

Wednesday, February 14: Introduction

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor of Bethel United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, VA.

That Wednesday morning in July began like many that summer: I woke up, got ready for the day, and then took my oldest son to swim practice where I would wait on the pool deck doing some reading or catching up on emails before going into the church office. And that's when the phone rang. It was my gastroenterologist's office saying they needed to follow up with me on some test results following the colonoscopy I'd had done earlier in the week. The doctor would see me the next day. The next 24 hours felt like 24 days.

The next day, I received the news: I had something growing inside me that if left untreated would kill me. Colon cancer. Not the news I wanted to receive; not the news anyone ever wants to receive. Thus began a whirlwind season of my life: tests, scans, doctors' appointments, surgery, and eventual chemotherapy. Crazy google searches while I spent days and nights anxiously awaiting pathology reports. All in the hopes of one day feeling healed and whole, all in the hopes of a future.

When the Word of the Lord came to the prophets, more often than not that Word was not news that Israel wanted to hear. The prophets came declaring to Israel, and to us, that we have something growing inside of us, individually and collectively, and that if left untreated it will lead to our destruction and demise. Not the news anyone ever wants to receive. In fact, those that came bearing the Word of the Lord were often beaten, stoned, or killed.

And yet, the news the prophets brought is news we need to hear if we are ever to experience healing and wholeness. News we need to hear if we will see the Lord's salvation in our hearts, in our lives, in our world. News we need to hear if we are to have hope for a future.

This Lent, the prophets come to us anew to deliver messages of judgment. This Lent, the prophets come to us anew to deliver messages of God's unfailing love. This Lent, the prophets come to us anew to deliver messages of God's promised salvation, God's promised future. This Lent, the prophets come to us anew to deliver messages of God's unending faithfulness.

And then we shall recall, remember, and relive what that faithfulness looks like in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We invite you to join us through this Lenten devotional to incline your ear to the voices from the wilderness, the prophetic voices calling us to return to our God that we might be healed.

Note: There are devotional entries throughout Lent, but they are not "daily." In the early part of Lent, there are entries for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday each week. As we approach Holy Week, these entries become more frequent.

Friday, February 16: Go to Rehab

Written by Elaine Ellis Thomas, Rector, All Saints Episcopal Parish, Hoboken, NJ

Isaiah 58:1-12

Nobody wants to go to rehab. Back in 2007 at the age of 24, singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse took home a boatload of Grammy's for the song *Rehab* with its lyrics

*They tried to make me go to rehab,
I said "no, no, no."*¹

The bouffant-haired Winehouse was resisting an intervention from her manager and recording company to seek treatment for alcohol and drug addiction. Like so many people, Winehouse did not want to go to rehab, with tragic results.

Rehab is hard. Whether it's for addiction or physical therapy, it is painful and challenging and forces us to do things we'd rather not. Years of pounding my knees running on pavement led to a knee replacement which, as anyone can tell you, is not for the faint of heart. Months and months of arduous physical therapy followed surgery, and there were many times when I was reduced to tears.

But here's the thing about rehab - things don't get better if you don't go.

The prophets all, in some way or another, tell us that we need to go to rehab.

*Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins. (Isaiah 58:1)*

We, the people of God, deceive ourselves with our words and our piety that are limited to the walls of the church, our fasting that serves only our own sense of worthiness, none of which relieves the sufferings of the world.

At 2019's United Nations Climate Action Summit, Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, sounded a lot like a prophet of old:

*You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. People are suffering, people are dying, entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of endless economic growth. How dare you!*²

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUzP8pR1uc>

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-23/teen-activist-greta-thunberg-to-world-leaders-how-dare-you>

Through Isaiah, God is saying to us, "How dare you? How dare you go through the motions of orthodoxy and ignore the activities of orthopraxy? Saying and believing the right things are not going to win my favor. No, you must *do* your religious practice.

*'Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers. (Isaiah 58:3)*

Y'all need to go to rehab.

I don't really believe God despises our acts of worship and prayer and fasting. These are all parts of a life of faith. It's how we grow in knowledge and love of God and neighbor. The problem comes when we think that is enough, that we are absolved from looking around us and caring for those who are suffering. Feed the hungry, care for the sick, house the houseless, welcome the stranger, free the oppressed. Then our "light shall break forth like the dawn" (58:8). God will hear us when we call and guide us in right paths.

Yes, we are being sent to rehab, and the only way out is through. And what is our reward?

*Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in. (58:12)*

It's time to go to rehab. Don't say no.

Monday, February 19: The Grass Withers

Written by Katie Hoerster, Associate Pastor, Pinehurst UMC, Pinehurst, NC

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort the people by telling them they are grass? What kind of God tells a prophet to comfort God's people, saying, "All flesh is grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers; the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass."? Where is the comfort in being grass, prone to wither and die?

To some, this may not be very comforting at all. Most people don't like to dwell on the fact that we are going to die. In fact, much of our society today pathologizes, avoids, and ignores death to the best of our ability. To others, it IS a comfort that they will not be remembered long after they die, when so many celebrities or political leaders often get remembered only for their worst mistakes or the tragic way they died.

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent remind us, yes, we are grass, and one day, we will die. But the comfort in being grass comes from knowing whose grass it is- the Gardener's. This Gardener created all things. This Gardener will someday gather us around the tree of life. This Gardener is The Lord, the Good Shepherd, the One who has died, is risen, and will come again.

Lent is a time to pause. Stop! Look around. Have you noticed? Are you paying attention? Things are not as they should be. There is difficulty, sin, pain, and darkness. In the winter here in Pinehurst, we see our grass wither, going dormant until the spring. But people do not go dormant. We die. The Good News is that God is the business of death and resurrection! God does not take things that are broken and cobble them back together. God does not settle for things dying! They die. But they are raised to life again. We are raised to life again. God is in the business of making things as they should be, when sin has broken and twisted them into how they should not be. In the face of darkness and pain, we have a very real comfort in the death and resurrection of our Savior, who conquered all sin and all death and all darkness.

We are surrounded by hardship, suffering, and grief, yet we are called to witness to the persistent joy that sustains our life as God's people. After every Good Friday, there is an Easter Sunday- after every cross, there is an empty tomb- after every disappointment in this life, there is a God who is making all things new. The grass withers; the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Wednesday, February 21: A Living Offering: Fasting, Prayer & Almsgiving in Lent

Written by Anna A. Petrin, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Marywood University

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

This prophetic oracle from Joel appears each and every Ash Wednesday in the Revised Common Lectionary: the diet of readings from Sacred Scripture that orders the Church's prayer and worship. Even with the yearly appearance of this reading it remains, for me at least, a little disorienting. The prophet begins with a cry of warning issued by God: "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain." That cry of alarm intensifies as the prophet continues to speak God's message to the people: "the day of the Lord," is coming and it will be a day of darkness and gloom, "like blackness spread upon the mountains." What are the people to do about this threat of God's coming? Return to the Lord by means of fasting, and weeping, and mourning. After all this comes the prophet's most surprising insight – a promise of hope, albeit shaky: "Who knows?" the prophet asks tentatively. "Who knows, whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?"

That timorous hope, thin as a wisp of smoke, leaps off the page at me year after year. It is remarkable first because of the prophet's trust in God's own action. Joel stands before the ineffable will of God and simply waits. Second, it is perhaps more remarkable for its outcome: the prophet doesn't hope simply for better days, ease, or comfort. Joel doesn't even mention getting things back to the way they were before the tumultuous "day of the Lord." Instead his hope is to receive something that can be offered back to Lord, and for a blessing from God that can be offered back to God by God's people. Joel's hope is that the fast, weeping, and mourning can be transformed by the day of the Lord, and become itself a sacrifice and offering that restore communion with the God of Israel.

As Christians, we bear witness to the fulfillment of Joel's hope. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ are simultaneously the "day of the Lord," God's gracious presence among us, and the offering by which God's communion with God's people, indeed all people, is restored. In Lent we anticipate the darkness and mourning of the "day of the Lord" that comes in the suffering and death of Christ Jesus our Lord. We know simultaneously in Christ the transformation of human life expended as a living sacrifice in communion with God's own will: it is the joy of Easter's dawn. We know that the Resurrection transfigures sacrifice: mourning will be turned to dancing, sorrow will become joy, and death will give way to life eternal.

The historic practices of Lent are a means by which Christians have prepared for "the day of the Lord" for much of the Church's history, and they are threefold: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. First, we enter into Christ's own act of obedience each Lent by following the prescription of the prophet Joel: by fasting. The act of fasting, not out of disdain for God's good creation, but from a desire to prepare for an encounter with God in God's creation is itself a lamentation. It is a statement that despite our

creature comforts “all is not well,” until God is all in all. Fasting is not, then, an end in itself but a means to communion both with God and with God’s people. It is therefore always coupled both with prayer and with almsgiving. Removing ourselves from some (or many) creature comforts teaches us to devote ourselves afresh to prayer: to a regular act of communion with God. Fasting here is partially the subtraction of distraction, but it is more importantly the addition of prayer. Prayer, in turn, produces community. Fasting turns our attention from ourselves and toward God. Simultaneously, our attentiveness to God teaches us to be attentive to one another and to replace striving after desire for our own comfort with striving to love as God in Christ has loved: in service to others.

Each of these practices, braided together, prepares us alongside Joel’s listeners to anticipate the day of the Lord that we will celebrate in the feasts of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. Our fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, is an entry into Christ’s own suffering and into the “day of the Lord” as Christ struggles in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and endures the Crucifixion on Good Friday. In our own practices we are “united,” as Paul says in Romans 6 to the death of Christ. We become with Christ a holy and living sacrifice. And we are transfigured also to welcome the dawn of Easter morning, to receive from God the blessing of our lives reconfigured by the eternal life of Christ and to live in an unshakeable communion with our God.

May our fasting and worship this Lent unite us to the suffering of Christ, so that we may enter with him also into the joy of the resurrection.

Friday, February 23: The Call of Jeremiah

Written by Bayo Ogungbade, Associate Pastor of Adult Discipleship at Reville United Methodist Church, Richmond, VA

Jeremiah 1:4-10

“God, I am too young! There’s no way I can pray in front of other people! I’m too anxious to preach in the pulpit! I’ve never done any of these things in my entire life! Robes make me feel like an ancient relic! Organ music puts me to sleep! There’s no way that God is calling someone like ME to serve in the church!” As I read this Scripture passage, I’m reminded of the many reservations I had when I first experienced a sense of call to ministry as an 18 year old college student at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I couldn’t help but to find ways to disqualify myself before I even got started.

When I reminisce on my relationship with church and God in my early childhood, I’m very hard pressed to find any signs that God was leading me towards a life of vocational ministry. I didn’t attend Sunday School at my local church. I was not well versed in Scripture outside of Psalm 23, which my loving mother taught me to say with her before I went to bed at night. I couldn’t stand dressing up in a suit and tie on Sunday mornings when my family went to church. I went to youth group for every other reason EXCEPT growing in my relationship with God. In short, before I knew what God had planned for me, I already felt that I knew that church work wasn’t in my future. Imagine my surprise when after nearly flunking out of VCU while studying pre-med, God decides to invite ME to serve God’s Kingdom as a pastor. I was filled with so much dread. So much fear. So much angst. I remember some of my back-and-forths with God went something like - “God, I’m 18 years old! I’m too young! I’m in the prime of my life! You’re telling me that instead of spending my weekends partying and living it up with my friends, You want me to sacrifice them and do all the things I hate on Sunday morning?” To say that I was stressed out of my mind is an understatement. I truly felt so unqualified for the work that I felt God was calling me to do.

However at the same time, I was also filled with this indescribable sense of excitement that I couldn’t explain. I couldn’t help but feel excitement and anticipation about what God wanted to use me to do. I found myself intrigued and curious and in addition to my excitement, I also felt, for the first time in my life, a sense of calm that all things were going to work themselves out and all I had to do was keep moving forward. Unbeknownst to me, I believe that this was God’s way of teaching me to see that no matter what I may have thought about myself, my disqualifications, and my fears, God knew why I was called for this work. I may have been worried about being too young, but God said that I was right on time. I may not have known how to pray or preach in front of others, but God only told me to show up and I would be provided with the words to say. God had already known me in the womb. God had already set me apart. Now, all I had to do was go where God called me to go and to say what God commanded me to. Most importantly, even in light of my frustrations and fears, God told me to not be afraid. Because God would be with me.

In this Lenten season, I invite you to reflect on times in your life where you felt disqualified to do what you believe God was calling you to do. It's okay to be honest - we've all had those times. I've only named one of the many times that I've had those struggles. It's okay to feel like you're in the wilderness. Hear the good news - no matter what you believe you can or can't do, God knows who you are. God knew you in the womb. God knew you before you were born. God knows what you'll grow up to do. Continue to build and plant, my friends. God is with you. God has ALWAYS been with you. God will ALWAYS be with you.

Monday, February 26: The Potter's House

Written by Blaine Oliver Thomas, Pastor, Bethany United Methodist Church in Weyers Cave, VA

Jeremiah 18:1-11

He said, "Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. - Jeremiah 18:6

I often remember my parents consistently telling me as a young boy that I was "impressionable," as they encouraged me to find good friends who made good choices. At the time, the word impressionable did not mean much, but as I grew up, it was a word I heard less and less as I developed into a young man. I assume that as I grew into becoming a pastor, that my parents were less concerned with who I might become and who was around me. But is being impressionable only something that we as people of God ought to be concerned about at an early age?

As a child, the only thing I remember from elementary school art class was making clay sculptures. I remember the room that housed the school kiln in it and only Mrs. McBride, our teacher, was able to go into that room. I spent many classes playing and getting clay everywhere before I finally configured an exotic barn-like structure. Safe to say, it would not have won any awards. But to this day I remember just how that clay was so impressionable and able to change, while it was still in its original form. The potter's hands therefore are always working, changing, altering, and perfecting the clay. It is not until after it has been placed in the kiln that it is no longer able to be changed or morphed into something else.

Jeremiah is urging the people of Judah to turn away from their sins and shortcomings, and redirect their focus to the living, breathing God. Judah had produced the likes of King David and King Solomon, and yet, the people of God had forgotten how faithful God had been to them in the past and turned away from the promise and future that God had promised to them. If they choose to continue to follow in their own ways, God will uproot them and punish them. The text reminds me of the words from Bishop Will Willimon, when he says, "God is going to get what God wants." God is trying to chase down the people of God and bring them back into the fold. Luckily for the people of Judah, they haven't been placed in the burning kiln yet, so there is still time for transformation and returning to the will of God. They have an opportunity to hear the words of Jeremiah and choose their path.

And just like the people of Judah, we too have been offered a warning to return to the faithful ways of our loving parent. God, like the potter in his house, is still in the business of transforming and making us new and impressionable. Our sins and failures do not define us, for we are continually being shaped and molded into God's own children. My hope and prayer for us during this season of Lent is that we may turn our hearts toward God, we may be leaving an imprint on others whom we meet along the

journey, and we let the Holy Spirit continue to shape us into being God's own kindred. May God continue to create in you a new and vibrant piece of work.

Wednesday, February 28: “Long, Long Time”

Written by Jonathan Page, Director of Connectional Ministries for Innovation and Creativity for the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Glen Allen, VA

Jeremiah 29:1-14

The best episode of television I’ve watched in the last year was called “Long, Long Time”. It’s the third episode of the first season of a show called *The Last of Us*. The premise of the show is that a cataclysmic virus is sweeping the world, turning most of humanity into a form of living-dead-being and leaving a few people to make their way through an apocalyptic mess to some kind of safety, home, and hope.

In this particular episode, there is a focus on two characters named Bill and Frank. Bill finds shelter early in the space of the viral event and spends most of his energy protecting his fortress. Frank is a traveler seeking shelter who stumbles across Bill’s space in the wilderness. While the initial reaction is one of rigid denial, eventually Bill allows Frank to come and get some food. Which then turns to a space to rest. Which then turns to a relationship that spans years and grows connection and grace in a multitude of capacities.

What began as a temporary stay of pity became a long-lasting reminder of hope. In many ways, this tender relationship and connection was a reminder of the depth of care these people had for one another, a way of providing one another shelter in the space of unrest.

Shelter in the space of unrest is a familiar concept for Jeremiah’s community. These are a people that have been evicted from what they have known, left to meander through Babylon with meager hope that they might one day return home. Jeremiah, while still in Jerusalem, writes to his people and offers an astonishing first piece of wisdom: “Build homes.” He’s not advising them to pray or to strategize how to get back where they’ve come from. He wants them to make a new dwelling in this unfamiliar place.

I imagine his motivation, in part, is that he knows there will be time and trials ahead. Making camp where they are is not enough – there must be a connection to the land and to the people that will sustain them through all that is to come. Verse 7 stands out in this prophetic word: “Pursue the peace and welfare of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to Me, the Eternal, for Babylon because if it has peace, you will live in peace.” It’s as if Jeremiah understands a simple truth in this moment – **you will harvest the fruit of the seeds you plant**. Not the seeds you wish you planted, nor the fruit you might prefer; no, you will get out what you put in.

In *The Last of Us*, it was a single seed of mercy that changed the story. That mercy didn’t make the story resolve cleanly, by the way. Spoiler alert, but Bill and Frank don’t make it out alive. But the home they create and cultivate eventually leads to being a space of shelter and promise for other travelers along the way. Even in the wake of death, the fruits of grace and mercy long outlive these people.

Maybe Jeremiah knows this for his people, and even for us too. It's why he is bold enough to share that (in)famous eleventh verse: "I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope." We would do well to note that, much to the chagrin of many American prosperity preachers, this is not a prophecy for today or tomorrow; rather, it will be for those who are living 70 years down the line. But the seeds that are planted today will be those that are harvested for generations to come.

And within this there is a Lenten blessing. Sometimes you have to build homes in exile and reside and make peace for a season before you can come back home. Sometimes those homes, those places you'd rather not live, also become the places you die. And in whatever exilic territory you might find yourself, know this: God already plants the seed of grace, mercy, and love in the hardened yet beloved soil of your soul. God knows that there is a good harvest that can come from all of God's good creation.

So might you do the same. In this space of Lent, might you build a home in the place you'd rather not be and the condition you'd rather not suffer. Might you choose to sow peace and grace when it feels like contempt and malice might have a more fertile ground. And might you trust that the harvest will come from what you plant, even if it is not yours to see.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Friday, March 1: Habakkuk's Complaint

Written by Ashley Oliver-Thomas, Pastor in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia

Habakkuk 1:1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So, the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous; therefore, judgment comes forth perverted.

This passage is titled, "Habakkuk's Complaint." When I read these words, I picture Habakkuk in a dark place. Physically, emotionally, or maybe both. Perhaps he was lost, amidst his own wilderness, unable to see any evidence of light.

Have you ever found yourself in a place similar to Habakkuk's? A place where you catch yourself asking God, "How much longer will this last? How much longer will I suffer?"

You can't help but plead for God to bring you out of it.

I remember feeling that way last winter. I had been sick - the sickest I had been in my life thus far. I took two trips to the hospital with a heart rate creeping far too close to 200 for the doctors liking. After nearly a week, they discovered from a second chest x-ray that I had pneumonia. I think I would need more fingers and toes on my body to count how many times I asked God (and my husband, parents, and doctors) "How much longer will this pain, these symptoms, last?" My own sick, dark wilderness, I found myself sinking into.

The wilderness isn't always a dark place, but sometimes, it is, and it can feel lonely, uncertain, and endless. Sometimes, the only comfort we have is the truth that we aren't alone. We have the comfort of knowing Jesus is beside us, holding our hand as we walk whatever journey is set before us. This Lenten season, may we remember, and remind others, that we are not alone, and when our voices cry out to God and plead to God, we are heard by the One who gave us a voice in the beginning.

Monday, March 4: A New Covenant

Written by Michael Petrin, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Marywood University, Scranton, PA

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

This prophecy from the Book of Jeremiah was originally proclaimed to a suffering people, a people that had experienced defeat and exile, a people that knew the brokenness of this world firsthand. Of course, Jeremiah is a prophet, so he doesn't let the people of God off the hook. He doesn't hide the fact that the Israelites—who were chosen by God as his “treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Exod. 19:5)—have sinned and broken their covenant with the Lord. Yet Jeremiah does not dwell on the past. Instead, he proclaims a powerful message of hope: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:31).

We should be careful not to view this “new covenant” as something completely disconnected from the covenant made at Sinai. Yes, God does say that the new covenant “will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors” (Jer. 31:32); but it's still a covenant between the Lord and the house of Israel. And this isn't the first time that God has said of the Israelites, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (see Exod. 6:7).

So what is different? The main difference seems to be that the people of Israel have broken the old covenant through their sin and iniquity, but that the Lord has chosen to forgive them and to restore their spousal bond with him. The new covenant, God says, will make it so that all of his people will know him, “from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer. 31:34), and they will all have his law written “on their hearts” (Jer. 31:33).

For Christians, this idea of a “new covenant” is of central importance because Jesus uses it at the Last Supper, telling his disciples, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:25; cf. Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). Jeremiah's prophecy of a “new covenant” is also quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 8:8-12)—and the very

name of the “New Testament” comes from the Christian belief that Jesus is the mediator of a “new covenant” between God and human beings (Heb. 9:15; 12:24).

As we go through the spiritual preparation of Lent, therefore, let us take some time to reflect on what it means for us to be included in this “new covenant” that has been ratified with Christ’s blood. How can we strive to be faithful members of this covenant? How do we need to seek God’s forgiveness for our sin and iniquity? And how should we demonstrate that we have God’s law within us, written on our very hearts?

I think the word “heart” is especially important here because the Bible uses this word frequently when it speaks of how human beings should relate to God. We should heed the psalmist’s exhortation: “O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness...” (Ps. 95:7-8). We should seek to “love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might” (cf. Deut. 6:5). And we should pray to receive the blessing that God promised to his people through the prophet Ezekiel: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26).

As we journey through the stony wilderness of Lent, may we learn to have hearts that are truly hearts of flesh: hearts that are enlivened by the Holy Spirit and hearts on which God has written his law. May we grow daily in our love of the Lord and strive to live in a way that is faithful to the new covenant. And above all, may we never forget that “in this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Wednesday, March 6: The Great Perhaps

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor of Bethel United Methodist Church, Woodbridge, VA

Isaiah 52: 7-10

*How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of a messenger
who proclaims peace,
who brings good news,
who proclaims salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God rules!"*
*Listen! Your lookouts lift their voice;
they sing out together!*
Right before their eyes they see the Lord returning to Zion.

Break into song together, you ruins of Jerusalem!
The Lord has comforted his people and has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has bared his holy arm in view of all the nations;
all the ends of the earth have seen our God's victory.

"I go to seek a Great Perhaps." - Francois Rabelais

In John Green's first book, *Looking for Alaska*, the main character, Miles "Pudge" Halter, enrolls in a boarding school inspired by the last words of Francois Rabelais. He is off in search of a better life, a more exciting life, he's in search of more to life than what he has found up to that point. He is off to seek his Great Perhaps.

At boarding school he encounters the titular Alaska and, because it's a young adult novel involving teenagers, is smitten. Alaska has been taken by someone's last words as well, in her case Simon Bolivar: "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?!" Alaska's life has been marked by suffering and she is forever searching for a way out of the labyrinth of suffering, a way to be free of the pain of what she has done to others and what others have done to her; a way to be free of the shame others heaped upon her; a way to be free, a way to be forgiven, a way to be whole.

Sadly, Alaska is not able to find a way out of the labyrinth in this life, forcing Miles and his friends to grapple with her loss and their own suffering. Miles' struggle mirrors Green's own as he remarks that as he was writing the novel, he was working out for himself whether it was possible to live a hopeful life in a world full of suffering. It is a question that we must all ask of ourselves, and the answer to which will ultimately determine our view of the world, of life, of the cosmos.

Into our own searching, into our own wandering of the labyrinth of suffering comes a voice. A voice proclaiming peace and wholeness. A voice bringing good news to those who long for an escape. A voice bringing salvation to those searching for hope. You are loved. You are redeemed. You are whole. You are mine.

Our God comes to us in Jesus Christ to announce that in a world of suffering, in a world of death, in a world of sin, in a world of hurt, our God reigns. Our God rules. His presence comforts us and he has defeated the sin, the shame, the hurt, the pain that forms the walls of the labyrinth. Christ is our Great Perhaps. Perhaps we don't have to be defined by our sin. Perhaps we don't have to live in shame. Perhaps we don't have to be held captive to death. Perhaps we can hope.

In writing about his first book years later, John Green said, "I was born into Bolivar's labyrinth, and so I must believe in the hope of Rabelais' Great Perhaps." We have all, I'm sure, been born into the labyrinth of suffering. We are all familiar with the sting of sin and death. But perhaps! Perhaps that doesn't have to rule us. Perhaps the labyrinth isn't our home. Perhaps our place is with God, in His light and love forever.

I, too, have been born into a labyrinth of suffering. In 2005, when I was 19, the same year this book was published, one of my best friends died in a car crash. And I was thrust headlong into the labyrinth of suffering. But I was fortunate to have messengers come to me bringing the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Bringing a word of hope. Bringing the grace and mercy and love of our God.

I choose to believe in Christ's Great Perhaps. Beautiful are the feet of those who bring this news. Beautiful on the mountains are those who proclaim to those in the labyrinth of suffering that perhaps there is a way out.

Friday, March 8: God's Kingdom is at Hand

Written by Stephanie Kimec Parker, Pastor, The Gathering at Scott Memorial United Methodist Church, Virginia Beach VA

Isaiah 11:1-10

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow[a] out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see
or decide by what his ears hear,
but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed[b] together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Earlier in Isaiah chapter 7 we discover the people of Judah were facing attacks from Syria and the kingdom of Israel. The king of Judah, Ahaz, was unsure what to do. Of course, he didn't want to be under another nation's rule, he didn't want his people to be destroyed by war, and he found trusting God to be hard to do. Isaiah, the prophet of the day, urged king Ahaz to stand firm and trust in God. Isaiah knew that God could and would provide all the protection needed, but King Ahaz would have to trust in God. However, Ahaz was not satisfied with this, and instead he entered into an alliance with Assyria.

The people of Judah have broken the covenant they had with God. They have not put God first in their lives, they have had other gods before our one God. They should have trusted God to provide protection, but instead they put their trust in the powers of other nations instead of their God. Isaiah knows it will not go well for the people now that they have so clearly broken the covenant.

Even in the midst of coming destruction and war, Isaiah writes of hope. Isaiah 11 illustrates the kingdom of God. The peaceable kingdom is coming. Christ's return will usher in the kingdom of God, a time of total restoration of the world to what God intended when God created the world.

This description is powerful, these unlikely animals that are predator and prey and now live in peace with each other. The wolf was known for attacking the lamb, now they live together. A calf and lion will eat together, and it won't be the lion eating the calf, and a child will lead them. Young children will play in the homes of snakes and will remain unharmed. The snake that had ever since Genesis 3 had become a symbol of chaos and evil would be restored.

Jesus' message was about the kingdom of God, he came to remind the people that God would fulfill this promise one day. "They will not destroy or hurt on all my holy mountain" (Isaiah 11:9a NRSV).

Although the people have made some big mistakes, God will still fulfill God's promises. One is coming who will with righteousness judge for the poor, and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth (Isaiah 11:4 NRSV). The peaceable kingdom will one day be fully here on earth. Death, destruction, hurt will be no more. This is good news for our world today, where everyday the news is full of death, destruction and hurt. God will restore the world to what God intended, God's kingdom is at hand and is fully coming. On days when the news threatens to take our hope, this passage stands firm to remind us this world in its current form is not as God intended. God's intended world is coming, Christ's return will usher in the kingdom of God as promised. Amen.

Monday, March 11: Holding a Grudge

Written by Sherry E. Hietpas, Associate Pastor of Digital Ministry, Andrew Chapel UMC in Vienna, VA (currently residing in Bangkok Thailand)

Jonah chapters 3 and 4

In the early 2000s, Sandra Bullock starred in a movie adaptation of the book *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. And while the movie was not a box-office sensation or even very memorable in her list of cinematic accomplishments, there was one line from that movie that always stuck with me. Ellen Burstyn played her mother, Vivi, and in describing herself, says, “I take a problem and chew on it ‘til all the flavor’s gone, and then stick it in my hair.” I can think of no better description of holding a grudge. It is one of those aspects of human nature that people love to hold onto, even when there’s no redeeming value, and it does more to truly make our lives a mess.

As we remember the story of Jonah, most of us recall him running away from God, being held in the belly of a fish for three days, and eventually going to Nineveh. But most of us forget the part where Jonah went kicking and screaming the entire time, angry at God the entire way for God’s mercy and love. He was so focused on his grudge and holding onto his anger that he could barely see straight. He didn’t want to go at all because if he went and they listened, they might repent, and God would forgive them. And that would be too much for him to bear.

How often do we find ourselves in Jonah’s shoes? Jonah is so fixed on the wrongs that were done by Nineveh, the ways that they had hurt others, the ways they failed. He didn’t think they deserved forgiveness, so he certainly didn’t want to be an instrument in bringing them peace. When I think about our role as followers of Christ, if we aren’t careful, we can end up like that: bitter, frustrated, believing that we are the only ones who deserve God’s mercy and love. We look outside our doors at the world outside and think we don’t have to make space for others who are different. We don’t have to extend grace and love to those who don’t deserve it. They vote the wrong way, they believe the wrong way, and they openly support causes that we vehemently disagree with. Why should God offer them mercy? And why should we have to be a means of offering it to them?

It can be so easy to fool ourselves that we alone are righteous and that we have it all figured out. In a culture where so much of our day-to-day is driven by outrage and conflict, whether it be the news cycle, social media feeds, or the upcoming elections, our world really likes to divide people between “us” and “them.” You’re either with me or against me, and if you’re against me, well, then you’re dead to me! It’s one of the reasons we should remember the sacrament of communion. Because at Christ’s table, all are welcome. We are to admit our failings, ask for forgiveness, make peace with our neighbors, and come together as one, as equals to the heavenly feast. At Christ’s table, it’s not about us versus them because we are all one in Christ.

We rejoice at God's goodness and grace. And if we are honest, there are times when it can be hard to see God's goodness and grace extended to those who have harmed us. Christ has called us to more than holding onto our anger until all the flavor is gone. Christ has called us to love others and reflect God's love and grace to the world. It's not always easy. And thankfully, we don't have to do it on our own. God is with us. God can handle our anger and help us through to the other side. And thankfully, for all the times that we mess up, God doesn't hold a grudge.

Wednesday, March 13: God Delights in Us

Written by Lauren Lobenhofer, Pastor, Cave Spring United Methodist Church, Roanoke, VA

Zephaniah 3:14-20

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.”
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.*

- Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NRSVUE)

All my life, I have wished that I could live in a musical. I'm a fan of Broadway shows, and a former showchoir kid, so the idea of people in my everyday life breaking into song and dance brings joy to my soul. Wouldn't it be amazing if, instead of just cheering when something good happened, we could break into a show-stopping musical number? How cathartic would it be if, when we were sad, we sang a heart-wrenching ballad rather than just crying? Music is a powerful outlet; it would be incredible if it infused every day of our lives as it does in the fictional worlds of musical theater.

Sadly, we don't live in a musical. In the world we inhabit each day people don't break into song at appointed times or dance along the hallways of our offices. Quite the opposite, in fact. In the United States in 2024 we almost never sing in public.

On the rare occasions when we can be convinced to be part of a musical interlude it is for people we care about. We'll participate in the awkward ritual of singing "Happy Birthday" for our friends and family. We might belt out "YMCA" or "Don't Stop Believin'" or "All the Single Ladies" while dancing at a wedding reception. A playful kid can perhaps convince us to join in their silly song, or we might find ourselves crooning over an infant in our arms. In other words, our songs are mostly reserved for moments of deep joy over people we love.

Perhaps that's why these words from the prophet Zephaniah are so powerful.

Usually when we think of God, the words and images that come to mind are serious and somber. We dredge up the image Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, of a straight-faced, intimidating monarch barely touching creation with one finger. Or we picture a grumpy ruler in the clouds a la *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Or we envision a heavenly judge glowering at humankind's sin. Or perhaps we picture a powerful force, distant and removed from creation.

All of those are rooted in Scripture, and they're the dominant images of God in our culture. But they are not the only images of God in the Bible. The glimpses of God in our holy text are more diverse than that.

Even within the book of Zephaniah, one of the Bible's shortest books, the images we get of God are varied. In the earlier chapters, we see a God who is disappointed in human sin and unfaithfulness, who is angry at our negligence and misbehavior. But these final verses of the book reveal that, despite our sins, God delights in us. **God doesn't just tolerate us, God adores us.** The prophet announces that God sings over us with joy. God *sings over us*. With the love of one who will awkwardly sing happy birthday out of tune, with the love of one who exuberantly dances and sings "Don't Stop Believin'" at a wedding reception, with the love of a parent singing a lullaby over a sleeping baby, God sings with joy, with delight over us. God rejoices in being with us whenever we choose to give our time, our attention, our love to God.

The God we worship doesn't just put up with us. The God we worship delights in us.

We forget that. We often frame our language about God as tolerance, or indifferent presence. Perhaps on occasion we think about God being pleased with our service, our work, or our growth, or glad when we repent and seek to improve. But there is something powerful in remembering that the God who made us is just happy that we exist, that the Savior who came to live with us delights to be with us.

This is an important truth because how we understand who God is shapes our relationship with God. We would speak differently with a monarch or a judge than we would with a beloved family member. We speak differently with people who are smiling at us than we do with those who look bored or angry. In the same way, we will speak to God differently, pray differently, if we remember that God delights in us. We will pray with more openness, more honesty, more vulnerability, when we bear in mind that God looks on us, and sings over us, with joy.

I pray that we will be assured that God delights in us. I pray that we will rest in that assurance as we become more vulnerable before the Almighty and more fully experience the joy of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Friday, March 15: The Throne of Fiery Flames

Written by Taylor Mertins, Pastor, Raleigh Court United Methodist Church, Roanoke, VA

Dreams are beginnings. It is through our dreams that we catch images of what could be, what may be, and perhaps most exciting (or terrifying), what will be.

The prophet Daniel has a dream of the fullness of God's glory. And yet, reading through the various images, his dream sounds more like a nightmare. A throne of flames with burning wheels of fire. Beasts are put to death. Tens of thousands stand in witness.

The Word of God for the people of God! Thanks be to God?

When I was in college I took a course titled, "Apocalypticism, Terror, and Peace." We read through various religious texts and talked about their real world implications. Most of the students were International Affairs majors, and only a few of us were from the Religion Department. The conceit of the class was to get the two disciplines working together so that we all might better understand that which we didn't understand.

During the first class, we were each handed an ancient text, a piece of paper, and a pencil. Our professor then offered a simple instruction: "Draw what the text says." We each spent thirty minutes sketching away and then one by one we stood to describe our artistic renderings.

From Revelation there was One seated on the throne surrounded by seven lamp stands.

From the Ramayana there was the divine monkey king and a fantastical battle.

And from Daniel there was the Ancient One with a throne of fire.

"What do we think of these images?" our professor asked.

We responded: "They're crazy!"

"Indeed they are," she said, "But are they any crazier than the craziness this world tends to offer?"

What we came to discover across the semester was the power of apocalyptic visions. For, when we hear the word apocalypse, we imagine the end of time and devastating destruction. Which is all the more reason for us to take seriously what the word apocalypse actually means: revelation. Therefore, an apocalypse is often nothing more than a revealing of something we may or may not already know.

Daniel lived during a time of devastating destruction during which people were thrown in furnaces or lion's dens for worshipping incorrectly. His nightmarish vision was not all that different from what he saw when he was awake. And yet, this apocalyptic tapestry reveals the truth of God's everlasting dominion even in the midst of destruction.

During the season of Lent we are called to look at ourselves and the world truthfully. There is a revelatory aspect to this period of the church calendar during which we consider the condition of our condition. No matter how good we might play it off, we are all sinners in need of grace. Our lives and our world is just as broken and devastated as Daniel's vision.

But we know how the story ends.

Beasts will come and go, but the God of grace and glory has an everlasting dominion that can never be taken away.

Or, as Paul put it, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, no angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, not anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Monday, March 18: From the Belly of the Fish

Written by Elizabeth Snader, Campus Minister at the University of Mary Washington

Jonah 2:1-10

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said:

*“In my distress I called to the Lord,
and he answered me.*

*From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.*

*You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.*

*I said, ‘I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.’*

*The engulfing waters threatened me,[b]
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.*

*But you, Lord my God,
brought my life up from the pit.*

*“When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, Lord,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.*

*“Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God’s love for them.*

*But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
will sacrifice to you.*

What I have vowed I will make good.

I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’”

And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

This passage is the prayer that Jonah cried out to God while in the belly of the fish. For this moment let’s agree that the literal understanding of what actually happened to Jonah and whether or not he was

actually in the belly of a fish doesn't matter as much as what Jonah prays and how he cries out to God in this dark moment, arguably brought on by his own actions. Jonah is expressing true emotion and vulnerability with God after rejecting God's call to go to Nineveh. Jonah is left in a dark state, maybe both literally and figuratively. Have you ever felt like your own actions have left you in a state of feeling distant from God? I know I have been there and it can be hard to process through or know how to approach God.

I view this prayer as not only Jonah crying out to God, but I imagine Jonah saying this prayer as a way to remind himself of who God is. Jonah says, "I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple" and "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you and your holy temple." I am currently doing Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Mary Washington Hospital (serving as a chaplain for the hospital and reflecting on what I experience together with others) and I can remember my Supervisor telling us during orientation that we will see a lot of hard things during CPE, but it helps to remind yourself of your truth in the moment as a way of coping. I view Jonah as trying to find words to reassure himself in this dark time of not knowing what was going to happen. And, wow, were those powerful words that Jonah uttered in the darkness of the circumstances he finds himself. I wonder if we too have moments where we feel like we are in darkness when we have uttered our true feelings to God. We may feel as if God cannot or will not hear us, but Jonah reminds us that even when you run away from God, God is still there and able to hear you and be with you.

During this season of Lent we are reflecting on Jesus' life and ultimately the road that leads him to death. That is dark, and can be hard truly to sit and ponder. Thankfully we know the end of the story, but true growth happens when we sit and address our feelings of darkness and remind ourselves of the truth. I wonder what it may look like for you to craft a prayer modeled after Jonah's prayer. Starting with the things that you feel have left distance between you and God and then in the same sentence reminding yourself of the good, steadfast ways that God is in your life. I pray this Lenten season is one where you take time to pause and reflect.

Wednesday, March 20: The Suffering Servant

Written by Hungsu Lim, Pastor, St. John's United Methodist Church, Buena Vista, VA

52:13-53:12

*See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up
and shall be very high.*

*Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.*

*Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*

*For he grew up before him like a young plant
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

*He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity,
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.*

*Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.*

*But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.*

*All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;*

*like a lamb that is led to the slaughter
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with affliction.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out himself to death
and was numbered with the transgressors,
yet he bore the sin of many
and made intercession for the transgressors.*

My church has profiles on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, and I also have a Facebook account. I often find myself unsure of what to post on these social media platforms. Typically, I try to share posts that are meaningful both to me and my church. This includes news, upcoming events, live-stream videos, mission work updates, and inspiring quotes. I believe that social media is an incredibly powerful tool to communicate with my congregation and the wider community, and it has become an essential aspect of our ministry.

As part of my efforts to improve communication skills, I recently read an article on "How to make your content go viral on social media." It provides step-by-step guidance to enhance your chances of going viral:

1. Create shareable content.

2. Use eye-catching visuals.
3. Craft compelling headlines.
4. Leverage trending topics.
5. Promote engagement.
6. Maintain consistency.
7. Boost your reach through ads.

Their advice is valuable and practical, but they are ways to follow trends and solicit others. Of course, their focus is on marketing skills, which are essential in business, and the content needs to be relevant and worthwhile.

However, Isaiah's description of the servant is characterized by its contrast with common cultural beliefs and practices.

"See, my servant, shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him - so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals." (vv. 13-14)

How could nations and kings be startled by the servant and at what they see? In today's language, he doesn't look like he's going viral on social media. What makes them surprised? Is it surprising that the one who is so marred would be elevated?

Isaiah 52 features poetic language that can be interpreted in various nuances and meanings. But it is apparent that the Lord is raising up the servant, despite the servant's disfigured appearance. The servant has been through humiliation and pain.

"Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases, yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted." (v. 4)

In Isaiah 53, the voice shifts to that of the kings of the nations, wondering what to see in him. Then, by verse 4, it appears that the nations have gained some understanding. They have come to see that this servant is someone who carries out God's will, and acts as God's instrument. Furthermore, the servant is willing to suffer for the sake of God's mission, and this suffering has significance for the redemption of the community.

This is a unique way of perceiving suffering and pain. Suffering doesn't necessarily have to be the final chapter in our story. If our suffering is aimed towards God's mission, if it's for the purpose of justice or to inspire and guide others, then it can hold a deeper meaning that we may not have initially recognized. Suffering can then become redemptive. Those who willingly choose a lot of suffering for the sake of the mission can actually be meaningful amid that brokenness. It is those who are not the victims, that choose to suffer can make a difference.

The image of the suffering servant is a representation of the community in exile and how the early church perceives Jesus Christ's death on the cross. Jesus is seen as the perfect model of the suffering servant who sacrifices himself to save everyone. These texts become significant when the faith community accepts its belief and faith through them. They offer a meaningful way to follow what they are called to do.

We are now in the season of Lent, which is a time of self-denial and repentance. During this period, we have an excellent opportunity to reflect on the lifestyle of the suffering servant. It is essential for us to recognize ourselves as God's servants and follow in Jesus Christ's footsteps. He lived on earth as a suffering servant and loved everyone unconditionally.

During Lent, we are called to be a beacon of light and bring justice to the nations, even though we may experience humiliation and suffering. We have hope because God can use our sacrifices, pain, and suffering to bring redemption and restoration to others. We may not need to go viral on social media, but our actions will inspire others and teach them new meanings of life. As believers, we can follow Jesus and his loving ways because Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

Friday, March 22: Get Ready

Written by Katie Phillips, Pastor, Vine Church, Dunn Loring, VA

Malachi 3:1-4 (CEB)

*Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me;
suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple.
The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming,
says the Lord of heavenly forces.
Who can endure the day of his coming?
Who can withstand his appearance?
He is like the refiner's fire or the cleaner's soap.
He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver.
He will purify the Levites
and refine them like gold and silver.
They will belong to the Lord,
presenting a righteous offering.
The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord
as in ancient days and in former years.*

I rarely think about the cleanliness of the baseboards in my home. But when I do – it's because company is coming over.

Or the faint cobwebs inside a lampshade? They just somehow go unnoticed in my home until I'm sitting with a visitor – and thinking quietly about how I should have swiffed the insides and the outsides of things.

The fervor that happens in the hour or two before guests arrive to my home stands in stark contrast to the cool way I try to welcome people into a home that surely doesn't normally look the way they are experiencing it.

Preparation for guests – especially important guests – requires a bit of thought, a bit of time, a bit of elbow grease for me. (This may not be the case for you – as you stay in a constant state of cleanliness and order. Well done! Let's hang out at your house the next time we get together, cool?) The notion of how we get ready – and for whom – is an interesting one for us this Lenten season.

The prophet Malachi is inviting us to consider an interesting question – one that is for all of us who are living not only aware of God's presence with us – but expectantly for the fullness of God's Kingdom come.

Are we ready?

Malachi tells us that “suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come.” The messenger is on the way. Are we ready? Can we be ready?

The prophet asks, “who can be?” or “who can endure?” Because the one whom we are waiting for is in the business of refining – of reorienting and reshaping in a way that improves upon what is. Malachi offers a whole series of metaphors for the work of cleaning up that’s coming – and none of them sound pleasant or easy to me: refiner’s fire, fullers’ soap, purifying silver. These processes are offered for things that are of value – ways for precious metals to be revealed, for fabric to be flawless, for a radiance and polish to be evident.

The imagery calls me to both delight and fear. It is comforting to know that I’m of enough value to be refined – but worrisome to imagine the process! The elbow grease that it’s going to take to shine me up is going to require something of me in the exchange, I fear.

For Malachi, the direct context was the rededication of the temple and the restoration of a displaced people. There is a crisis of food, of structure, of tradition, of stability, of power. As we read the larger work we recognize an all too familiar contention between people, a rift in community. Can God’s promise hold? Can God’s goodness make it through to the people and can the cries of the people make it through to God?

Our context may not feel much removed. We recognize the spaces where refinement is needed -- as individuals, as community, as parts of larger systems that fail to be just or loving.

And yet it’s right there.

It’s right here.

In the midst of a mess --- a messenger arrives reminding us that the problems of the human condition don’t need to be barriers between us and God. A transformation is at hand – and it comes through a Messiah who restores us to God and to one another.

The Good News of Jesus Christ invites us to a refining that comes not as a function of judgment or punishment – but an extraordinary act of love demonstrated through invitation, service, and the very real presence of the Living God. We’re offered a refining grace poured out as a gift.

Through Jesus Christ, we – like the priests (Levites) mentioned in Malachi – are restored to God fully able to make an offering of our very selves to the continued work of building God’s Kingdom here and now. Our flaws, our inconsistencies, and even our baseboards are transformed from being barriers between us and others – spaces of shame and embarrassment - and instead can be tools of reconciliation and hope.

We belong to the Lord, a pleasing offering, invited to see ourselves as God sees us – and to see others through the Refiners eyes as well. Restored. Graciously viewed. Welcome to the holiest of spaces. Cleansed. Swiffered – inside & out.

Sunday, March 24: Palm Sunday

Written by Alan Combs, Pastor, First United Methodist Church, Salem, VA

Zechariah 9:9-12

Lent is a time of preparation and expectation. In the early church it began as a time of final preparation for those who would be baptized at Easter, but it eventually expanded to incorporate an opportunity for all Christians to remember the promises of their baptism. It is a time of expectation because in that preparation our hope is to bring our whole selves to journeying with Jesus to the cross. Part of that journey leads us to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is clear that both Matthew and John had this passage from Zechariah in mind when they described this scene:

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

One has to wonder how these words were directed for the first audience who heard them. Who is the king that comes to them? Is it the Persian King Darius who allowed the exiles to return from Babylon and allowed the creation of the Second Temple? Other scholars think it a reference to Alexander the Great passing through Jerusalem and receiving a welcoming reception. In all likelihood, the prophet keeps the identity vague on purpose because the growing expectation was that this coming king would be different from all the kings that Israel had known.

The first clue comes in the words used to describe the king. The prophet describes the king as “triumphant and victorious,” which at first conjures up an image of a king leading a victorious returning army after a brutal battle. Zechariah is quick to upend that image by comparing the colt this king rides and the war horses of the kings of the earth. The prophet says, “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off” (Zech. 9:10). To ride on a donkey is to proclaim peace, as opposed to a conquering king on a war horse. The king of this prophecy is different from even the “good” kings and rulers of this world, who still often enforce what many consider as “peace” through violence.

It doesn’t take long to see why Matthew and John thought of this image when they thought of Jesus. They lived in a time where one of the chief benefits of living under the rule of the Roman Empire was the “Pax Romana,” the peace of Rome. While the Pax Romana might have meant a relative amount of stability and lack of conflict, the way the Romans maintained it was through military might and violence when necessary. Jewish folks knew that first-hand.

Of course the hope of the occupied and oppressed Jewish community for a Messiah wasn't necessarily the king envisioned by Zechariah; it was a conquering king of their own who would overthrow Rome and return Israel to its former greatness. You can see this even in the questions of the Disciples where their assumption was that at some point Jesus would lead his followers to overthrow Rome and restore Israel. But Jesus wasn't the kind of Messiah most folks were looking for. Instead of the conquering king riding in on a war horse, he is Zechariah's king, who is a herald of peace, in whom "the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations" (Zech. 9:10). Instead of conquering through violence, Jesus offers himself up to the violence of this world, and it is his death that he conquers sin and in his resurrection that he conquers death.

We see through a glass dimly, and while the prophet probably did not have a clear sense that this king would be Jesus as we know him from the Gospels, it is powerful that the expectation he named already spoke of a king who would be a Prince of Peace, not a general of war. Even after exile, in the midst of the building of the second temple, Zechariah knew Israel's (and the world's) hope couldn't be found in the cycles of violence that continue to try to dominate our world, and in which we often continue to seek security.

Another ambiguous line in his passage is the promise that God will "set your prisoners free from the waterless pit." Again, many people theorize who this could be about. Is it the exiles returning from Babylon? Is it another oppressed group? I think it is purposefully vague. Perhaps one faithful way of reading it is in the context of the contrast between this colt-bound king who announces peace and the rulers of this world who wield their power with violence. When we are told to look at the world "realistically" we are told that violence is just a part of the way things are. That we assume that nothing can be done is a pit of our own making. We need Jesus because we are in a waterless pit out of which we cannot climb on our own.

In the United Methodist Baptismal Covenant we make promises to "renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness," "reject evil powers of this world," and "accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression." These are not one time declarations, but a way of life we live into through Jesus Christ. To live into them, we look to that same king who rode a donkey, proclaiming peace in a world full of violence. We "confess Jesus Christ as [our] Savior, put [our] whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as [our] Lord." When we surrender to him this way, as we seek to live according to a different way than the ways of this world, certainly we become what Zechariah describes as "prisoners of hope," and as he rescues us from the waterless pit we are saved by water and the Spirit.

Monday, March 25: The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me

Written by Grace Han, Pastor, Trinity United Methodist Church, Alexandria, VA

Isaiah 61: 1-11

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.
Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks; foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines,
but you shall be called priests of the Lord; you shall be named ministers of our God;
you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.
Because their shame was double and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs.
For I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my whole being shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a
bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord
God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

In the gospel of Luke, after Jesus was baptized and tempted in the wilderness, he returned to Nazareth, his hometown and went to the synagogue, as was his custom. While there, he stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. And he unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."

And after reading, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and said to them:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

(**Luke 4:16-21**, paraphrased)

This is no coincidence that Jesus read from Isaiah 61 that fateful day. It wasn't an accident or pure good luck that the attendant handed him this particular scroll. There's something happening here we must pay attention to. As Jesus preaches for the first time in his earthly ministry, Jesus is making a proclamation about who he is and what he came to do. As Jesus declared: *today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

Here's what's important to know. This passage from Isaiah was written in the post-exilic period. It was written after many years of frustration and deep suffering when the Israelites were driven from their homes into exile in Babylon. They were defeated and humiliated and everything seemed to be crumbling around them. And just as they were on the verge of giving up completely, God spoke to Isaiah about what is to come: *The spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me... to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.*

And finally we see the promise that God makes: hope is not lost, good news is coming, healing and liberty are upon us, restoration awaits God's people. It was the long awaited good news the Israelites had been waiting for.

So when Jesus stood up to read at the synagogue in Nazareth, he knew exactly what he was reading. Reading Isaiah 61 not only recalled the promise of hope and restoration, it proclaimed that Jesus himself is the fulfillment of that promise. That Jesus is the Spirit of the Lord, and that in his very being, we find the fulfillment of the promise proclaimed in Isaiah 61. In Jesus, we find restoration, healing, rest, and celebration, a year of the Lord's favor.

And the best news is that Jesus came not only for the rich or the powerful or the mighty, but for all of us—the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. If you keep reading in Isaiah 61, that list keeps growing: comfort to all who mourn, strangers and foreigners. And God invites us all into an everlasting covenant, pulling us out of exile into communion with God.

This season of Lent, we know all too well the pain of exile, the humiliation of failure, the weight of suffering. We see war and violence and destruction all around us. And yet, just as we are on the verge of giving up, we see that the promise is not forgotten. Jesus stood up and fulfilled this promise.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Tuesday, March 26: A Miscarriage of Justice

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor, Bethel United Methodist Church, Woodbridge, VA

Isaiah 52:13-15 (NRSV)

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals— so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

A few weeks ago my phone buzzed with a news alert. It was a story about the execution of Kenneth Smith. Perhaps you remember reading or hearing about this story in late January. And for a short while I read about his trial, the manner of his execution, what he did that landed him on death row a lifetime ago, and all the appeals that happened trying to change his fate.

Kenneth's story is wild! He was accused of being a hitman, paid by a pastor to kill the pastor's wife. It turns out while in the midst of an affair, the pastor found himself in financial troubles. So he took out a large life insurance policy on his wife and then hired Kenneth to kill her, a crime for which he was convicted. A jury of his peers sentenced him to life in prison, but at sentencing the trial judge overruled the jury and sentenced him to death (the provision of state law that afforded the judge that power has since been revoked and ruled unconstitutional). A flurry of appeals followed the trial to no avail. And 11th hour calls for someone, anyone, to provide a stay of execution fell on deaf ears.

Every Holy Week we recall another wild trial. A peasant rabbi from a backwoods map dot was accused of attempting to overthrow the greatest Empire the world had ever known to that point. Jesus of Nazareth was brought before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate for the crime of inciting an insurrection.

Pilate attempts to get to the bottom of it. He can see the witnesses brought to testify against Jesus have been heavily coached; the trial is rigged. The problem is that the defendant doesn't offer much of a defense. Pilate realizes the defendant is innocent and seeks to dismiss the case. But a stacked jury of Jesus' peers, the assembled crowd, overrules the trial judge. Crucify him, that shout. Execute this criminal. Send him to death row, you can skip his last meal.

After I'd gone on my deep dive of Kenneth Smith's story, I read a draft sermon a colleague sent me. He said he, too, had come upon Kenneth Smith's story that week and that it had moved him to tears of sorrow and lament. But then he said he saw a vision: Kenneth Smith alive and whole in his Savior's arms. Kenneth Smith reconciled to and with his victims. Kenneth Smith unbound, unshackled, reveling in God's love and grace.

All made possible by a miscarriage of justice.

No, God's mercy for a sinner is not a miscarriage of justice. But the death of God's Son is an unjust travesty. The image of God had become so marred within us that we could no longer recognize the fullness of God dwelling in Jesus; rather we mistook him for a common criminal. The powers and principalities achieved death's goal: they snuffed out the light of the world; they killed the one in whom was life for all humankind.

And yet the promise of God remains true. God's servant, Jesus the Christ, was exalted! He was raised up! The powers and principalities, the rulers of this world, can try as hard as they might to do death's bidding; our God does and shall always have the last word.

Kenneth Smith was executed by means of nitrogen hypoxia. Essentially he was forced to breathe in nitrogen through a gas mask until he suffocated, his body completely depleted of life-giving oxygen. Once again the powers and principalities colluded with death to literally suck the breath of life out of another of God's children.

And yet the promise of God remains true. For all of God's children. All who share Christ's flesh shall be lifted up, shall be exalted. We shall all be reconciled to our enemies, we shall all be embraced with our Savior, we shall all revel unbound and unshackled in God's love and God's grace.

This week we remember the great miscarriage of justice at Golgotha and we repent of our sin that led to Christ's death. But we are reminded of the ultimate verdict given to Christ and to us by the only Judge whose words matter: we are innocent. We are free. We are alive.

Wednesday, March 27: Faith is a Highway

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor, Bethel United Methodist Church, Woodbridge, VA

Isaiah 35: 1-4

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!'
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'*

He strode out on stage like it was going to be any other normal interview. A comedic actor with a new book going to be interviewed by the comedian host of a late night talk show. Initially it seemed like a normal interview, the comedian talking about how he got into comedy. But when he started talking about his book it became clear this was not any other normal interview. Actor Rob Delaney said, "Around the time of my third son Henry's first birthday, he got really sick." The book is called *A Heart that Works* and it's about Henry's life, illness, and death and how a father and a family cope with the death of a one year old.

In Rob's interview with Stephen Colbert, Colbert asked him what it was like for him to watch his surviving sons experience this loss. He said one day he looked out his kitchen window and saw one of his sons in the backyard. He'd taken a big box and with his kindergarten spelling written tumor on it. And he was stabbing the box with a steak knife. Rob said normally you see your child playing with a steak knife and you take it away from him, but in this case he said, stab away buddy.

Stabbing a box on which you've written "tumor" is the sort of thing that would make the Biblical prophets proud. The Biblical prophets would often do things outside of normal, polite behavior in

order to prove a larger point, in order to show the people what was really going on. And they used vivid, poetic language to describe how the world is and what God wants to make the world into.

Isaiah uses pretty vivid metaphors in this passage. We see images of the wilderness and the desert. We hear of people walking on hot sand and ground so arid it is crying out for water. And he does this because in our world there are literal deserts and because in our lives there are times we go through that feel like we are living in a desert. And we don't want to live in a desert. And we just want there to be some place we can go and live and thrive and be normal.

Rob and his family lived in a desert for a long time. They walked on hot sand daily. But the point of Isaiah's text is not to describe the desert. It's not to revel in the hot sand. Rather Isaiah wants to declare what God can do, even and especially in the desert.

In an interview with CBS Mornings, Rob talked about an interaction he had with Gayle King prior to the show. He said that she approached him before the show and broke down in tears in front of him while asking him specific questions, hard questions, human questions. And when she went to apologize for that, Rob said her tears were like water in the desert.

It was water in the desert.

It is what our God offers us.

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing." "For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes."

This is a complete and total transformation, a complete and total redemption. This is God setting all the things right that this world and this life and this sin have made wrong. This is God coming and doing what we cannot do on ourselves.

The good news is, as Isaiah says, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you."

And when God comes, everything changes. Everything is different. Our response to this promise is joy.

But ours is not a joy that is rooted in some sort of denial of the tragic aspects of life. It is not a joy that is unaware that we live in a world where death touches us, marks us, and our grief separates us from others.

Rather ours is a joy and a hope that have drunk deeply of life in this world, with its blessings and its tragedies, ours is a joy and a hope that have drunk the earthly cup to the dregs and have heard the voice of truth say "Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God. He will come and save you." It is the type of

joy that comes when someone who was crucified is raised from the dead. It is the hope and the joy that comes from knowing God has not just overcome the tragedy of this life but has redeemed it, has made it right. Has caused the desert to flourish. Has caused the hot sand to become a cooling pool. Who has brought about a complete transformation, a complete redemption of all of this life.

Our God is coming to save us. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, through the cross and an empty tomb, God has saved us. In the death of His Son, and in the Father's insatiable and hopeful desire to be with His Son and with all who share His flesh for all eternity, the glory of God has been revealed. Be strong and do not fear. Here is your God. He will come and save you.

Rob recounted in an interview how they told their other two sons their brother was going to die. And then he said "Because they're kids they ask again and again. Which we kind of do in our own heads as adults because we have to repeat these things because we don't believe them."

There are some things we have to tell ourselves over and over again because we don't believe them. Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God. He will come and save you.

Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God. He will come and save you.

Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God. He will come and save you. I promise.

Thursday, March 28: Come, Let Us Walk in the Light of the Lord

Written by Drew Colby, Pastor of Grace United Methodist Church, Manassas, VA

Isaiah 2:1-5

“The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

Swords into plowshares. Guns into gardening tools. God that sounds nice.

But how?

It was a knock-down, drag-out fight. Not physically. Not like, abusive, just... marriage. He had been keeping something from her and she found out. It was a big deal.

She confronted him with her tears and her anger, bringing to light what he thought he had kept from her, tucked away in the shadows. When she brought it to light, he panicked and got defensive. He started to try to rationalize and justify himself by shining light on *her* shortcomings. That meant war. It was tit-for-tat, a rhetorical race to see who could cut the swiftest and the deepest. They said things they didn’t mean. They said other things that they meant whole-heartedly, but never should have said.

She walked out. He froze, head in hands, and he wept.

The prophet Isaiah is speaking to a people who had failed God. It was their fault. Part of the prophet’s task is always to drag what is done in the shadows into the light, to expose the failures of the so-called People of God to “walk in his paths, in the light of the Lord.”

*Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the Lord,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged!*

*Why do you continue to rebel?
Your whole head is sick,
and your whole heart faint.
From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in you,
but bruises and sores
and bleeding wounds.*

-Isaiah 1:4-6

With sermons like that, it's no wonder how many prophets got killed!

The husband went out to find his wife and apologize. He couldn't find her. It was getting late, so he laid down in bed, curled up in their crimson bed sheets, wet with tears, and tried to sleep.

When she came back home she laid down next to him, reached over and turned on the light, but it was her touch that awoke him. She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward her. He turned to face her, but couldn't look her in the eye. She lifted his head, insisting that he meet her gaze and see her tears.

"I forgive you," she said. "We'll figure this out."

He melted into her arms. The light in the room seemed to get brighter.

*Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.*

-Isaiah 1:18

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

-Isaiah 2:1-2, 5

In the midst of failure, Isaiah gives the people a promise, that they *are even now* headed toward a mountain, the mountain of the Lord! Yet, in the fullness of time and in this season of Lent what we find is that the "mountain of the Lord" is actually located at the foot of the cross.

The cross is at once the low point of human failure, and the mountain of our reconciliation. All that is done in the shadows is brought to light as the worst of human sin and failure is revealed. It flows, visibly, crimson, from the bruised and wounded body of Christ.

And yet, the “word that flows from Zion,” as Isaiah foretold, the arbitration and judgment that flows from the mouth of the Lord as he reigns from his cross-shaped throne is mercy, forgiveness. “I forgive you.”

This, I am convinced, is the only way anyone, any people, is moved to the point of beating swords into plowshares, and guns into gardening tools. This is the only way that the shadows of our life and world are filled with the light of the Lord.

So, come, let us walk. Let us walk in the shadow of the cross *which is* the Light of the Lord.

Friday, March 29: Good Friday – God Has Been Abandoned for Us

Written by Brian Johnson, Pastor, Haymarket Church, Haymarket, VA

Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24

I am someone who saw the suffering caused by God's angry rod.

He drove me away, forced me to walk in darkness, not light.

He turned his hand even against me, over and over again, all day long.

He wore out my flesh and my skin; he broke my bones.

He besieged me, surrounding me with bitterness and weariness.

He made me live in dark places like those who've been dead a long time.

He walled me in so I couldn't escape; he made my chains heavy.

Even though I call out and cry for help, he silences my prayer.

He walled in my paths with stonework; he made my routes crooked.

...

The memory of my suffering and homelessness is bitterness and poison.

I can't help but remember and am depressed.

I call all this to mind—therefore, I will wait.

Certainly the faithful love of the Lord hasn't ended; certainly God's compassion isn't through!

They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness.

I think: The Lord is my portion! Therefore, I'll wait for him.

The book of Lamentations was written in response to a national tragedy. Jerusalem had been conquered. The Temple had been destroyed. Political and religious leaders – along with many of the elites of society – had been carried off into exile. Their nation, their religion, their way of life had all been laid to waste. Those who remained in the land were suffering from political violence, economic catastrophe, national humiliation, and theological crisis (how could God allow such a tragedy to befall God's chosen people!). Things were dark. They were bad. God's people felt as if they had been forsaken.

Lamentations is, as the name suggests, a lament. It is a book of poetry that cries out to God, grieving over the trauma that has been endured. It has been, traditionally, attributed to the prophet Jeremiah (though we don't really know who the author is).

Lamentations does not have an easy or obvious turn towards hope. It does not (at least not clearly) say "things are bad, but we know they will get better." The pain with which the author is wrestling is too raw, too recent, too real. These are words written from the depths of darkness and despair. It is

midnight, and there is no sign that dawn will be breaking soon. The author's world has been torn to shreds. All hope seems lost.

This pain – this sense of abandonment – is familiar to us. These words ring true. The moment when the diagnosis comes back and it's worse than you'd hoped. The moment when you found out that you've lost a loved one. Broken relationships. Death. Heartbreak. Trauma. Unspeakable tragedies in our communities, our nation, our world. Many of us, at one point or another, have found ourselves sitting in stunned silence, staring into the dark, unable to imagine how we could ever possibly move forward.

This suffering – the pain voiced by Lamentations – is also familiar to anyone who has ever read the gospels. These words ring true to the story of Jesus. Although Lamentations is not directly quoted in the gospels, this sense of unimaginable pain, of dwelling in the darkness – it finds a place at the heart of Jesus' story. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus is “a man acquainted with suffering.” The story told in the gospels revolves around the cross, on which Jesus is said to have cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (quoting Psalm 22). It's hard to imagine what it means for Jesus – who is God with us, God-in-the-flesh – to feel forsaken by God. And, yet, whatever it means, it certainly has much in common with the absolute desolation experienced by the author of Lamentations. In Lamentations, the author wrestles with the deepest darkness of suffering and loss, giving voice to a shared human experience of hopelessness. On the cross, Jesus enters into that shared experience. On the cross, Jesus joins in our lament. On the cross, he, too, faces the darkest night, the furthest reaches of human suffering.

That's the story we tell during Holy Week – and particularly on Good Friday. It's the story for which we spend all of Lent preparing ourselves. The story is this: God, in Christ, has chosen to suffer with us. God has seen our suffering, has witnessed the darkness we face, has heard our cries of despair and hopelessness – and God has decided not to abandon us to it. God has said, “I am with you. I will join you. I will enter into the darkness with you in order to lead you through to the light.”

On the cross, our God enters into the deepest darkness, the foulest evil, the most painful suffering – and is not defeated by them. Our God experiences abandonment and despair – and yet remains faithful to us. Our God is beaten down by violence and hatred – and yet continues to pour out love for us and for the whole world. Our God has been abandoned. Our God has experienced the despair to which Lamentations gives voice. God has faced the worst for our sake. And, because of that, the pain expressed in Lamentations does not have the final word. Because God has entered into the depths of our despair, the final word belongs to hope. Because God has suffered death for our sake, the final word belongs to life. God has gone to the cross for us. Despair has been transformed into hope. God knows what it is like to sit in the darkness. And God is leading us out into marvelous light. Thanks be to God.

Saturday, March 30: Holy Saturday – A Song of Hope and Bones

Written by Matt Benton, Pastor, Bethel United Methodist Church, Woodbridge, VA

Ezekiel 37

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”
(Ezekiel 37: 1-3)

Can these bones live?

That is *the* question. Not just for the future of Israel, but for the direction of the cosmos.

For, like Ezekiel, we too have been led by the hand of the Lord, not to a mass grave whose bones are indistinguishable, one body from another, but instead we have been led to a tomb that had never been used before to look upon bones encased in a body very recognizable: Jesus of Nazareth, one hailed and executed as King of the Jews. His bones are not dry, but they are lifeless all the same. The breath of life has been snuffed out from the one in whom was light and that light was life to all humankind.

And we are asked by that very Spirit: can these bones live?

What will become of these bones? If they stay dead, if the God-man, if Emmanuel remains in this tomb, if we will have proved successful in killing God, then all is truly lost. We are forever condemned to live under the reign of death, the reign of sin, the reign of evil. And then the saying that is written will come true:

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”

If these bones cannot live, neither can ours.

But. But! If these bones can live, then our God in Christ will prove to be victorious over sin and death. If these bones can live, then through Christ, God will reign victorious. If these bones can live, we can live in hope that our destiny is not this tomb, but instead the life that is light to all humankind. If these bones can live, then we know that our God will redeem the hurt and the pain, the suffering and hate, the violence and oppression that sin and death hath wrought in our lives and in our world. All things will be made new. If these bones can live, the breath of life will be eternally breathed into

the children of Adam, the one into whom that life was first breathed. If these bones can live, so too can ours! If these bones can live, then our God can and will stitch together and renew all of that which was declared very good at creation.

If these bones can live, then the saying that is written will come true:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

Ours has always been the cross. Ours has always been the grave. But if these bones can live, then ours shall also be the skies!

We stand before a tomb, we stand before *the* tomb, as the Spirit of the Lord asks, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Sovereign Lord, You alone know.

Sunday, March 31: Easter – God’s Victory Banquet

Written by Brian Johnson, Pastor, Haymarket Church, Haymarket, VA

Isaiah 25:6-9

*On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.
In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”*

In the end, God’s going to throw a party.

Throughout Scripture, we see God’s ultimate victory imagined as a feast at which all people are welcome. Jesus consistently describes the Kingdom of God (God’s way of doing things, God’s way of being in the world, how the world looks when God’s love reigns – now and in the future) as a feast – a banquet to which all people are invited, and at which the poor, hungry, and outcast are given seats of honor. The ministry of Jesus was, to a large extent, defined by his willingness to share his table with anyone and everyone – so much so that his opponents accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard.

In the book of Revelation, this feast – God’s victory banquet – is described as “the marriage feast of the Lamb.” When God puts all things right, and we are united in love (to Jesus and each other) for all eternity, it’s going to be a party.

Isaiah paints a similar picture. This is a promise of hope for people who are struggling, starving, overwhelmed by suffering and despair. In the end, God shall set all things right. God will set a feast,

and all people will be welcome, and evil shall be destroyed, and death will be defeated, and God will wipe every tear from every eye, and our mourning shall be turned to dancing.

What's interesting about this passage – this word of hope, this promise of a banquet, this pronouncement of blessing – is that it comes in the middle of a long section in which the prophet pronounces God's judgment. The prophet Isaiah is denouncing the evil he sees around him, decrying all that is wrong with the world. And then, in the middle of denouncing evil, he proclaims this word of hope: all people shall come to God's banquet, death itself will be defeated, and God will wipe every tear from every eye.

What this tells us – at least in part – is that God's victory includes the destruction of all that is evil. The triumph of God's justice means the defeat of injustice. The victory of love means overthrowing the power of hate. For hope to reign, those who spread hopelessness must be stopped.

In other words, the glorious banquet that God has promised does not come easily. In the end, love will reign, and God will win (in fact, God has already won!). But, also, evil must be destroyed and death must be defeated (in fact, death has already lost!). God promises universal salvation AND universal judgment of evil. And because evil has its fingers in everything, that judgment is going to hurt a little. Parts of us that are broken will have to be healed. Things that are not as they should be will have to be set right. All that is wrong – within us, among us, around us – must be wiped away. And it will be wiped away – we can trust that God will win because we have already seen God's victory, on the cross and in the empty tomb. We do not get to Easter without Good Friday, and we do not get to the resurrection without the crucifixion. God says no to all that is wrong so that God can establish – and invite us into – the Kingdom of God's righteousness.

In the face of a world that is sometimes overwhelmingly beautiful and, at other times, overwhelmingly broken – and often a mixture of the two – the Good News is that God has promised to fix it – to overcome evil, drive out sin, destroy death – and bring us home to a victory feast that is greater than we could ever imagine. It might hurt a little, we will certainly have to let go of many things (our sin, our selfishness, our desire for power, our participation in all that is opposed to what God wants for the world). But God has already won the victory, God shall make all things right, and all of us – every last one of us – will have a place at the victory party.

And not only is this a promise, but it's also something that we have experienced. It is something we celebrate and anticipate every time we celebrate communion. When we worship Jesus, we get a glimpse – even if just for a moment – of God's party. There is a feast coming – a party at which all are welcome, and God's glory is offered to everyone – and we have seen it, we have tasted it. Jesus sets a table for us, he invites us to a feast, at which the bread is his body, the wine is his blood, death is defeated, and God's Love reigns.

God's victory feast is coming. God's victory has already been won. Sin and despair and pain and suffering and death are on the run. Jesus is our host. Jesus is the feast. Jesus invites everybody to his party. No one is excluded. And the feast is even better than we can imagine.

"The crucified and risen savior sets the table, and the rich meat and fine wine [envisioned by Isaiah] are [Christ's] own body and blood." - Alan Padgett