilate's presence, or did he have to talk to an official, who talked to another official, up the bureaucratic ladder? How close were we to not having that body in the tomb, sealed by the stone?

And if there were no tomb, what WOULD have happened to body? If it had just been left on the cross, would the moment of resurrection have been more public? More widely believed? Or less? Would people have accused Jesus' followers of some vain tomfoolery?

And, can someone be re-arrested and re-killed? Or is the privacy of the cave vital to it all? What might have been?

On a day like this, one overflowing with death, sadness and theological quiet, we are left to ponder such things – in part because the magnitude of what has happened to Jesus is so great that I, for one, would rather think about anything else. The more I think about it, the more I realize the wondering is an escape mechanism. The day after Good Friday, and I'm still trying to undo it somehow.

But all is just as it should be – Joseph, the cloth, the fresh tomb, the women, the spices, the day of rest. As usual, my plans are not God's plans.

John Weicher

## April 21 – Easter

Luke 24:1-12

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. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

“We’re Easter people living in a Good Friday world” -Barbara Johnson

Easter stopped being about candy eggs and daffodils blooming when I was nine years old and my baby brother died. The previous Easter, all four of us were dressed in white clothes and had been baptized on Holy Saturday as is custom in some church denominations. (My grandmother, though, to her dying day refused to acknowledge that we had been baptized, as we had not been “fully immersed” and this troubled her greatly). The following July, Frankie died unexpectedly.

We were one of about ten families who were not Pentecostal in the small town in Appalachia where I grew up. Frankie’s funeral caused quite a scandal and my best friend was so embarrassed that she quit talking to me for a while. My mother wore a white dress instead of a black one. The flowers on the altar were white and the paraments were white. We sang “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today.” My mother rationally explained that we were remembering Easter, where Life won out over Death, in the end. Nobody in St. Paul had ever seen such anything like that funeral. Of course, after it was all over and the “teachable moment” had passed, my mother took to her bed for the next ten years.

The “teachable moment” stuck. I never again saw Easter through the same lens. There can be no Resurrection without death. None of us get out of this alive. We must put all of our eggs in the real Easter basket.

“Resurrection stands up against the tide of sin and death; it proclaims hope over despair, and it tells us that whatever happens to us, thanks be to God, the end of things is not really the End of Things.” -Greg Garrett

Alleluia! The Lord is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

Kathy Parkins