

***2024 Lenten Daily Devotional
February 14th-March 31st, 2024***



Open Table United Church of Christ (UCC)

Sunday Worship Gatherings at 10:00am at:

Steel River Playhouse

245 E. High Street, Pottstown

Mailing Address:

PO Box 1034

Pottstown, PA 19464

2024 Lenten Daily Devotional

February 14th - March 31st

We have created this daily devotional to help you to engage with the Lenten season every day in a special way. On each page of this devotional booklet, you'll find an entry for each day of Lent, including a scripture reading, reflection, and prayer. This is meant to be used as a daily devotional, but we are grateful for whatever way these devotionals enhance your Lenten experience. These devotionals will also be posted on the Open Table United Church of Christ Facebook Page every day throughout the season.

We have also included a candle and a small wooden cross to hold in your hand in this bag for you to use at home while you engage with the devotional, day by day. Use them as you find them most helpful.

May this be a special season for you, drawing near to Christ as Christ draws near to you.

In Christ's Love,

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto, Longswamp United UCC, Mertztown, PA

Rev. Selina Hamilton, Rosedale UCC, Laureldale, PA

Rev. Matthew Hoover, Pleasantville UCC, Chalfont, PA

Rev. Rebecca Hoover, One UCC, Kenhorst, PA

Rev. Nichole Jackson, Open Table UCC, Pottstown, PA

Rev. Zack Jackson, Open Table UCC, Pottstown, PA

Rev. Linda Kozlowski, Good Shepherd UCC, Tuckerton, PA

Rev. Becky Grace Sausser, St. John's United Church of Christ, Allentown, PA

Rev. Addie Strong, St. John's United Church of Christ, Lansdale, PA

Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak, St. Peter's United Church of Christ, West Lawn, PA

Rev. Mark Stryjak, Alleghenyville United Church of Christ, Mohnton, PA

(Daily Devotional Writers)

**Scripture quotations from the Common English Bible, © Copyright 2011 Common English Bible. All rights reserved. Used by permission. (www.CommonEnglishBible.com).*

**Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.*

**Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition, Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.*

**Scripture quotations from The Message, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress, represented by Tyndale House Publishers. All rights reserved.*

**Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com
The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™*

Ash Wednesday

Wednesday, February 14, 2024

written by Rev. Selina Hamilton

Matthew 6:19-21 (NRSV)

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

Reflection: Today is Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, and by a coincidence of the calendar we are remembering our mortality as we celebrate the love we've been blessed to experience in this life. What a beautiful coincidence, that can help us to remember that even if we are made from dust, even if we will return to dust someday, here and now in this time in between, we have been given the gift of love and the commandment to love. Love is the greatest treasure we have been offered and love is the greatest treasure that we can share with the world. This Ash Wednesday, and throughout the season of Lent, may we rest assured that God loves us and Jesus loves us. May we show our love for God, our love for Jesus, and our love for one another.

Prayer: Loving God, you created us in love and called us to love one another. In this season of Lent, help us to trust in your love for us and help us to be bold in our love for others as we follow Jesus in life and ministry. Amen.

*

Thursday, February 15, 2024

written by Rev. Matthew Hoover

1 John 1:8-9 (NRSVUE)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Reflection: Sin is not always a popular subject and yet the author of First John calls us to an awareness of our own sinfulness. We are each imperfect; we have each caused hurt in our lives, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes intentionally out of anger and malice. Lent is a good time for us to take stock of our sinful hearts that betray our best intentions for ourselves and God's intentions for our lives. Can we be honest with ourselves that each of us has sinned in big and small ways? In Lent we are called to move past our self-deception and be open with ourselves and with God.

In is only when we are honest and open with God and each other that God can forgive us. It is only when we confess that we find forgiveness.

Prayer: Holy God, we are sinful; we have messed up. In the honesty of our confession, may we receive your forgiveness and strive to live according to your will. Amen.

Friday, February 15, 2024

written by Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

2 Timothy 4:1-5 (NRSVUE)

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Reflection: I was a little bit of a weird kid, and I was very interested in Susan B. Anthony and the Suffragette Movement as an elementary student. And while I now know that the mid-19th century Suffragette movement that ratified the 19th amendment was wrongly focused solely on the rights of white American women, as a child I saw it as the epitome of social justice. So much so, that reading this scripture from 2nd Timothy instantly made me think of this Susan B. Anthony quote, “I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do because I notice it always coincides with their own desires.”

Scripture has been used as a weapon throughout history to uphold policies and beliefs that are absolutely against the teachings of Jesus Christ – not only keeping certain communities from voting in America but to justify violence, harm, and hurt against many disenfranchised groups here and across the globe. Timothy warns against this in today’s reading.

Prayer: Creator of us all, keep us from seeking out scriptures and teachings that affirm our own desires and suite our previously held biases. Encourage us to open our minds and hearts to all God’s people and God’s truth known through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Saturday, February 17, 2024

written by Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak

Psalm 32 – (NRSVUE)

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silent, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Reflection: Our Lenten journeys are often times of reflection, seeking to draw nearer to God, and asking for forgiveness. It is easy to say that we believe in forgiveness and practice our communal confession each week. But it is harder to truly bear ourselves to our God. Confession makes us vulnerable, at times it can make us feel unworthy or question ourselves. But the reading from Psalm 32 promises there is no uncertainty in how God will respond to you. You can bear it all to God in confidence that God will forgive, that God loves you – including all our broken pieces. This psalm highlights the paradoxical combination of human confession that brings liberation, and divine comfort that brings consolation. In other words, in confession we are both nakedly revealed before God yet also lovingly sheltered by his intimate love and forgiveness.

Prayer: Holy God give me the courage to confess to you all that weights me down and the confidence to know that your love surrounds me in forgiveness each and every time I come to you. Amen.

First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 18, 2024

written by Rev. Linda Kozlowski

Genesis 9:12-17 (CEB)

God said, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Flood waters will never again destroy all creatures. The bow will be in the clouds, and upon seeing it I will remember the enduring covenant between God and every living being of all the earth’s creatures.”

Reflection: God offers, “I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures.” God will remember.

I grew up thinking the responsibility was all on me to remember God’s promises, to follow God’s ways, to learn the “rules” of religion. I had a much narrower view of God with faith being right/wrong, either/or, without room for questioning, for exploring, for going deeper. And God is larger. God is wider. God is more than we can ever imagine. God remembers each of us, all of the creatures, all of creation. God is always seeking to offer more hope, to reveal more peace, to share more love, to welcome us with more grace. God offers the symbol, the bow in the clouds, as God’s own reminder of the everlasting and enduring covenant with every living being of all the earth’s creatures. Breathe in this truth, friends. Breathe in this wonder, beloveds. Breathe in this promise and trust that God is with you today, tomorrow, and every day to come.

To Ponder: How does it feel to receive the truth that God remembers you, that God knows you fully and completely, that God loves you with an enduring, everlasting love? Take some time in this season of Lent to reflect on this truth and give thanks to God.

Prayer: Holy One, we give thanks for your enduring covenant. Help us rest in your presence and give thanks for all you offer.

As we journey with Jesus to the Cross, help us remember how you journey with us, that we are never left alone. Help us share this good news as we journey forward. Amen.

Monday, February 19, 2024

written by Rev. Zack Jackson

Psalm 77:1-3 (NRSVUE)

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints.

Reflection: I've lived with clinical depression since I was in middle school. As an adult, I've found some respite through therapy and medication, but nothing works perfectly. Living with depression feels like being a planet with an elliptical orbit around a black hole. When the planet is far from the black hole, everything is normal, but once it starts to get closer, I can feel the gravity pulling pieces of me away into the darkness. I know that it is inevitable and cyclical. I know that I will keep orbiting and the pull will decrease as I move farther away, but as my orbit draws nearer to the black hole, I forget that. In the moment, it feels like this is all there is, and the darkness is eternal. God feels distant and hope is unimaginable. In those times, I find comfort in Psalms like this one. Go ahead and read the whole chapter when you get a chance. It's remarkable because it's unremarkable. So many Psalms, like this one, are cries of lament from a person who cannot feel God's presence. The Psalms are just as much about God's absence as they are about God's presence. So when the Psalmist continues and ends their poem with shouts of praise, we know that they are desperate words, shouted into the darkness. They are not the praises of someone who feels full, but cries of someone trying to make themselves remember when God felt near to them. That makes me feel less alone, and that brings me hope.

Prayer: God of the darkest night, it is often hard to believe that you are near. In those times that we cannot feel your presence, keep us steady. Give us hope. Help us to remember your goodness in the past, and may that be a beacon of light which guides us home. Amen.

Tuesday, February 20, 2024

written by Rev. Nichole Jackson

Psalm 77:4-15 (CEB)

You've kept my eyelids from closing. I'm so upset I can't even speak. I think about days long past; I remember years that seem an eternity in the past. I meditate with my heart at night; I complain, and my spirit keeps searching: "Will my Lord reject me forever? Will he never be pleased again? Has his faithful love come to a complete end? Is his promise over for future generations? Has God forgotten how to be gracious? Has he angrily stopped up his compassion?" Selah

It's my misfortune, I thought, that the strong hand of the Most High is different now. But I will remember the Lord's deeds; yes, I will remember your wondrous acts from times long past. I will meditate on all your works; I will ponder your deeds. God, your way is holiness! Who is as great a god as you, God? You are the God who works wonders; you have demonstrated your strength among all peoples.

Reflection: Most of us are familiar with the kind of overwhelm the Psalmist describes, having experienced it at one time or another in our lives: “I am so, so, so upset, I can’t even sleep. It’s hard to even think about a good day because the last one was in the ancient past.

I try to meditate my way through this, but nothing helps. And God, seriously? When are you going to let up?” The psalmist even acknowledges that they are complaining, and yet, they go on and on, still. This feels a bit courageous to me: to name the mess, and even blame God – while praying to God – that means that God knows that we are blaming God! Eek!

The psalms are often gritty – full of sorrow, anger, frustration, loneliness, fear – we feel these scriptures, we don’t just read them. They are real, scriptures of expression and communion with God that is honest and raw. Usually, by the end of the Psalm, there is some resolution of heart, a return to trusting God and leaning into faith, and that’s not because the psalmist has resigned themselves to suffering, but rather, once the Psalmist puts all the cards on the table – once they have expressed what they needed to express – there is nothing left to get out and God meets them there: in the center of their pain.

The Psalms grant us permission to put all the cards on the table – to lay all the sorrow, the anger, the frustration, the loneliness, the fear on God’s shoulders – so that we can allow God to meet us in the center. What might you need to express to God today? What pain might God’s touch soothe? Let us offer that to God in prayer.

Prayer: God who is acquainted with our pain, receive that which we can’t hold. Offer us, not only your listening ear, but also your tenderness that meets our truth. Heal us and remind us of your goodness once more. Amen.

Wednesday, February 21, 2024

written by Rev. Mark Stryjak

Proverbs 30:1-9 (NIV)

“I am weary, God, but I can prevail. Surely I am only a brute, not a man; I do not have human understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One. Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is the name of his son? Surely you know!

“Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

“Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.

Reflection: In our Lenten disciplines, I feel it is important to be disciplined as spoken about in this selection of Proverbs. The writer eventually after questioning many things about God, sets his sight on two variables. As a humble sojourner he requests to be not forgotten.

During our lives, we have overcome and found the true life and a mere request to be not forgotten is our communal confession, God do not forget me. We all ask collectively to God, do not forget us, sinners who have tried and tried again, to be an example of your love. In our Lenten travels today, may we clear our ways of all that is unacceptable to God, and hold to fast all that is good.

And secondly, the writer asks to be given his daily bread. A life of simplicity, basic needs met, and basic needs provided for whoever is in need.

Through this understanding of less is more, we learn the importance of simplicity when we focus and desire our faith to guide us this day.

Prayer: Holy God, please provide to me this day exactly what I need and nothing more. May the distractions of worldly wants and have be recognized and moved to let the Lord's love have complete attention in our body, mind and soul. Amen

Thursday, February 22, 2024

written by Rev. Becky Grace Sausser

Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18 (NRSVUE)

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.'

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.'

Reflection: Have you ever gazed with wonder at the stary sky? This simple act has been performed by humanity for millennia and it is little wonder why! The stars have served as a compass and guide to sailors and navigators, inspiration to great artists and philosophers, and most importantly, they served as a promise between our Creator God and our forefather Abraham. In the first 11 chapters of Genesis we see creation formed and God saw that it was good, but it doesn't take long for things to get complicated as humanity continually turns away from God. The wonderful news is that God had a plan to save humanity! It would start with Abraham and a promise, and would unfold through the generations to an anointed one, the Messiah, Jesus Christ! This Lenten season, we are blessed with the opportunity to renew our own promise with God as we strive to grow deeper in our faith and closer to Jesus.

Prayer: Holy God, grant us new insight this Lenten season as we study Your Holy word, and help us to grow closer to you as we strive to share Christ's love and light with the world. Amen!

Friday, February 23, 2024

written by Rev. Rebecca Hoover

Romans 4:2-5 (CEB)

Because if Abraham was made righteous because of his actions, he would have had a reason to brag, but not in front of God. What does the scripture say? Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. 4 Workers' salaries aren't credited to them on the basis of an employer's grace but rather on the basis of what they deserve. But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don't work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly righteous.

Reflection: Righteousness is one of those words we Christians use a lot, especially in Lent, yet are we sure about its meaning? Often we think of righteousness as being, well, right, often obnoxiously so. If you're a child of the 80s like me, when you hear "righteous" your mind might conjure other words to go with it like "gnarly," "excellent," or "cowabunga." Righteousness, however, has more to do with faithfulness than awesomeness or sanctimoniousness. In the context of our scripture reading for today, righteousness has to do with Abraham's faith in God's promises. The LORD God made a promise to Abraham that took 25 years to find fulfillment. Can you imagine having the faith to believe in a promise that took a quarter century before it came into being? In our instantaneous society, waiting 25 days for something is a leap. So many of our faith's promises, though, are the slow-burning kind that ask a long faithfulness of us. This Lent, how can we increase our capacity for righteousness, for keeping faith, as we wait for God's promise of resurrection to find us?

Prayer: Faithful God, your promises do come true, even if they take generations to reach fulfillment. Through examples like Abraham and Sarah, teach us again how to wait with faithful impatience and faithful hope. Amen.

Saturday, February 24, 2024

written by Rev. Addie Stong

Mark 8:27-30 (NRSV)

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Reflection: One of my absolute favorite quotes comes from author Madeleine L'Engle who writes, "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

It was these words that I thought of as I read this passage from the book of Mark and sat with Jesus' question to his disciples. "But who do you say that I am?" To be honest, there are lots of people in the world whose words and actions suggest that they believe in and follow a different Jesus than the one I know and love, and whom I would not like to answer Jesus' question on my behalf. And yet, the question still stands and is still asked of me and of each one of us. "But who do YOU say that I am, <Insert your name here>?"

What if people only knew Jesus by the light that our that our life, our words, our spirit, our actions give off? Would they want desperately to know the source of that light? And would that source truly be the extravagantly welcoming, unceasingly compassionate, and abundantly loving Christ?

Prayer: Gracious God, may all that I say, all that I do, and all that I am be a faithful (not perfect) reflection of your light, that my life might tell the story of your abundant love. Amen.

Second Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 25, 2024

written by Rev. Matthew Hoover

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (NRSVUE)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her and also give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Reflection: What is the name, those who know you best call you by? Most likely, it's not the name on your birth certificate. Even if it is, perhaps it is the way it is spoken by those chosen individuals that makes it special when it passes their lips. In this scene of covenant, Abram and Sarai are given special names, Abraham and Sarah as sign of the covenant and as a sign of God's love for them. Even God is named specially as "El Shaddai" in Hebrew. In this naming the Holy One's love is on full display. What a blessing it is when the one who truly know our names calls out to us and what a blessing it is that we can call out to God.

Prayer: Holy One, speak to our hearts. Name us, claim us, and show us your care. Amen.

Monday, February 26, 2024

written by Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

Genesis 21:1-7 (NRSVUE)

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Reflection: I think Sarah has a better sense of humor than I do. As someone who struggled with issues of infertility for years before having a child, there's not a whole lot that seems funny about waiting so many decades for a long-desired child. Furthermore, I'm in my 30s and think raising a kid is exhausting; if I was closing in on 100 years of age, I might be crying more than laughing as I dealt with the trials of raising a young kid.

If you were reading another pastor's devotion on this scripture, it might say something about how everything happens in God's time. Or that receiving God's blessing requires patience. But, as someone who experienced infertility, when people gave those types of platitudes, it made me want to punch something. Nothing feels worse than someone saying God is intentionally not choosing you to bear a child. So, here's what I'll say instead; Sara's got it right. Sometimes you choose to laugh, because if you're not laughing, you might be crying.

Prayer: God of our deepest sighs, may we be in tune with our feelings and guided by the gift of our deep emotions. Help us to not fall back onto empty platitudes and easy answers, but to embrace the fullness of our experiences and feelings. For we know you cry with us, laugh with us, experience anger with us, and bless us, too, with deep, deep joy. Amen.

Tuesday, February 27, 2024

written by Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak

Genesis 22:1-19 – (NRSVUE)

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Reflection: Just two short month ago we found ourselves waiting in the season of Advent and now we find ourselves in Lent, which is a time of preparation (and waiting) to celebrate Jesus's resurrection at Easter. Yet, that preparation and waiting are significantly important. It is during this time where we are able seek God through prayer, serve through almsgiving, and build our relationship with God through fasting from a behavior or item, or by giving of ourselves in a new way. During this preparation we can experience the superior joy in waiting for the arrival of God's promise.

In Lent we wait for God's promise of the resurrection, in our scripture from Genesis, Sarah was waiting on the Son that God promised her. In both, the waiting is on God's promises, and yet we realize that we find blessings not just when the waiting is over, but also through God's presence with us in the waiting.

Prayer: God of Patience, help us be grateful for the times of waiting in our lives and help us remember not only the joy at the end of the waiting, but the blessings of your presence with us in the waiting. Amen

Wednesday, February 28, 2024

written by Rev. Linda Kozlowski

John 12:37-43 (CEB)

Jesus had done many miraculous signs before the people, but they didn't believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of the prophet Isaiah:

Lord, who has believed through our message? To whom is the arm of the Lord fully revealed? Isaiah explains why they couldn't believe:

He made their eyes blind and closed their minds so that they might not see with their eyes, understand with their minds, and turn their lives around—and I would heal them.

Isaiah said these things because he saw Jesus' glory; he spoke about Jesus. Even so, many leaders believed in him, but they wouldn't acknowledge their faith because they feared that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. They believed, but they loved human praise more than God's glory.

Reflection: “They believed, but they loved human praise more than God’s glory.” Oh, beloveds, how often do we turn away from God’s glory in order to seek praise from humans, from the world around us? Perhaps we seek human praise for the jobs we do, for the way we look, for the good works we offer. Perhaps we seek human praise because we feel we are not enough—not good enough, not worthy enough, not rich enough, not smart enough. Perhaps we are hesitant to believe that we were created in the image of God, that we are loved as we are, that we are enough in God’s eyes. Jesus touched those others said were untouchable. Jesus loved those others viewed as unlovable. Jesus reached out to the marginalized, the cast aside, the outsiders. Jesus’ love reminds us that God’s glory is enough for us. God’s love will sustain us. God’s grace cleanses us. God’s wisdom washes over us. This is God’s truth: you are enough. Release any need to rely on human praises and trust in God’s steadfast, enduring presence. Trust in God’s glory.

To Ponder: Friends, take some time today to look in the mirror and see the love of God gazing back at you. You were created by God. You are loved by God. You are enough. Breathe in this truth.

Prayer: Good and gracious God, thank you. Thank you for creating us in your image. Thank you for reminding us how your glory shines all around us; how you know us fully and completely; how you love us unconditionally. Help us follow the footprints of Jesus today and in the days to come. Help us live as you created us to live and release our need to look for praise outside of your realm. Amen.

Thursday, February 29, 2024

written by Rev. Zack Jackson

Exodus 19:5-6 (NRSVUE)

Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.’”

Reflection: I was my Grandpop’s favorite. I know that you’re not supposed to have favorite children or grandchildren or whatever, but it’s true. He told me on his deathbed while his mind was addled with morphine and his discretion wasn’t on point.

That was an incredible moment for me because I had never felt like anyone's favorite before. My role in the family had always been as the easy one; the one who didn't show emotions, went with the flow, and ate whatever was put in front of me. No one's favorite, but also no one's least favorite either, and that suited me fine. I liked the feeling of being someone's favorite, though. I liked it a little too much, and my sisters who were present with us certainly did not appreciate it. For them, his confession soured an otherwise beautiful goodbye, and made our future interactions a lot more awkward. That's what favoritism does. The Israelites (as well as later Christians) believed themselves to be God's favorites, and while it made them/us feel good, it has led to millennia of conflicts. But here's the thing, God never said that we are his favorites. God never said the Israelites were his favorite nation nor did God say that the followers of Jesus were his favorites either. God said that we were "set apart" and "blessed", but that is not a declaration of favor. It is a job description. It is a responsibility. We are set apart to serve and to bless others, not to be served by others and blessed by God. The Church has, historically, gotten it all backwards. Being a follower of Jesus does not make you better than anyone else and you do not deserve any more rights than your neighbor. Being a follower of Christ makes you a priest to the world. It makes you a servant of all creation. What a wondrous and beautiful calling.

Prayer: Lord, make us servants. The Church has too often chosen domination and entitlement over joyful service. Help us to practice humility, and may we be your priests in the world. Amen.

Friday, March 1, 2024

written by Rev. Nichole Jackson

Psalm 19:7-14 (NRSVUE)

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can detect one's own errors?

Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Reflection: During Lent, we engage in some form of introspection and confession: examining the state of our hearts, paying attention to our longings, our shortcomings, the ways in which we fall short of loving God and our neighbors, and we offer these things to God with contrition, asking for forgiveness. This season is often one of growth in our spiritual life, for that reason, and can result in enlarging our capacity to love.

This can also be a painful process, as acknowledging the ways we fall short or cause harm in others is not easy. It doesn't feel good to recognize that we have been the person to cause another pain, and it can even bring us shame when we confess these painful truths, believing that we are made up of only our worst qualities and actions.

While this season may offer invitations to engage in introspection and confession, we are reminded that it is not merely on OUR shoulders to figure out what needs to be healed. The Lord gives us the strength and capacity to see these places of misalignment. The Lord is the One we do the work with, and we are not met with shame or embarrassment, but rather with mercy, grace, and love. It is with the Lord's help that we can grow, that we can change, that we can even believe that change is possible.

So, as you engage in this work, remember that God loves you and goes with you.

Prayer: Loving One, thank you for inviting us to Yourself – with all parts of our personhood – those for which we are most proud, as well as those parts that need your healing touch. As we seek to examine our interior world, meet us with your mercy, grace, and love. Remind us of your promise that nothing can separate us from your love: nothing. Guide us on the good path. Amen.

Saturday, March 2, 2024

written by Rev. Mark Stryjak

Mark 9:2-8 (NIV)

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

Reflection: The power of the Transfiguration is that it plants in our hearts and minds the brilliance of eternity on the mountain with the greatest prophets, emboldening us for the journey together as the body of Christ. The Transfiguration thus prepares us to come to terms with our humility, our soil nature, our utter dependence on God.

Those words describe in a nutshell what this event of the transfiguration means to us on the deepest possible level. That we are dust and to dust we will return. Our only hope comes from the understanding that we are dependent on God. There is no other way and as this scripture pulls all of us into its mystery, where occurrences like this are not of this world, it is then and only then that we find what we have been looking for a long, God.

The dependence on an eternal being that is learned through text and experience is a quest and journey for the ages. It is far from easy to be completely dependent on anything and, especially some being for which we have no way of describing. Our leap of faith comes down to a simple message then, can we continue the process of letting go in order to fill that space with the mystery of God?

Prayer: Eternal Spirit, may the truth that you conveyed so long ago be recognized in our lives this day. May the slowing down and silence, the confounding mystery of You and the transfiguration reveal once again that there is only one way towards faith, complete faith in You.

It is not the easy way or the way we might want it to be, but it following our faith is God's will, this day and forevermore. Amen

Third Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 3, 2024

written by Rev. Becky Grace Sausser

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (NRSV)

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'*

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Reflection: "Did you just blow in from a loser convention?" I was asked while walking down the street. This was not an unusual occurrence since I had started wearing a black t-shirt with a bold white font that read "LOSER". On the back of the shirt was Matthew 16:25, "For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it." I also have one that says, "FOOL", and lists 1 Corinthians 1:25. In our world that is focused on instant gratification, 2-day delivery, and representing oneself as perfect (in front of the camera), it is little wonder that for so many the idea of following Christ seems foolish. Look at verse 22 again, some are looking for signs, some are looking for what they believe wisdom should look like, while the whole time unconditional love and salvation is standing right there! The things that this world places value in contradict what God says is important, that is why it is so important to remember that, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Prayer: Precious Lord Jesus, thank you for your salvation freely given to me! Thank you that you paid the ultimate cost so that I might not die, but have ever lasting life! Help me to share this message of salvation with the world so that all may see how great is your love for us. Amen!

Monday, March 4, 2024

written by Rev. Rebecca Hoover

1 Kings 6:21-22 (CEB)

Solomon covered the temple's interior with pure gold. He placed gold chains in front of the inner sanctuary and covered it with gold. He overlaid the whole temple inside with gold until the temple was completely covered. He covered the whole altar that was in the inner sanctuary with gold.

Reflection: Until recently, I had been unaware the world holds an intense fascination with King Solomon's gold. Biblical scholars, adventure seekers, explorers, and archaeologists have been searching, apparently for generations, for the location of the mines where Solomon got all that gold for the Temple. If the subject fascinates you, the memoir *In Search of King Solomon's Mines* by Tahir Shah is an interesting read. The quest to find these legendary gold mines sounds similar to others' exploits to find the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail. While it would be cool to locate such biblical artifacts and places, at some point we have to wonder why? What would the world gain from discovering such treasures? Would more people really come to believe in God or something? Aside from a penchant for decorating with gold, King Solomon is the person who asked God for wisdom when God would have granted him anything. What is our heart's desire? Treasure? Fame? Glory? Lent is a good time to explore what our hearts seek most and what would be gained if we discovered it.

Prayer: Holy God, you invite us to seek you first and then everything else shall be given to us as well. Help us better learn the desires of our hearts and the reason for those desires so that our lives may increasingly glorify you. Amen.

Tuesday, March 5, 2024

written by Rev. Selina Hamilton

Psalm 84:1-4 (NRSV)

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Selah

Reflection: Where does God dwell? Where do you feel closest to God? Where do you feel God's loving and protective presence the most clearly? Like the psalmist, our souls long to find places where we can connect more deeply with God. Our hearts sing with joy when we find those places. Today, remember that those places aren't as hard to find as we might worry they are. Sparrows and swallows can find a home in God's dwelling place. The places where birds lay their eggs become God's altar. The places where we live and love and share and find our rest also become God's altar. God's dwelling place is right where you are. Sing for joy, and know that God is with you.

Prayer: Holy God, help us to remember that wherever we find ourselves, we are in your dwelling place. We are welcome, we are loved, and we are protected here in your house, and we sing your praise as we offer our lives to you. Amen.

Wednesday, March 6, 2024

written by Rev. Matthew Hoover

Mark 11:15-17 (NRSVUE)

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves, and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”

Reflection: It’s time for some spring cleaning!!! What gets in the way of your connection with God? Whatever it is, get rid of it. Remove everything that is a distraction from your hearts, minds, and souls, so that you can focus more deeply on the life of prayer. As Jesus cleansed the physical Temple, we are called to cleanse the spiritual temple of our souls to become people of prayer. This is the work of Lent, to clean out the house and get our lives in order. We clean out the house in confession and repentance; we clean out the house in getting rid of those things that keep us from contemplation and prayer.

We do so because we know that it is into that empty space where our “stuff” used to be, God enters to bless us. Clean out a space in your lives (physically and spiritually) and enter a time of silence and prayer. Create a holy place in our souls. Create a house of prayer, a house where God can dwell.

Prayer: Cleansing God, enter in and bless us. Move aside our stuff and create a place where you can dwell, and we can dwell with you. Amen.

Thursday, March 7, 2024

written by Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

Ephesians 1:3-6 (NRSVUE)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Reflection: Many churches are struggling with declining attendance. Certainly, less families are choosing to attend Sunday worship, but churches also struggle with how to make folks feel welcome. When so many of our congregations become too focused on balancing the budget, building repairs, and clinging to more prosperous days of the past – we lose sight of what’s most important about church membership.

Paul’s writing to the Ephesians helps us focus in; reminding us that Christ adopts us all into God’s family. Our calling in our faith communities is to focus on the love we know in Christ and adopting people into the fold. As the church are we spending our energy painting the walls and paying the bills? Or are we working to grow spiritually and adopt others into our community as God adopted us?

Prayer: Heavenly Parent, thank you for welcoming us into your family through Jesus Christ. Help us to be better at welcoming others. Make our faith communities places where folks can grow, praise, and worship – places that look to the future boldly and are eager to adopt people into the fold. Amen.

Friday, March 8, 2024

written by Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak

Ephesians 1:7-14 (The Message)

Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free, signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This down payment from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

Reflection: Are you ready for an adventure? When my husband says those words, I am not sure if I should be excited or a bit nervous. Whether planned or not, life has handed us many different adventures along the way. However, following God in our lives have led us on some of the biggest adventures. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians gives us a small glimpse of this life in Jesus. Right before our passage Paul speaks of spiritual blessings from God and adoption into God's kin-dom. Our passage reminds us of the gifts of forgiveness and grace (vv 7-8), the revealed mystery of God's will (v 9) and finding out who we are and what we are living for – glorious living (v 12). When Jesus Christ enters our life, we discover that getting to know him more and following him closely is the greatest of adventures. Seek him now and every day for real life adventure!

Prayer: God of the unknown, thank you for always walking with me and for loving me. Help me to be open to the life adventures that you call me to, reminding me of my purpose for glorious living. Amen.

Saturday, March 9, 2024

written by Rev. Linda Kozlowski

John 3:1-9 (CEB)

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom."

Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Reflection: Nicodemus asks the question: “How can we be born again?” I believe we are born afresh over and over. As we grow. As we go deeper in our faith. As we explore the wonder of God’s creation and creatures. As we let go of all that no longer matters and lean into the life God offers. As we receive afresh the teachings of Jesus. The Spirit of God is always blowing in our midst, transforming us, gentling us, whispering to us, reminding us whose we are. We belong to God, friends. This season of Lent reminds us to pause, to listen, to repent, to turn around, to journey with Jesus through the joys and the struggles, through the delights and the sorrows. And we are constantly changed—we are constantly born afresh.

To Ponder: How has your faith transformed you? What are you learning in this new season? How are you being renewed, refreshed, transformed? What do you need to release? And what do you need to receive?

Prayer: Sacred and Divine Presence, move among us, around us, within us. Fill us with your Spirit of transformation so we might see the beauty of your world, so we might receive the sacred stories of our neighbors, so we might journey forward with Jesus as we share his Good News. Amen.

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 10, 2024

written by Rev. Addie Stong

Ephesians 2:1-10 (The Message)

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

Reflection: If you're anything like me, reading words like “All we do is trust him enough to let him do it.” incites panic and the assumption that these words from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians were clearly written in a different time and for different people with shorter to-do lists and far less responsibility and anxiety. Let someone else do it? I could never!

But alas, I do believe the contain truth for us as well. One of the hardest things in life is letting go of control and realizing how little control we had in the first place. In a “self-made” culture that tells us we need to be setting the world on fire and solving all of our problems with ambition, determination, independence, and a good “I’m the boss” mentality, it’s downright unsettling to think about handing things over to God.

It feels passive or even lazy to surrender all our strategy and planning and managing in favor of waiting and trusting and hoping.

But here's the thing: in this beautiful upside-down world that Christ draws us into, it is freedom, not failure, that comes when we unclench, step aside, and let Christ work in all the ways he always has, always does, and always will. When we fully realize that what God can create, orchestrate, redeem, and put into motion is so much more than any of us could, it feels a little easier to give in to God's grace.

Prayer: Trustworthy God, when you don't move in the ways in which we think you should or at the speed with which we wish you would, calm our anxious hearts and slow of racing minds, so that we can feel the incredible freedom that comes when we dare to let go and "let you do it". Amen.

Monday, March 11, 2024

written by Rev. Nichole Jackson

Exodus 15:22-27 (NRSVUE)

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" He cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he put them to the test. He said, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you." Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they camped there by the water.

Reflection: Can you think of a bitter season in your life? Maybe you are currently experiencing a season of bitterness. You know the type - just when you thought things were going to get better, that the season was finally coming to an end, something else happens and you feel lower than ever before.

If you're like me, or the Israelites on their way out of Egypt, you don't do well at suffering in silence... When I'm miserable, it's hard to answer the question, "How are you?" an innocent person asks me politely with anything other than the truth: "UGH!!! I'm miserable. Here is what is going on..." And then I watch the other person slowly back away, realizing that they were getting a lot more than what they really asked for.

God delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into a life of freedom and, eventually, flourishing. But the journey to that flourishing life felt a lot more like flailing. Even though God proved, over and over again, that God would provide for them, all the Israelites could see was their lack, the obstacle ahead, and the trials of their present circumstances. Marah. Bitter. Hopeless. Abandoned.

However, we have the advantage of seeing where God brings these people. We read about the ways God provided for them, time and time again, until they reached their promised land. Not once did God abandon them, even though all they could taste and see was the bitterness.

We too, can trust that God will not abandon us either. Let us pray that we, too, can trust in that promise.

Prayer: Accompanying God, we aren't always able to see outside of our bitter circumstances. May you help us to remember your faithfulness. Help us to trust that you are providing what we need, and that you will guide us through. Amen.

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

written by Rev. Mark Stryjak

1 Corinthians 10:6-13 (NIV)

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Reflection: Nothing like a good dose of hell, fire and brimstone to start your morning or end your evening. Temptations are boiled down to the simplest of ideas, do not do anything that takes your focus off of God and the faith you are trying to be committed to. It is through these words, whether we take them literally or as metaphor, that serve as a reminder of all that can derail our best plans to hold onto our faith. And it is the God that we put our complete trust in, day in and day out, that promises once again, a way forward.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, we come to you with a list of distractions and temptations in our lives and all around us. We pray with all our heart, mind and soul, that our faith will continue to lead us towards your way, today and forevermore! Amen

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

written by Rev. Becky Grace Sausser

John 8:12-20 (NRSV)

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' Then the Pharisees said to him, 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.' Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.' Then they said to him, 'Where is your Father?' Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.'

He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

Reflection: Boom! I have transported you to a football field in the middle of the night. There are no stadium lights, just you at one goal post and me at the other in total darkness. If I were to light a single candle, you would be able to see it, even at that distance. A single candle can actually be seen from up to 6 football fields away! Just one little candle! In a recent winter storm, our power went out for a few hours, and we managed to get a candle lit and suddenly the whole room was filled with soft warm light. Light is powerful! Light's wavelength can reach out eye from vast distances in a spectrum of colors operating between 400-700 nanohertz! In our passage today we are reminded that Jesus is the light of the world. During Advent, we remember Isaiah 9:2, that the people who were walking in darkness have seen a great light. Jesus is the light of the world, and the world needs the light now more than ever before!

Prayer: Light of the World, bathe us in Your Holy light this Lenten season. Help us to grow closer to you, help our hearts to reflect your love and light into the world so that all might come to know the light of your love and salvation! Amen!

Thursday, March 14, 2024

written by Rev. Rebecca Hoover

Psalm 51:8-12 (CEB)

Let me hear joy and celebration again; let the bones you crushed rejoice once more. Hide your face from my sins; wipe away all my guilty deeds! Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me.

Reflection: Psalm 51 is virtually a compilation of penitential phrases greatest hits. Tucked quietly away within this psalm's pleas for purification and lamentations of guilt is verse 8, "Let me hear joy and celebration again, let the bones you crushed rejoice once more" (emphasis mine). Let the bones God crushed rejoice once more.... While I don't believe God is out to get us, looking for opportunities to crush us, I do believe God allows us to experience hardship and trials. To grow into stronger, healthier beings, we need some challenge and some stress in our lives. Think back to a time when you felt your bones were crushed...where was God for you during that time? Maybe you sensed God in the community around you who prayed with you, checked in on you. Maybe God felt distant and uncaring. If the latter is true for you, find a way to give voice to your feelings. Woven within Psalm 51 is the psalmist's cry for attention, a shout out to a God who feels distant in distress. And if you need to borrow some words to give voice to your feelings, adopt Psalm 51 as your prayer and plea.

Prayer: Please don't throw me out of your presence, Holy God, please don't take your holy spirit away from me. Return the joy of your salvation to me and sustain me with a willing spirit. Amen. (borrowed from Psalm 51:11-12)

Friday, March 15, 2024

written by Rev. Selina Hamilton

Hebrews 4:14-16 (NRSV)

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Reflection: Do you remember being young and being absolutely certain that the adults in your life had no clue what your experience was like? I've been thinking about that feeling as my kids look at me, sure that I have never been frustrated by a friendship or a parent, sure that I've never been irrationally angry or sad, sure that I've never suffered in the way that they suffer. It helps to remember my own experience as I help them navigate theirs. It helps to remember that feeling as they roll their eyes at me for saying they will get past and through and over whatever they're facing. It's interesting to imagine God in Jesus, experiencing how it feels to be human, sympathizing with our weakness, being tested, and knowing with absolute certainty what humanity can and will get past and through and over. God's grace is for us, and God knows our deepest needs because God has experienced our deepest needs.

Prayer: Jesus, our Brother and our Savior, forgive us for our rolled eyes and our childish doubts. You are with us. You have suffered and been tested, and you know who we are and what we need. Help us to trust your wisdom and grace. Amen.

Saturday, March 16, 2024

written by Rev. Matthew Hoover

John 12:1-8 (NRSVUE)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Reflection: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." It is that line that challenges me most about this scripture. It challenges me because it is a challenge about putting our faith into action. It is a challenge about how we use our resources. More appropriately, it is a challenge about the ways we hoard our resources. Jesus says the poor are always here with us. If we believe other places of scripture (like Matthew 25), then we know that Jesus is found among the poor. If Jesus is there among the poor, then shouldn't we be there as well using our resources to bless Jesus and the poor.

Often, we get caught up in the politics of our possessions and those who are poor, but we forget about the politics of Jesus that dictate that political ideologies are not the thing that makes an ultimate claim on our lives. Jesus is, the Gospel is. All throughout Lent so far, we have been claimed by God, let us live into that claim.

Prayer: Challenging God, in blessing the poor, we are to find blessings. In giving, we receive. Help us to live out these simple, yet profound promises. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 17, 2024

written by Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSVUE)

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.

Reflection: What is written on your heart? What is deeply carved into the being of who you are? In today’s reading from Jeremiah, God is writing forgiveness into the hearts of God’s people. Sure, first God is placing God’s law in the people’s hearts, but this is followed by forgiving their iniquity and remembering their sin no more.

Imagine a world where forgiveness was carved into everyone’s hearts? A world where we could step away from feelings of resentment, we could be relieved of our debts; and fear and anger wouldn’t guide our lives. Imagine a life where forgiveness was carved into our own hearts? We wouldn’t be so judgmental and hard on ourselves; we could see past our flaws and move toward a more fulfilling life. How would you live differently if forgiveness was written onto your heart?

Prayer: O Gracious One you bestow upon us the ultimate forgiveness. Teach us how to better forgive others and forgive ourselves. Clear bitterness and anger from our lives and replace it with love for you, God, love for others, a love for ourselves. Amen.

Monday, March 18, 2024

written by Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak

2 Corinthians 3:3-11 (NIV)

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!

For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Reflection: Have you ever written a recommendation for someone? Maybe it was for a job they were applying for, a college they were hoping to get into, or an internship to continue their learning. Trusting you to give an honest reflection of who they are, they asked you to complete this task. What if our lives were our recommendation for a life in Jesus? What would others learn about Jesus through us? In our passage from 2nd Corinthians, Paul tells us that, “you are a letter from Christ, . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” The good news is that our lives are letters to reveal Christ, but they also are written by God. In this letter, God has made us qualified to be ministers of a new covenant. What an amazing gift we have received from God.

Prayer: God of infinite love, thank you for having the confidence in me to live as a minister of your new covenant. Help me to live a life that writes letters reflecting your love in our world. Amen

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

written by Rev. Linda Kozlowski

Acts 2:14-24 (CEB)

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, “Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect; after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams. Even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy

I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke. The sun will be changed into darkness, and the moon will be changed into blood, before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

“Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this. In accordance with God’s established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. God raised him up! God freed him from death’s dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang onto him.

Reflection: God pours God’s Spirit upon all God’s people, and the Spirit transforms us, urges us to dream, to hope, to share the good news of Jesus’ miracles, wonders, and signs. The Spirit is abundantly poured on all God’s people without exception. And together we prophecy—sharing all we have seen, heard, felt and learned. Together we see visions—of people following Jesus’ lessons, loving and listening to each other, learning from each other. Together we dream—of a time when the world will overflow with peace, with space for all to be exactly who they are, with many hearts, minds, and hands open to welcome and accept each other.

It's going to take a lot of work and intention. We're not there yet. And this season of Lent invites us to release the urge to judge, to take time to learn from those who are beautifully different, to remember the way Jesus saw and touched, loved and listened, how he calls us to do the same. With God, love can overcome hate; life can triumph over death. This is our dream. This is our vision. May we live into God's call to unity.

To Ponder: What dreams do you have for your life, for your Faith Community, for the Church, for God's world? Take time to pause, to dream, to receive the Spirit's whispers.

Prayer: Divine One, pour your Spirit on us afresh. Help us breathe deeply and receive your messages, your blessings, your wisdom. Help us move together with our neighbors near and far so love can reign in your kin-dom, so new life can be abundant and received by all of your children. Amen.

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

written by Rev. Zack Jackson

John 12:44-45 (NRSVUE)

Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me."

Reflection: I was once gifted a Christian bumper sticker. It was a simple little thing, but I never put it on my car. It wasn't because I was ashamed of being a Christian. It was because I was ashamed of my driving, and I didn't want to drag Jesus down with me! I was worried that if I cut someone off or drove too aggressively, people would see my Christian bumper sticker, and think, "Christians are the worst!" I was young and thought I had way more influence than I did, but my heart was good. The truth is that when people see you, they see the one who sent you. People will see Jesus when they interact with you no matter how you act. If they see you posting hateful memes on Facebook, they will see Jesus posting hateful memes on Facebook, and will want nothing to do with him. For many people, you are the only Bible that they will ever read, whether you are an accurate translation or not. That's a humbling realization, and one that should make us take pause and ask how well we are truly reflecting the Christ. Are we living lives of love that draw people deeper into the Christ mystery or are we recklessly dragging Jesus into the mud with us? My guess is that we do both, probably on a daily basis, but let us take some time of intentional introspection this Lent and pray to become more accurate reflections of Christ's divine love.

Prayer: God of love, we have not always been messengers of your love. There have been times that we have caused others to think that you are vengeful and angry because of our own temper and pride. May we become, instead, like beautiful mirrors which reflect your light into the world. Amen.

Thursday, March 21, 2024

written by Rev. Addie Stong

Psalms 118: 21-25 (NRSV)

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

Reflection: “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” were the only words to the song that we sang every single morning during preschool “circle time” at Hilltop Christian Nursery School. I don’t remember much about my days as a 3 and 4 year old, but I’d like to think that they were shaped, even if I didn’t consciously realize it, by the simple, daily reminder, that God had created the day I was living in.

My daily singing of this familiar passage of Psalm 118 ended the day I graduated to kindergarten, but in so many ways, I wish it hadn’t. What if every single morning, instead of running through my mile-long to-do list or fretting over the events of the day, I still reminded myself of this truth?

Now there is a rub for me and that is the assumption is that, because we are told to “rejoice and be glad in it”, life ought to be wonderful, enjoyable, and easy breezy and if it’s not, we’re doing something wrong, or perhaps just not rejoicing hard enough. But let me assure you, I don’t think our Psalmist wouldn’t be asking God to “Save us” if everything and everyone was supposed to be happy, healthy, and well all the time. Things fall apart, people get sick, tragedies occur. And still, God is there.

Our devotion today is a simple one: A reminder that this day, whether it has been the worst you’ve had in a while, it’s shaping up to be one of the best, or it’s just plain ordinary, is created and held by our savior. Nothing you will experience or have experienced today is apart from God. Good, bad, ugly—God is at the center of all of it. I pray that we adults might take some “circle time” to notice and be glad that we are not alone on the journey.

Prayer: God who answers and saves, we set aside regret for yesterday and fret for tomorrow, to simply say “thank you” for this day that you have made. As we think about all that it has held or all that it will hold, remind us that you hold us in the midst of it. Amen.

Friday, March 22, 2024

written by Rev. Mark Stryjak

Philippians 2:12-18 (NIV)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Reflection: We have a continual job to do as servants striving to live as faithful human beings. It is difficult to live this life and commit ourselves to peace and all things positive, as God has willed. To do this alone will bring failure, but to walk each day leaning and praying to God for our daily bread, we can...and will, be able to live out our faith.

I have learned it takes true intentionality, not just the fulfilling words to hear, but the actions in which cement them in our faith journey. That solid path, with reliance on God for all things, will bring us towards a faithful reunion one day with our creator.

Prayer: Holy and promising spirit, we hear these words and this ongoing message to turn, repent and sin no more and we know that it takes complete homage to You, in order to focus our lives on what is true and pure. May the words we hear, the actions we take, always be guided by you, our Holy and promising spirit! Amen

Saturday, March 23, 2024

written by Rev. Becky Grace Sausser

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (The Message)

Thank God because he's good, because his love never quits. Tell the world, Israel, "His love never quits." I didn't die. I lived! And now I'm telling the world what God did God tested me, he pushed me hard, but he didn't hand me over to Death. Swing wide the city gates—the righteous gates! I'll walk right through and thank God! This Temple Gate belongs to God, so the victors can enter and praise.

Thank you for responding to me; you've truly become my salvation! The stone the masons discarded as flawed is now the capstone! This is God's work. We rub our eyes—we can hardly believe it! This is the very day God acted—let's celebrate and be festive! Salvation now, God.

Salvation now! Oh yes, God—a free and full life!

Blessed are you who enter in God's name—from God's house we bless you! God is God, he has bathed us in light. Adorn the shrine with garlands, hang colored banners above the altar! You're my God, and I thank you. O my God, I lift high your praise. Thank God—he's so good. His love never quits!

Reflection: There is an undeniable connection between our season of Advent and our season of Lent. I know most of our trees have been put away for months now and only a few diehard folks still have their Christmas lights up (you know who you are), but follow me for a minute. During the season of Advent we celebrate the coming of the Messiah, the birth of Christ, the anointed one! See, our Bible is actually one connected story... a love letter between God and God's people. God created humanity to be the ambassadors of his love on earth. God made a covenant with humanity, but time and again they broke that covenant, but God had a plan to save the world! God sent his only Son, not to condemn the world, but to save it! Christ came to bring the evangelion, the good news! That all who believe in him would not die, but have ever lasting life, because Christ conquered death! Without Christ's birth, there would be no resurrection, and without the resurrection, all would be lost.

Prayer: Creator, Son, and Spirit one, we praise Your Holy name! Thank you for your blessed salvation in this holy Lenten season. Prepare our hearts and minds for the joy of Easter morning, amen!

Holy Week

Palm Sunday

Sunday, March 24, 2024

written by Rev. Rebecca Hoover

Mark 11:1-3 (CEB)

When Jesus and his followers approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave two disciples a task, saying to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘Its master needs it, and he will send it back right away.’”

Reflection: St. Francis de Sales is credited with saying something like, “nothing is small in the service of God.” At the outset of Holy Week, especially when we 21st century disciples know all the events to come, Jesus giving two disciples the task of finding a colt seems pretty small (and slightly odd). However Palm Sunday would not be what it was without that colt, and Holy Week would not have quite the same stage set without the Palm Sunday parade. Jesus continues to give us disciples tasks, sometimes unglamorous and boring tasks akin to fetching animals. This Holy Week what tasks is the Lord giving you? Maybe getting the church ready for yet another worship service? Printing bulletins? Preparing music? Cleaning the sanctuary? Lending a listening ear? Running an errand? Cooking something? Showing up to worship and pray? Whatever task Jesus entrusts you with this week, trust that it is a necessary part of God’s wild plans of salvation and love.

Prayer: Gracious God, throughout this Holy Week, strengthen our connection to the story of your Son’s death and resurrection. Help us not only to find our place within the story of salvation, but please help us to know our role is meaningful. Bless all that we offer to you, and use our efforts for your glory and for the sake of the world you love. Amen.

Monday, March 25, 2024

written by Rev. Selina Hamilton

John 12:1-8 (NRSV)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?’ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’

Reflection: Imagine being at dinner when the host’s sister poured perfume worth about a year’s salary on the feet of one of the guests, and then proceeded to dry the guest’s feet with her hair.

The intimacy of this moment and the value of the perfume were both remarkable, and Jesus makes clear that both were the right thing. We ought to offer Jesus our deepest and most intimate truths. We shouldn't hold anything back out of embarrassment or a sense of decorum and propriety. We shouldn't hold anything back out of a belief that it is too valuable to share. We are full of excuses for why we can't and shouldn't and oughtn't, and still Jesus calls us to share our hearts and our treasure to the glory of God, every chance we get.

Prayer: Jesus, help us to not hold anything back from you, just as you have not held anything back from us. Help us to not count the cost of loving you. Help us not to be ashamed to worship at your feet. Amen.

Tuesday, March 26, 2024

written by Rev. Matthew Hoover

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (NRSVUE)

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of the proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Reflection: We think we are so smart and that we have it all figured out. Then God reveals to us just how foolish we truly are. We cannot live a life apart from God. We are fools for trying to live without God. It is a lesson we learn each Lent. In God is wisdom; in the cross is salvation for those who are foolish enough by the world's standards to admit they don't have anything figured out. In God's wisdom is the way of the Christian life. As we live in this Holiest of Weeks may we endeavor to carry that way of life beyond Lent.

Prayer: Wise and all-knowing God, remind us of our foolishness when we try to live without you. Teach us your wisdom and way of life. Amen.

Wednesday, March 27, 2024

written by Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

John 13:21-32 (NRSVUE)

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining close to his heart; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do."

Now no one knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the festival,” or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

Reflection: The Wednesday of Holy Week is often referred to as “Spy Wednesday” – under the assumption that Judas was a spy on behalf the government and the officials seeking to arrest Jesus. For most of us, when Judas comes to mind we don’t think Judas the Spy, but Judas the Betrayer.

But something is amiss – if we read this scripture closely it’s not Judas who betrays Jesus alone -but Satan who enters him and pushes the action forward. Additionally, I always found it strange that Jesus outrightly tells the disciple that the person he hands the bread will betray him – and they still don’t follow what’s happening.

A seminary professor once asked, do you think Judas knew Jesus would be crucified? Perhaps Judas didn’t love the direction Jesus’ ministry was taking and thought an arrest and a night in jail might clear Jesus’ head. Was it God’s plan for Jesus to die on a cross so God needed Judas to betray Jesus? Or did God create good from an impossibly bad situation where the government officials put Jesus to death for his work of justice and love?

Judas’ actions after Jesus’ death certainly show a man who felt deeply guilty. I’m not letting Judas off the hook here, but I think part of a life of faith is embracing the mystery and the unknown; not acting like we have all the answers.

Prayer: Holy One, keep us open to all the questions of faith. Keep us from believing that we fully understand how God acts in the world. Help us to stay open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and give me fresh eyes each time I read the scriptures, even when they are words I’ve read over and over again. Amen.

Maundy Thursday

Thursday, March 28, 2024

written by Rev. Dr. Kimberly Stryjak

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 (NIV)

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

“No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Reflection: Often, we think of people who are leaders as people who are here to be served due to their position and status. Jesus was God in the flesh, and yet he didn't expect special treatment, or to be served. Instead, he came to show us a different way.

In John 13, we read about the last meal Christ shared with His disciples. That night, Jesus taught them the principle of humble service by washing their dirty feet. He wanted to set an example of how they should treat others. If the disciples were going to follow him, they too should joyfully serve others.

Every opportunity for service we encounter may look different, but one thing's the same: there's great joy in serving. The purpose behind acts of service isn't to bring ourselves praise, but to offer Christ like love to others, so our lives become living continuations of the good news Jesus shared.

Prayer: Divine Love, thank you for showing me the way to service others in joy. Please help me to humble myself to both serve those around me and also be able to accept when other serve me. Amen

Good Friday

Friday, March 29, 2024

written by Rev. Linda Kozlowski

John 18:1-9 (CEB)

After he said these things, Jesus went out with his disciples and crossed over to the other side of the Kidron Valley. He and his disciples entered a garden there. Judas, his betrayer, also knew the place because Jesus often gathered there with his disciples. Judas brought a company of soldiers and some guards from the chief priests and Pharisees. They came there carrying lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus knew everything that was to happen to him, so he went out and asked, "Who are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I Am." (Judas, his betrayer, was standing with them.) When he said, "I Am," they shrank back and fell to the ground. He asked them again, "Who are you looking for?" They said, "Jesus the Nazarene." Jesus answered, "I told you, 'I Am.' If you are looking for me, then let these people go." This was so that the word he had spoken might be fulfilled: "I didn't lose anyone of those whom you gave me."

Reflection: Today is Good Friday. Today we journey with Jesus to the Garden, to the Cross. Jesus knew betrayal. Jesus knew pain. Jesus knew death. And still Jesus loved.

In the midst of all that was happening in the Garden and all that was to come, Jesus told his captors it was him they were looking for. Jesus sought to protect his friends, to fulfill God's will so not one of God's people would be lost.

Friends, there is nothing we can ever experience that Jesus has not experienced and lived through. Some may betray us. Some may desert us. We will experience pain and suffering, sorrows and losses. And Jesus knows. And Jesus loves. Jesus seeks to carry our burdens because he has experienced the fullness of life—the joys and the sorrows. As we pause and ponder, reflect and remember on this Holy Day, may we remember Jesus' sacrifices, Jesus' love, Jesus' presence, Jesus' promise to never lose a single one of us.

To Ponder: Take some time in quiet stillness to reflect on the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus. Take some time to remember his life, his ministry, his death. Give thanks for the many ways you have been blessed by the One who is Love.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for guiding our journeys, for protecting us, for loving us, for keeping your promises. Today we weep. Today we remember. Today we journey with you to the Cross. Life is challenging. Life is messy. Life is beautiful. Life holds both struggles and joys. And you are with us always. For this we give thanks from hearts overflowing with gratitude. Amen.

Holy Saturday

Saturday, March 30, 2024

written by Rev. Zack Jackson

1 Peter 4:6 (NRSVUE)

For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.

Reflection:

Welcome to Holy Saturday, friends. We broke bread on Maundy Thursday, wept at the cross on Good Friday, and tomorrow we will rejoice at the empty tomb on Easter Sunday, but today? Today we are in the ground. We are in the murky, uncertain realm of the dead. What good is today other than for waiting? I would point your attention to this little verse in 1 Peter for a spark of hope. This verse is a callback to the previous chapter in which Peter wrote, "He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah". There was a tradition in the early days that survives through the Eastern Orthodox Church that Holy Saturday was a busy day for Jesus as he descended to the land of the dead to bring life to all who were in bondage there, including, as this passage says, the bad guys. This tradition is called "the Harrowing of Hell". For those of you who are not farmers, "harrowing" is a process of tilling the top of the soil so that it can be made ready to plant seeds. I love that image. Jesus spends his Saturday like a farmer of souls, tilling the land of the dead and preparing it for new life. Jesus takes Hell and turns it into a garden. If Jesus can make a garden out of Hell, what could possibly be impossible for him? What blighted neighborhood, political crisis, or broken relationship is so damaged that it cannot be fixed by the one who is growing tomatoes in Hell? Nothing is impossible. No one is too far gone. We worship the God of Impossible Things. Let's plant our own gardens.

Prayer: O God of Impossible Things, you who make light work of the worst evils that humanity can conjure; make us gardeners. Help us to see the potential in the world and to not be overwhelmed by the enormity of its problems. Give us your vision, and help us to till the soil and tend the garden until your Kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.

Easter Sunday

Sunday, March 31, 2024

written by Rev. Nichole Jackson

John 20:1-18 (NRSVUE)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflection: Happy Easter! He is risen! Alleluia! What a glorious day to celebrate! Death has no victory over the grave! Alleluia!

While we celebrate this glorious turn of events, when we read the gospel narratives about this story – especially John's version – we find a bunch of...well, chaos. There is excitement and confusion and bewilderment and grief, and each moment seems to capture a new and unnerving experience of emotions. It's one of my favorite scriptures, for two reasons:

1. Peter and the One that Jesus loved – tradition holds that "the one that Jesus loved" was John, the author of this gospel.

These two are the first to respond to Mary Magdalene's pronouncement that Jesus' body was gone. "The one that Jesus loved" takes great pains to make sure that we know that he and Peter raced to the tomb and that he got there first – he mentions it, not just once, but twice. It cracks me up that this seemed so important to the author, offering him bragging rights. Classic disciples!

2. Mary Magdalene – Mary's experience is a little more tender, and her perspective reflects a sense of woundedness. As we read about her grief response to the angels, and even to Jesus himself whom she was unable to recognize, we feel her pain and distress. However, in the middle of her distress and incapacity to see past what feels insurmountable, Jesus speaks her name and the world stops. Her eyes cleared and her heart skipped a beat. Suddenly, her Teacher and Beloved friend became unmistakably recognizable. It's in this moment that we finally understand the celebration, the eagerness to spread the good news, the excitement. Alleluia!

Our names. It's how we identify as ourselves, how we know ourselves, and I love that for both John and Mary, their names speak of their belovedness. John, himself, identifies as the beloved one, and Mary knows her belovedness when Jesus merely speaks her name. There is a lot of mystery and miraculous and chaos in this resurrection story, but the one thing not mysterious or chaotic is this: God's love expressed through Jesus in the flesh. God's love that is personal, extravagant, and invitational. And that love bids us to know our belovedness.

Friends, on this Easter Sunday, may you hear Jesus, like Mary, utter your name. May you too, like John, take on the identity as "the one that Jesus loves." Alleluia!

Prayer: Resurrected God, One who loves us, we are so grateful. We are grateful that you loved us so much that you came to us, as us. We are grateful that you lived your life as God on Earth, loving us and showing us how to live in love. And we are grateful for your self-giving love that resulted in your death, but that death was not the end of the story. We are grateful that today we can celebrate that death was not the end. We celebrate that the story continues. May today's celebration remind us that you travel this life with us, and that nothing can separate us from your love. Praise be to God for your unfailing love! Alleluia! Amen.