

Lenten Meditations 2023



*St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral
Shreveport, Louisiana*

In Memoriam
Martha Annan Cooper

Growth begins when we start to accept our own weakness.

--Jean Vanier

Ash Wednesday

Psalm 103 Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10 Matt 6:1-6,16-21

I was about 8 years old the first time I remember having a discussion about Ash Wednesday and the ashes that we would receive the next day. I can't remember which priest here at St Mark's School explained the do's and the don'ts of the ash removal, but my takeaway was they were not to be washed off till that night. I lived by this, protecting my ashes on my forehead all day. It was my badge, my stamp, my validation, that I was a good Episcopalian girl.

As I got older and began to read, study, and listen to the lessons and gospel in the Bible, I noticed in several scriptures it was in direct conflict with my beloved ritual I received once a year to confirm my "Good Episcopalian" status.

In Matthew we read, Jesus says "beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen". It goes on to read "so whenever you give alms do not sound a trumpet before you as the Hypocrites do". You can imagine the confusion I had as a young adult reading this.

One of my favorite songs we sang at Camp Hardtner helped bring Clarity to my ash dilemma. Part of the lyrics read "we will guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride". That "we will work with each other" and that "we all pray our unity will one day be restored". The chorus is what really brought clarity to me. It expresses true Christianity. "They will know we are Christians by our love".

So, my now take away of the ashes placed on my forehead every year on Ash Wednesday. They do not validate or stamp me a good Episcopalian nor does wearing them all day for the world to see make me a hypocrite. But the love I show to others is what brands us as a Christian and unites us all.

Ashley E. Kisla

Thursday before the First Sunday in Lent

Psalm 37:1-18

Deuteronomy 7:6-11

Titus 1:1-16

John 1:29-34

The *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, which is also known as the *Ghent Altarpiece*, is one of my favorite pieces of art in all of history. If you have never seen it, a quick Google search will pop it up. Today's Gospel is, in part, the inspiration for this multi-paneled 15th Century piece. The "lamb of God" imagery is one that is familiar to our ears and eyes, but it is always helpful to revisit. John is proclaiming to the crowd through proclamation who Jesus is and how he knows it. He is this innocent, small lamb who, like the *Altarpiece* depicts, will have to shed his blood. Recounting John's story of the Holy Spirit, the *Altarpiece* depicts a dove is coming down upon the lamb who is on an altar.

It is reassuring to know that this still happens at our own baptism. If Jesus is to be our ultimate guide, we must follow him in baptism. The mystery of what is happening here is where faith becomes our guide. Defying logic, God wants to be in us. It is through baptism that is our first step in following Jesus' example. As the saying goes, "We are often the only Gospel people will read." To walk through life with others around us, and trying to be an example of Christ begins at the baptismal font. It is through this work of the Holy Spirit during our baptism that the True Light may shine. May we go forth being bold in our faith and in our baptism to proclaim Christ.

-R. Seth Thibodeaux

Friday before the First Sunday in Lent

Psalm 35 Deuteronomy 7: 12-16 Titus 2: 1-15 John 1: 35-42

In the second chapter of Paul's letter to Titus, (whom he refers to as "my true son in the common faith"), Paul is instructing Titus in leading the people of the church in Crete in the truth of God, and in how they, as God's people, should live and behave in their daily lives.

As Paul continues his tutorage, he lists the many attributes of a faithful and devoted follower of Jesus: godliness, self-control, love, purity, kindness, goodness, integrity, etc., encouraging Titus to instill these traits in the various groups in that church, so that they might grow in their spiritual life, and in the love of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. By truly taking this teaching to heart, their lives will be transformed into new creations.

I do not know about you, but I need this "transformation" on a daily basis, and sometimes more by the hour! Just when I feel that I am making progress, I "backslide"! Lent is a season for "backsliders" to concentrate on our inner, spiritual lives, and emerge, if only for a while, as a new creation, at least until we "backslide" again! I tend to take two steps forward, and four steps back! But we always get another chance to try again.....thank you, Lord.

TRANSFORMATION... if you are like I am, this word always conjures up that incredible creation of our Lord's, the butterfly. Talk about transformation! WOW! Perhaps the Lord created it to be a symbol of how drastically transformed our lives can become, and what beautiful souls and spirits are created, as we allow His Holy Spirit to work His transforming love in our lives as we spend time His word, worship, prayer and other spiritual disciplines during these forty days of Lent.

Let's think of our spiritual lives in terms of the life cycle of the butterfly: when we are born, we are "eggs", and we grow into the "caterpillar", more or less "crawling" in our spiritual development, but nurtured by parents, Christian leaders, church activities, etc; as we grow in our spiritual life, and draw closer to our Lord, maturing in our faith, we, eventually, enter our "cocoon", or serious time of growth and change; finally we become more mature in our faith by loving our Lord, growing in Him, and being guided by His Holy Spirit; as this happens, we begin to emerge from our "cocoon", and begin to soar, like the beautiful butterfly. However, unfortunately, we can continue to "backslide" periodically! (Or at least I can!) That is the time to "cocoon" again! Lent is the perfect time for "cocooning", nourishing our spiritual growth as we spend time in His word, in meditation, in study, and worship and, perhaps, we will emerge with a stronger faith and dedication to our Lord and His people. Let's soar to new heights together this Lent.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be TRANSFORMED by the renewing of your mind. THEN you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing, and perfect will." Romans 12:2

Laura Boyd

Saturday before the First Sunday in Lent

Psalm 30 Deut 7:17-26 Titus 3:1-15 John 1:43-51

“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked Philip. (John 1:46)
Well, Nathanael, yes...yes it can.

In Catechesis of the Good Shepherd one of our early works is geography. We have a small globe with smooth blue for the oceans, rough sand for the land, and a tiny red dot for Israel. The place where Jesus was born, died and where he rose. Within Israel was Nazareth; some described it as uncelebrated and forgotten. Then we simply wonder aloud, “Why did God choose this tiny place for Jesus to be born?” I wonder...They say, “big things come in small packages”, and in this case, that’s the understatement of all eternity.

Throughout the Bible, we read stories about the lesser being the greater. The little brother who would rule over his entire family. A small David overcoming a giant Goliath. A baby born to be a Mighty Warrior and Prince of Peace, who happened to live off the beaten path, and there are countless other adversarial confrontations. In one example while in the wilderness Moses tells the Israelites, “You may say to yourselves, ‘These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out? But *do not be afraid*...the Lord God will deliver them over to you, throwing them into great confusion until they are destroyed...No one will be able to stand up against you, you will destroy them.” (Deut. 7:17-24) A small people overcoming seven larger and stronger nations.

Therefore, as Psalm 30 says, “We will exalt you Lord, for you lifted us out of the depths and did not let our enemies gloat over us. We call to the Lord our God and He turns our wailing into dancing, removes our sackcloth and clothes us in joy. Lord our God, we praise you forever”. (vv. 1,2,11-12)

So, yes Nathanael...great, wonderful, victorious things can come out of Nazareth.

All we need is faith.

Lauren Ewing

First Sunday in Lent

Psalm 32 Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Romans 5: 12-19 Matthew 4: 1-11

The gracious gift of God and His Son, Jesus Christ bore the sins for us by dying on the cross. That set us free. Thanks be to Jesus Christ, the true Son of God.

Then Jesus went to the desert and fasted forty days and forty nights. Jesus was truly very hungry. The devil tempts Him three times. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones become loaves. Jesus answered the devil, "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God."

The second time the devil tested Jesus "in the holy city and made Him to stand on the parapet of the temple and said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." Jesus told the devil, "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test."

Then, the third time the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world! Jesus said, "Get away, Satan." And then the devil departed, and angels came and ministered to Jesus.

So happy the sinner is forgiven and permits no guilt. "As long as I kept silent my bones wasted away...For day and night, your hand was heavy upon me; my strength withered as in dry summer heat." Then I confessed to the Lord and my guilt was no longer. We should always pray whether we're tempted or not. Pray always is the encouragement of this Psalm 32.

Marybeth O. McVie

Lent Week One—Monday

Psalm 41, Deuteronomy 8:11-20, Hebrews 2:11-18, John 2:1-12

At some point in our lives, we fear death. The first time we lose someone to death, someone we love dearly, we learn that life is ever changing, never constant. This can bring many feelings to the surface: fear, depression, anger, etc.

Fifty-five years ago, when I was ten, my parents died in an accident. I had a large family, three siblings, many aunts and uncles, and cousins. We were not left to fend for ourselves, but we were certainly unmoored. At first, I was certain that this was a mistake, and they would be home from their trip on the appointed day. This is sometimes called magical thinking. My emotions and every moment of my life, that first year, were all over the place. It took some time to think of my parents as being in heaven, with our Lord. It was difficult to get away from the concrete human ideas of death, the cemetery, the void. From the very beginning, all my siblings and I were surrounded by loving families who tried to be there for us. Most of these families were strong Christians, who faithfully attended church, many at St. Mark's, our church home. These were the people who led us out of the valley of fear.

St. Mark's became the focal point of my inner life, often through the vehicle of EYC, led by the amazing Ron Roberts. He taught us, through a variety of methods (all entertaining and fun) about the love of God, and the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, and everyone. I began to see my parents in God's loving embrace, on the other side, waiting for us. I began to see that there was a new plan for us, and the path would be through scripture.

In this letter of Paul's to the Hebrews, he quotes Jesus: "Here am I, and the children God has given me". Paul goes on to tell us that Jesus has freed all of us who fear death.

I am an adult now, and yet I find myself always going back to those days after my life changed drastically. I go there often, not in a maudlin way, but in a curious fashion, trying to discern the path given me. Lent is an obvious time for reflection, and I am grateful for our 7 am weekday services leading us through. Easter is the highest Holy Day, when our Lord rose and came back to tell us His news. One day I will die too, and I am positive that there is another life for me, another place to serve God. I find comfort in the line, "... the peace which passeth all understanding."

May you too find peace.

With love,

Kathryn Gaiennie

Lent Week One—Tuesday

Psalm 48, Deuteronomy 9:4-12, Hebrews 3:1-11, John 2: 13-22

After giving Moses the ten commandments, God orders Moses to return to the Israelite camp because: “They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten image,” v. 12.

The writer of Hebrews uses this story to encourage Christians not to return to their former religious practices. To not turn aside from “the way” established by Jesus. Speaking of the former Israelites the author writes, “They always err and are led astray in their hearts and they have not perceived or recognized My ways and become progressively better and more experimentally and intimately acquainted with them.” v. 10

These two passages teach us that God has a “way”, a method, or manner in which God wants humans to live in relation to Him. Both passages highlight the same problem. The Old Testament folks created a physical idol to supplant God. The New Testament folks were in danger of replacing God’s gift of salvation through Christ with their former religious practices. Failing to recognize and acknowledge God as the ultimate concern in our lives seems to be the point where we get off track and lose sight of “the way”. There are many things that we do or leave undone that we call sin but at their core, the DNA of sin if you will, is the failure to give God the preeminent place in our hearts and lives. This Lenten season may the old hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” be our prayer:

Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Jason Waltman

Lent Week One—Wednesday

Deut. 9:13-21

Psalm 119:49-72

Heb. 3:12-19

John 2:23-3:15

In John 2, Nicodemus, leader of the Pharisees and the most renowned teacher of his day, has come to Jesus under cover of night, to question Him. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Poor Nicodemus simply cannot see beyond his own elitism, knowledge, and ego. He ridicules Jesus rather than uses reason to try to understand Jesus’ point of view. He only wants to defend his own position. He cannot muster the faith to believe that Jesus has come from God, even though he (sarcastically) tells Jesus that he knows this to be true.

What is it that keeps Nicodemus from understanding and believing? How is he so different from Simon and Andrew who literally dropped their fishing nets and followed Jesus. Nicodemus cannot understand, because he is caught up in his own theology, the theology of the Temple, which was designed to maintain the social order and to justify rule by the elite.

Could Psalm 119 verses 67 and 71, be hints? “Before I was humbled, I went astray, but now I keep your word” and “It is good for me that I was humbled so that I might learn your statutes.” Are we too ready to take control for ourselves, to translate the Trinity only by our human standards, not to wait on the Lord, but to cast for ourselves our own graven image of God as in Deuteronomy 9? Yes, yes, and yes.

So what important lessons can we learn from Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus? Hebrews 3 reminds us to “Take care brothers and sisters that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.” Jesus himself tells us when he tells Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above...no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Our Baptismal covenant has all the answers:

- *Persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent, and return to the Lord*
- *Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ*
- *Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself*
- *Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being*

I will with God’s help. Amen.

Pat Viser

Lent Week One—Thursday

Psalm 19 Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5 Hebrew 4:1-10 John 3:16-21

Recently Dean Johnson preached a wonderful sermon about the ministry of light and salt. This meditation does not really reflect the message of his sermon but the words “light” and “salt” struck my imagination. We as Christians are certainly called to be both light and salt to the world in our various ways of living and worshiping. We can help others by listening and loving them. We can be present in our communities to take the right stand. We can give our time and money to further the cause of the Gospel, and so much more.

But, sometimes I need a different version of that ministry of light and salt and I find it not only in the first six verses of the Psalm for today but I find it at the beach. Sitting on the balcony of our condo in Perdido Key I have read this particular hymn of praise many times. It has become part of my beach ritual. In fact, the first time I read it at the beach I became more fully aware of what the verses meant. That wonderful view of sky and ocean provide the light and salt that renews my soul each time I’m there. I don’t really wish to parse the words of this Psalm...only to remember its richness and beauty and to encourage you to read it one more time.

Joy Ratcliff

Lent Week One – Friday

Psalm 40 Deuteronomy 10:12-22 Hebrews 4:11-16 John 3:22-36

Recently, in our Wednesday Ladies' Bible Study, we were addressing the Beatitudes, the Gospel reading for the following Sunday. In our discussion of the sixth one, "Blessed are the pure in heart . . .," we talked about motivation and how it is important to do the "Right thing in the right way for the right reason." This is a powerful thought, and it has stayed in my mind since that day.

In the Gospel reading for today, John is the perfect example of this idea. His followers are concerned that Jesus is also baptizing and that many people who might be coming to John are now going to Jesus instead. In relating this information to John, they might have expected John to be upset by this new development, but this is not the case. Instead, John acknowledges and endorses Jesus's ministry and reminds them that he is not the Christ. He does not want to mislead his followers because he is not in this for attention or a sense of importance. He is the messenger who has come before Christ to lead the people to Him. In other words, he is doing the "Right thing in the right way for the right reason!"

In our personal ministry, we need to be sure that our motivations are "pure" and that our actions are not carried out to gain attention, gratitude, or a sense of importance. In this holy season, help us to be mindful of others and let us, like John, be about reflecting God's love and leading people towards Him.

Carol Anne Caraway

Lent Week One – Saturday

Psalm 139:1-17(18-23) Deut. 11:18-28 Heb. 5:1-10 John 4:1-26

The Samaritan woman at the well is unique to John's gospel – she isn't found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Nevertheless, she is a memorable character and, to be frank, it sounds like her life was a mess. With five ex-husbands and a live-in boyfriend, she was not "good" by local definitions of the term. When Jesus pointedly comments on this in the middle of their conversation, it rattles my Southern sensibilities a little. How direct! Not something I would have said during a conversation with a stranger in the checkout line at Kroger. I'm not saying we should start, but perhaps we channel that candor inwards. During Lent, we take a break from trying to be "good" and allow the Holy Spirit to turn our attention to the less attractive parts of ourselves. What are the five ex-husbands in my life? Perhaps my tendencies towards resentment or self-absorption? What are yours? Even if we don't exactly know, God does, as the Psalm today reminds us:

"You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away"

"Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely."

This may be a sobering thought. Mercifully, however, salvation depends not on our "goodness," but on God's. Regardless of our past, our faults, and our struggles, Jesus offers the same Living Water to each of us, just as he did for the Samaritan woman. In this light, what a joy to think that Jesus knows us so well *and* loves us so well. Thanks be to God!

Annelies Harrison

Second Sunday in Lent

Psalm 121 Genesis 12:1-4a Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 John 3:1-17

The readings appointed for today are the beacons of our faith. Shining most brightly for us, illuminating the crux of our existence is one phrase: "For God so loved the world."

We seem to be living in a loop of emotional recovery. A pandemic, politics, ever-vacillating values, war and crime dominating the news cycle, so many stressors are relentlessly vying for our attention while an undercurrent of discontent is distracting us. Sometimes it feels like everyone we know is unsettled.

We're yearning for reassurance that everything is okay.

That reassurance is right here, the all-encompassing Gospel message so simply stated. For God so loved the world...

Here it is for us, today and every day; the best-known and most powerful verse in The Bible, John 3:16.

How much does God love the world? He gave us his only begotten Son to become one of us, live among us, to teach us, to suffer and die to save us from our sins, to create a new and everlasting covenant for all of us. Our reassurance and redemption are here. We reaffirm and celebrate this with the Eucharist. We are imbued with grace, we are forgiven, we are in the world God so loves. Our inevitable destination is another, better world where we are welcome because of God's greatest gift, a sacrifice, a love offering.

Sometimes it feels like "John 3:16" is ubiquitous. Those people with loudspeakers demanding our attention at public events, seemingly determined to overwhelm you with "the good news" cite it, quote it, have it written in Sharpie on cardboard signs. It almost becomes cartoonish or annoying background noise. Athletes have it emblazoned on eye black. It's graffiti on the sides of boxcars. Do these myriad messages whirring by in our culture diminish it? No. The risk, though, is that it becomes yet another distraction despite its enduring truth.

What often becomes lost in the simple yet powerful message that John 3:16 delivers is that Jesus himself proclaimed it. He was responding to a Pharisee who came to visit him under the cover of night. Nicodemus likely had trouble finding his way in the darkness. He and his contemporaries had seen or heard about signs and wonders associated with Jesus. They were curious, no doubt skeptical and possibly intrigued. What was Jesus up to? Was He a disruptor? What was the end game?

Give Nicodemus credit for going straight to the source, fumbling through the darkness to look for the light. Jesus lit the lamp and explained how we can see the Kingdom of God. He presented this beacon of hope, reassurance, and redemption: God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but in order to save it through Him.

Don't be discouraged. Don't be distracted. See the message. Embrace the message.
Believe the message. Follow the beacon.

Darrell Rebouche

Lent Week Two—Monday

Psalm 56 Jeremiah 1:11-19 Romans 1:1-15 John 4:27-42

While reading Psalm 56, we talked about our fears and how to trust in God to ease those fears. Our EYC kids shared their fears with each other including stage fright, gun violence, and bad weather. The reading reminds us to trust in God especially at times when we are afraid. Our EYC kids admitted that oftentimes when we are in an uncomfortable situation, we might react poorly to try to hide our fears. We might laugh or make jokes to make other people laugh. We might shy away or even become reserved and upset, but we should pray! Especially during times that we are fearful or uncomfortable, we are reminded that we should turn to the Lord in these times and put our trust and faith in Him. What happens here on Earth is nothing compared to what is waiting for us in His Eternal Kingdom.

We then turned to the Romans reading where we explored what it meant to share God's word. Our EYC kids expressed that they are fortunate to be surrounded by friends and family who already know who the Lord is. They were honest in admitting that they didn't feel like they have had the chance to share God's word with people around them so we explored the thought that maybe our job is to share and often remind people of God's message. Many of us know who the Lord is, but we still make mistakes and we still sin. We must remind ourselves and each other every day what God's message is and how he wants us to live our lives together. We can pray for each other, listen to one another, and mainly share kindness and love by treating others with the love God has for us.

St. Mark's EYC

Lent Week Two—Tuesday

Psalm 68 Jeremiah 2:1-13 Rom. 1:16-25 John 4:43-54

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised.

The evangelist G. Campbell Morgan once said that Romans was “the most pessimistic page of literature upon which your eyes ever rested” but at the same time, “the most optimistic poem to which your ears ever listened.” Today’s brief reading seems to prove his point! The first verses speak of a wrathful God and a sinful, wicked humanity. They describe a people who have come to know God, but turned away from him; a people who claimed to be wise but in reality were foolish.

It's all too easy to get pessimistic. It's easy to give in to the “sinful desires of our heart”, whatever they may be: pride, envy, anger, greed, lust. When we do give in, we invite the inevitable suffering that comes with it.

Maybe the optimism can come from an unlikely source, Buddhist monks!

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are that life always involves suffering, that all suffering is caused by cravings, that suffering is only ended by liberating ourselves from our cravings, and that the path to peace is the “middle way” of wisdom, meditation, and self-discipline. Good stuff!

Lent is a time to turn away from our cravings; to turn away from “created things” and focus instead on the one who created them. Maybe we can all take a cue from the Buddhist monks and seek the peace that comes from a quiet life; a life that frees us from our cravings and leads us to enlightenment.

Kevin Payne

Lent Week Two—Wednesday

Psalm 72 Jeremiah 3:6-18 Romans 1:28-2:11 John 5:1-18

In today's readings, there is Psalm 72 likely written by Solomon but, perhaps King David? He praises the God of Israel. He asks for God to bless him, and then enumerates how those blessings will be used. In Jeremiah 3, we hear the prophet setting forth the sins of the "faithless Israel and false Judah". He exhorts his people to return to Lord and he enumerates all of the good things that will happen when that occurs. In John 5, we have the familiar story of the healing of the man who had been ill for 38 years. However, it was the reading from Romans 2:8 that spoke to me. Specifically: "but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury."

Factious is the word that caught my eye. I wanted to define it to be certain that I understood it. It is "factious" in the RSV translation. It is "contentious" in the KJV translation. Some synonyms for factious are: split, sectarian, discordant, conflicting, argumentative, disputatious, quarrelsome, clashing, warring, disharmonious, and turbulent. The antonym of factious is Harmonious.

It seems to me that, in this current time, too many of us are indeed, factious, argumentative, quarrelsome, and disharmonious. We are not adept at listening to others, nor in trying to understand the perspective of others. We are all too quick to judge others. We know that we do this, and that it is sinful and wrong but, somehow, because we are certain that we are in possession of our own "truth", we continue to judge others. Romans 2:1 says it plainly: "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things."

Let us, in this Lenten season, judge less, listen more, try to understand, and be sympathetic to others. Let us be less Factious and attempt to be Harmonious. May the blessings of God be with you in your efforts.

Sanders Hearne

Lent Week Two—Thursday

Psalm 74 Jeremiah 4:9-10,19-28 Romans 2:12-24 John 5:19-29

Wow, as I read Psalm 74 and Jeremiah 4, I wish I had about 2,000 words to write my thoughts. I'll focus on the Psalm.

The Psalmist, Asaph, (writing perhaps about 580 BC) is really concerned, and he really wants God to pay attention to his words. (For me, reading Psalm 74 is almost as if Asaph has been reading and watching our current events - National and World news here in the 21st Century); He is deeply worried, and afraid that maybe God is not paying attention.

...A few of his thoughts....

He asks God to remember his "people", for the enemy had ruined the sanctuary and jeopardized the nation,

The carved work was smashed by axes and hatchets;

"They burned your sanctuary to the ground; they defiled the dwelling place of your Name";

"They burned every place where God was worshipped in the land".

"They said in their hearts, 'We will crush them completely!'

They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land."

"We are given no signs from God; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be".

"How long will the enemy mock you, God? Will the foe revile your name forever?".
,,etc, etc

He prays for God to remember all he had done in the past for his "sheep."

Since he had no prophet available, Asaph speaks to God directly. You can just hear his despair in his writing. He suggests to God that He no longer remain inactive, but rather show His right Hand (a symbol of his power) and destroy them (the enemies). Asaph seeks to perhaps motivate God by reminding Him of His past help: (Ex: God delivered Israel through the Red Sea; and, and crushed the heads of Leviathan, a seven-headed mythological monster.)

After re-reading Psalm 74 several times, and moving my thoughts to today, then, Yes, we see the "enemies" are doing all of those same things today, right in front of our eyes! I take great comfort in knowing that God does indeed hear our pleadings, and that God

does indeed take care of us. Though we may be worried about the times we live in, and think of ourselves as being in some “never before” situation, deep down we know that is not the case.

I’m not as bold as Asaph to be addressing God and telling Him what He *should do*; I just have to trust that God “will do”, as He has done so many times in history. So far, He has not disappointed.

Lennis S. Elston

Lent Week Two—Friday

Psalm 69

Jeremiah 5:1-9

Romans 2:25-3:18

John 5:30-47

Early in my career I witnessed one of my co-workers getting chewed out by the boss. It was a thorough work-over, and my co-worker patiently let the boss wind down before saying, “You’re right to be upset, but I didn’t do it. It must have been someone else.” The boss pulled up short, nodded his head and with a glimmer in his eye said, “Well, I’m glad to hear that it wasn’t you. But I’m sure you’ve screwed something else up recently, so just take that butt-chewing and apply it where it belongs!” My co-worker and I both had a good laugh at that one, because we both knew it was true. The boss didn’t know the half of it!

Human beings can be beautiful and glorious creatures, but sometimes we need to be taken down a notch or two. Imagine if from the moment of our birth every prideful or envious thought that flashed across our minds, every careless or hurtful word that crossed our lips, and every damaging or self-serving action that we took was meticulously written down. Not one of us could bear the weight of our own ledger. That’s what the apostle Paul is up to in chapter 3 of his letter to the Romans. In verses 11 – 18 he masterfully employs no less than eight Old Testament quotes (what the rabbis called “stringing pearls”) to drive home a singular point: “None is righteous, no, not one.”

Fortunately for us, there is One who does not seek His own will, but the will of the Father who sent Him; One who bears the reproach that we deserve; One who bestows righteousness through faith as a pure and undeserved gift of grace. We don’t carry the load of that ledger alone; He carries it for us. Our part is to lay it at the foot of the cross where He mercifully wipes it clean. Glory be to God!

Bob Ewing

Lent Week Two—Saturday

Psalm 75 Jeremiah 5:20-31 Romans 3:19-31 John 7:1-13

Through Jesus, God delivers all of us from accountability for our sins under the Law of Moses. Through our sinful nature, however, we fall short of the glory of God. It is only through the death and resurrection of Jesus that we are justified by Grace. Christ Jesus suffered for us and our sins and gave us this gift of grace. Our sinful nature is laid at the foot of Jesus's Cross, and we are redeemed by His blood.

As we live our lives, it can at times be difficult for us to see past our own selfishness. Only through prayer, study of scripture, and building a relationship with God, are we able to see past our own self-centeredness and put our faith and trust in the love of Jesus and His Father. As we walk through life, it is important that we become aware of the love and attentiveness of the Living God who walks with us. We should always strive to become a shining light to others who share our pathways through this our transitory life.

Jesus's Apostles were able to look past the Human Jesus and see not just their friend, but their Lord and the author of their salvation. Through our faith and trust in that same Jesus, we share that same love and tenderness that they shared. We not only have the opportunity to look to the Lord in prayer, but the opportunity to trust in His gentle nature and His loving Grace. It is this grace that welcomes us back no matter how many times we stray like lost sheep. Jesus is truly the guiding light for our lives and a safe and secure place in time of trouble.

Murray Viser

Third Sunday in Lent

Psalm 95 Exodus 17:1-7 Romans 5:1-11 John 4:5-42

This well-loved story of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria promises the incredible gift of living water, which will become in the believer "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." V14. But first we see that Jesus violates two strong cultural norms of his day— norms that were so important that no one would think of violating them! The first one was that men were never to speak to a woman, not even one's own wife or mother, in public! And secondly, Jews were never to speak to a Samaritan! Samaritans were treated as despised aliens so that the Jews had absolutely no dealings with them. So, the Samaritan woman is shocked when Jesus asks her for a drink of water and she says as much. "How is it that you, a Jew, are asking a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (V9). And so, Jesus speaks of 'living water' and "the gift of God." Her reply indicates that she has taken his words very literally and so is very intrigued and eager to have this 'living water' and never be thirsty or draw water from the well again! But then in normal conversation and without a hint of condemnation, Jesus reveals that he knows all about her chaotic past; therefore, she perceives that he must be a prophet. She hurries into town to spread this news among everyone she knows! Perhaps she is the first evangelist! Many hurried to see him for themselves and invited him to come and stay with them for several days. In the process many came to believe. So, it seems that Jesus had indeed given her 'living water' gushing up to eternal life! Another Scripture from John makes it very clear that living water refers to the Holy Spirit. We read in John 7:37-39 the invitation of Jesus: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now he said this about the Spirit which believers in him were to receive..."

And the Holy Spirit is truly the gift of God. Meditating on Scriptures that speak of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives can help us to be open and listening for the promptings of the Holy Spirit as we go through our day. Jesus assures us that "God gives the Spirit without measure." (John 3:34) And in Ephesians 3:20 we read that "God can do more in us and through us than we ever could ask or imagine, by the power at work in us." This is reiterated in Hebrew Scripture (Zechariah 4:6) where we read that it is "not by might, nor by power, but my spirit, says the Lord of hosts" that God's work is accomplished.

Our church hymnal contains several hymns that invite and welcome the Holy Spirit to come and work in and through us. Some of these can be wonderful prayers both at the beginning of the day and anytime when we are aware of our need for renewal: God working in and through us to bring God's love and peace to all the earth.

Rowena White

Lent Week Three—Monday

Psalm 77 Jeremiah 7:1-15 Romans 4:1-12 John 7:14-36

Paul's letter to the Romans talks about how we live under grace now that Jesus has died and risen and how we no longer live under the law. Before Jesus, the Jewish people were required to obey the law and slaughter animals as a sacrifice for their sins. But Jesus changed all that. He became the sacrifice for our sins so that everyone could be with God. This is the core of the Gospel, but for a long time, it was really hard for me to understand.

I think it's a normal human feeling to think that nothing is free in the world and that if we want something, we have to earn it. How is it that God is already with me when I've done nothing to deserve Him? Surely, I have to do all these good works to earn His love. But God is not something of this world. Putting our salvation in our own hands inevitably leads to darkness and sadness. We will always fall short. The power of sin is stronger than us.

When I finally accepted that God is here for me whether I want Him to be or not, it changed everything. I went from thinking "Am I checking all the boxes so that I can *get to God*?" to "Am I doing my best to live *with Him* every day?" It changed how I saw God in relation to my life. He went from feeling very far away to living with me through all things good and bad.

Paul reminds us that our salvation through Jesus' death does not allow us to turn back to sin. God is faithful. His love for us doesn't change, but we have to choose Him. By truly making a choice to live for God, our hearts change and so our lives change.

Tara Jones

Lent Week Three—Tuesday

Psalm 78:1-39

Jeremiah 7:21-34

Romans 4:13-25

John 7:37-52

Once upon a time, a long time ago, my eldest came skipping in from school to announce, "I'm God's chosen Child"! Try to respond to that one. During the discussion of what she had learned in school that day I discovered Father Sykes had given her that information in Religion class. They were surely discussing today's lessons as our conversation clearly revealed. When I asked her if was easier to mind God than it was to do what I asked her to do, she responded that God didn't care about silly stuff like making her bed or cleaning her room, just the big things like being nice to people, loving Jesus and all that. Her take away was as long as she followed the first great commandment, she was golden. It surprises us sometimes, as adults, the simple truth and understanding of children is spot on. The fact is if we follow God, honor and obey his word, we are God's chosen people.

These stories we read today tell us not only of the wrath of a vengeful God but of the caring and generously of a loving father. When the people of God cried out for bread, he sent them manna from heaven. When they cried out for meat he showered them with flesh and hordes of birds. Having already brought forth water from stone he gave them everything they needed to sustain life. Still, they disobeyed him. We are told of the terrible discipline that befell them. We are also told of the great battles that are won and the rewards bestowed on those who follow his commands.

This is truly how we become the chosen. As my young child explained to me, we are all a family of Abraham's children when we mind God. He only chooses children who believe in him. So, if you too want to be God's chosen child, it's pretty simple what you need to do.

Lynn Poole

Lent Week Three—Wednesday

Psalm 81

Jeremiah 8:18-9:6

Romans 5:1-11

John 8:12-20

Psalm 81 reminds Israel the love of the Lord brought them out of Egypt and protected them on their journey. Now Israel no longer responds to the Lord. She no longer hears Him. The psalmist recounts the Lord mourns Israel's rejection.

In Jeremiah 8:18-9:6, the prophet laments the brokenness of Israel. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" ...for the people "They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood and not for truth, for they proceed from evil to evil and they do not know Me says the Lord""Oppression upon oppression deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me says the Lord."

In both Old Testament readings Israel is requested to open their hearts to accept the Lord and they would be reconciled and justified. Help me, Lord, to open my heart to your word.

In Romans 5:1-11, justification comes to us through Jesus' loving sacrifice on the cross. We are reconciled to the Lord through Jesus Christ. We are the recipients of God's loving action.

John 8:12-20 is the last of a group of encounters with the Pharisees. In John 8:1-11 Jesus, outside the temple, has a woman caught in the act of adultery brought to him by the Pharisees. They ask Jesus what should be done? The Law of Moses says she should be stoned. Jesus bends down and writes in the sand and the Pharisees challenge him again. Jesus answers "let him who is without sin cast the first stone" when Jesus looks up again only the woman is there. He asks "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one sir" and Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Now go and sin no more."

Jesus next goes into the temple and announces "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of Life..." the Pharisees challenge Jesus' authority and Jesus confounds them. In the presence of the Light of the world, they cannot see. Jesus goes on to say "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."

Jesus does not condemn or judge. By his love, through the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection Jesus' loving action justifies and redeems us. Help me dear Jesus to avoid condemning or judging others and open my eyes to see what you want me to see.

Robert McVie

Lent Week Three—Thursday

Psalm 42 Jeremiah 10:11-24 Romans 5:12-21 John 8:21-32

John 31 & 32, Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples: and you will know the truth, and **the truth will make you free.**”

WOW, Freedom, but freedom from what and to do what? To what freedom was Jesus referring? Freedom is often thought of as the freedom of a group of people within a geographical area to not be subject to a tyrannical government. Some consider it being able to act, speak, or think as one desires without restraint. Not being imprisoned or enslaved is also considered freedom as is having freedom from undesirable things and unrestricted access to other areas. But is this the “free” that Jesus is saying will be given to his disciples if they continue in his word?

To gain this freedom, Jesus says to the Jews that they will truly be disciples if they continue in his word. How do they/we do this? We listen to His word. We learn from his word. We seek understanding of His word, and we obey His word. According to William Barclay in the Daily Study Bible discipleship brings four freedoms: the freedom from fear, Jesus is always with us so we are never alone; the freedom from ourselves since we are recreated anew in Christ; the freedom from what other people may think and say since we care only what God says; and freedom from sin since we now are enabled to break away from sin.

So how does this translate into our everyday lives? I find that when I consider Jesus in my daily decisions, I feel the freedom to say “no” or “yes” to certain things. I receive a certain peace about my day-to-day activities and feelings when I consider the popular saying “What would Jesus do?” I feel the freedom the truth of Jesus has given us all.

Judy Storer

Lent Week Three—Friday

Psalm 91 Jeremiah 11:1-8, 14-20 Romans 6:1-11 John 8: 33-47

Today's readings share two major threads—the first, that we are enslaved by sin and doomed to suffer and die in its thrall, the second, that God is our protector and that through Christ we are freed into everlasting life. Of the four readings, I find that today's selection from the letter of Paul to the Romans has the most resonance for me. Like Jeremiah or indeed like Christ in John's Gospel, I usually have no trouble finding where I have failed in my life, where I have sinned in thought, word, or deed. Indeed, I could list a long catalog.

But I take great consolation from Paul's words—that when we were baptized in Christ, we joined him on the cross, and when we were baptized in Christ, we joined him in resurrection into eternal life. And in this way of thinking we are “dead to sin, but alive in God in Christ Jesus.” This is very comforting to my heart. If I turn to Christ, renew my Baptismal Covenant, my slavery to sin is ended. With Christ, I have been freed to be with God.

Rob Gilchrist

Lent Week Three—Saturday

Psalm 90

Jeremiah 13:1-11

Romans 6:12-23

John 8:47-59

The readings today adhere to a theme that is consistent throughout this Lenten season, really throughout the Bible: how to live abundantly and defeat death. The lessons are familiar and pretty simple, yet we humans seem to have such a hard time accepting what God is offering. Psalm 90 is “a prayer of Moses the man of God.” The psalmist laments that we might live seventy or eighty years, if we’re lucky, yet we spend the best of them in trouble and sorrow. “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom (v. 12),” he implores the Lord. And so, at every turn, God tries to answer. He tells Jeremiah that, like a belt around the waist, He binds the people of Israel and Judah “to be my people for my renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened (v. 11),” and so, like the belt stuffed under a rock, they will be ruined.

Jesus, in one of many attempts to teach the wisdom the Jews say they want, tells them, “Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God (v. 47).” Look, Jesus tells them. I’m not doing this for myself. I’m telling you, “whoever obeys my word will never see death (v. 50-51).” When they question his authority, Jesus answers them, “before Abraham was born, I am! (v. 58). But they reject his teaching and pick up stones to stone him.

The apostle Paul is more direct. Who or what is your master he asks his Roman flock? Sin or righteousness? “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey? (v. 16).” Thanks be to God, by choosing obedience to Him, “you have been set free from sin (which leads to death) and become slaves of God . . . and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ (v. 22-23).”

How easily in our everyday lives we enslave ourselves to sin. And as Paul asks his followers, what benefit did we reap from the things we’re now ashamed of? The choice, as always, is ours. The secret to Moses’ “heart of wisdom” is ever before us. Why is it so hard to choose obedience to God?

Laura McLemore

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Psalm 23 1 Samuel 16:1-13 Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9: 1-41

John's Gospel for the Fourth Sunday in Lent calls to think about seeing, blindness, and healing. The young man is literally blind, but "sees", knows and acknowledges it . He gains his sight, becoming able to physically see, because he trusts that Jesus can heal him.

The Pharisees, who can literally see, are blinded by jealousy, and their desire to remain in power. They miss seeing what is really going on around them because they are distracted. They are blind, but do not know it.

We, the youth of St. Mark's, recognize that we too are blind in many ways. We are distracted by many things, especially technology like our phones, and social media. These things "blind" us to what matters, and to what is really going on. We know this. We hope that by recognizing our blindness, we can ask Jesus to heal us. We promise to try to pay attention.

We pray that Jesus will help us see - healing us, and freeing us from the things that distract us, and make us blind. We ask Jesus to take from darkness into light - from blindness to sight! As the Letter to the Ephesians puts it, We want to " Live as children of light." We know that the true light, Jesus, makes everything visible.

This Lenten Season, may Jesus, the light of the world, awake us from our sleep, take away our distraction, and heal us from our blindness. May Christ's light shine on us all!
Amen.

St. Mark's EYC

Lent Week Four—Monday

Psalm 89:1-18 Jeremiah 16:10-21 Romans 7:1-12 John 6:1-15

Feeding of the 5,000; the only miracle recorded by all four gospels. What an amazing accomplishment, read by all, going unchallenged...until it was. It was about 50 years ago when our Day School Headmaster offered a point of view that was new to me. As I look back, his rendition of the story has become a steppingstone of growth for me.

Pete suggested--No, he seemed positive--that the lad with barley loaves and fish set the example that day for those around him and continues to do so to this day. As the lad offered what he had, others began to reach into their bags and pockets and offered up what they had brought. Let me confess, I was stunned by Pete's interpretation—almost angry; had a lively conversation with a friend about it..maybe more. Now, I feel nothing but gratitude for that steppingstone and all the other stones that have become mine right here under the roof at St. Marks. I have learned that the Bible is filled with metaphors that teach truth, and only sometimes facts. I have learned that just because it didn't happen, doesn't mean it isn't true.

Lately, from all sides, I am learning that we become our choices. The lad and Jesus chose kindness, generosity, and love as a way of being in the world. Shall we follow their example?

Rosemary P. Lafargue

Lent Week Four—Tuesday

Psalm 94 Jeremiah 17:1-27 Romans 7:13-25 John 6:16-27

The readings from Psalm 94 and Jeremiah 17 make clear arguments for being on the Lord's "good side." To me, the message is: Go it alone, find yourself in a pit of despair; walk with Him, all will be well. It's a no-brainer choice, but have I actually made it?

The Lenten season is a time to help us reflect on where we are in our walk (or lack of walk) with the Lord through self-examination, repentance, and self-denial. Being raised Catholic, I really thought I knew how to "do" Lent... you gave up something (self-denial, check). Ideally, that something was something that you wanted to improve about yourself anyway: giving up sweets came with the added bonus of losing a few pounds! But what about the other parts of Lent, self-examination? Repentance? Yikes and no thanks!

Mostly, I think my problem was that I really didn't understand the concept of repentance. To me, repentance was complicated, messy, scary even, and on top of all that, would expose all of my awfulness when what I really wanted to do was show the Lord I was good so that I could be worthy and loved.

I was recently blessed with a better understanding. Our St. Mark's Friends in Faith group is reading *The Illumined Heart* by Fredericka Mathewes-Green, who explains in the book that repentance is examining your sinful, bad parts so that God can help you gain insight, overcome your evil ways, and open your mind and heart up to Him so that good works can abound. I hope that this Lenten season I will have the courage to become aware of my sins, expose them and offer them up through prayer, so that I can be sure that I have actively made the choice to walk with Him.

Katherine Douthitt

Lent Week Four—Wednesday

Psalm 101 Jeremiah 18:1-11 Romans 8:1-11 John 6:27-40

When God told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house, the pottery wheel had been in existence for over 3,000 years. Jeremiah knew how pots were made and he might have wondered what was the point of going to the potter's house? Why did God just not tell Jeremiah what was on His mind? Perhaps the answer is in verse 3: "I went down to the potter's house and I saw him working at the wheel". God wanted to indelibly imprint an image in the heart and mind of Jeremiah.

Clay is essential to the potter. While it might be a stretch to say the potter loves the clay, the potter understands how important the clay is to his ultimate concern or goal of creation. Jeremiah saw the potter working at the wheel forming the clay into a particular shape for a specific purpose, but something went wrong and the goal of the potter was frustrated. The vessel that he was making was spoiled in his hand.

The potter did not throw the clay out. Using the same clay that had become spoiled, the potter made it over, reworking it into another vessel. The clay remained valuable and useful to the potter. The potter persisted in working with the same clay to create a valuable object. In verse 6, Jeremiah reveals the lesson. "As this clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand." God will not give up on us. God will not throw us out but continue to rework us into the people He wants us to be. I pray we realize that God's plan for us is infinitely beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, hopes or dreams. Ephesians 3:20

Jason Waltman

Lent Week Four—Thursday

Psalm 73 Jeremiah 22:13-23 Romans 8:12-27 John 6:41-51

Psalm 73 was penned by Asaph, a singer in King David's court, whose descendants formed the guild of temple musicians. I have spent most of my life surrounded by singers and other musicians, and one thing I've learned is that most folks in that field are "of modest means." Apparently, that was also the case in biblical times, as evidenced by Asaph's struggle with feelings of envy.

He saw the wealthy as being without troubles – healthy, strong, and free from burdens. Asaph was grieved and bitter, feeling that his efforts to live a good, pure life were not worthwhile. He faced daily afflictions and troubles, and nearly "lost his foothold." How easy it would be to fall in with the powerful, even those who speak and act with violence.

When Asaph was ultimately drawn back to God, he realized how misguided his thinking had been. Surely, God will deal with those who are corrupt and evil. Asaph's faith was restored, and he again trusted God's guidance.

While many of us can certainly relate to Asaph's battle with envy, I am reminded of my grandmother's insistence that "no matter how difficult our circumstances, there are countless people who are worse off." Her goal was, of course, to bring us to a point of gratitude.

But let's look at things a different way: "Are others envious of me...of what I have? Am I perceived to be without struggles?" Take an honest look at the way we use our gifts. We must all strive to embody God's kindness and love in our dealings with everyone, sharing our life's stories – both the uplifting and the challenging – and always using our gifts for good. Perhaps this season of Lent gives us an opportunity to truly examine ways we can be of help. At the end of the day, the Lord will repay with each of us according to our deeds.

Lory Tubbs

Lent Week Four--Friday

Psalm 107 Jeremiah 23:1-8 Romans 8:28-39 John 6:52-59

Some treat Lent as a brooding self-deprivation calendar entry. Christianity, however, is nothing if it is not about choices. Ask Adam and Eve. And viewed under that lens, isn't Lent an opportunity - an opportunity to strengthen our faith and forge a stronger relationship with God?

Psalm 107 calls us to "give thanks to the Lord for He is good and His mercy endures forever" and to "give thanks for His unfailing love." Not all subjects in Psalm 107 were so appreciative. Some "wandered in the desert wasteland" and some "became fools through rebellious ways and suffered affliction until they came to the Lord in their troubles, and He saved them." And when enemies scattered the flock, "God gathered the remnants and brought them back to their pasture where they multiplied." For "we know in all things that God works for the good of those who love Him." Romans 8:28.

Jesus' invitation is much more direct. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day." "Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father so the one who feeds on me will live because of me"and "whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." John 6:52-59.

Implied in Jesus' invitation is that not everyone will "feed" on the bread he provides. Some in the Psalm were rebellious. Some trust not in God but rather in earthly things.

So, who receives this "unfailing love"? Unfailing love is how the New International Version of the Bible translates the Hebrew word "cheved". King James, version: "Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness and for his wonderful works to the children of men", while other versions use "loving kindness" or "favor", or "steadfast love." All connote a love that is always present, always there, always available. Like any relationship, that love must be accepted. Do we accept God's love? Do we accept the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ? Do we ACCEPT HIM? Do we accept that Jesus Christ is the only son of God the Father? Do we accept that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary; was crucified, died, and was buried; and on the third day ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father to judge the living and the dead? Do we accept God's unfailing love? If so, what is the level of that acceptance? Does our acceptance occur only when we are "wondering in the wasteland" or when everything is going our way?

Jesus Christ demonstrated his unfailing love for us by sacrificing his body and blood on the cross. He asks only in return that we accept him; that we feed on him. That we choose Christ.

According to Mark Twain, "Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in." Today's readings reveal God shows his favor and unfailing

love on those who choose to accept him and accept and feed on his Son our Savior Jesus Christ. It is no more complex than that. It requires a sacrifice. Not as great a sacrifice as dying on a cross, but a true sacrifice, nonetheless. It requires a change of behavior, a change of priorities, and a change in our choices. Are we willing to make those changes?

How do we show we accept God's unfailing love and the sacrifice of his Son Jesus Christ? Faith of course, but maybe our acceptance of God's love is reflected in our compliance with the command laid out in the road map provided to us: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. And if we choose to demonstrate that commitment in our daily lives, we will receive the unfailing love of God and the promise of Jesus Christ that we will be raised up to eternal life. The choice is ours, and the level of our acceptance is ours to choose as well. But isn't the opportunity afforded by Lent a great place to start?

Ginny and Brian Homza

Lent Week Four—Saturday

Annunciation

Psalm 85 Isaiah 2:5-10 Hebrews 2:5-10 John 1:9-14

As I read today's Gospel reading, I thought of season two-episode one of *The Chosen*. It is a series based on the life of Jesus. It is based on scripture, but the creators use creative liberties to humanize each of Jesus' disciples. John is seen writing his Gospel, which was written at least 90 years after Jesus' birth. In the show, John is giving special care to write down the exact words of eyewitness accounts from several people that knew Jesus, such as Mother Mary and the other disciples. He thinks about what "beginning" he should write.

As you know, all four Gospels are written differently. Each writer points to different important parts of the story and of our Savior. John points back to creation and Jesus being there with God the Father (v. 1) and the Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:26). John also points back to the Law of Moses (v. 17) and how Jesus saves us with grace and truth, not only to "his own people (v. 11)," but to all who received and believed Him (v. 12).

How fortunate we are that "God did not subject the coming world ... to angels. But [He is] ... mindful of ... mortals, that [He] care[s] for them" (Hebrews 1:5-6). When reading this, I am reminded of the Canaanite woman's humility, boldness, and confidence in Jesus' goodness and of her persistence as she asks for him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. In Matthew 15:27, "She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'" One cannot be much humbler than comparing oneself to dogs grasping for crumbs. God treasures us so much, but sometimes we, especially I, need to remember how undeserving we are of his love, personal attention, and salvation. How blessed we are that "What has come into being in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (v. 3b-4). He has chosen each of us and loves us, no matter how undeserving, just as he loved John.

Lauren Thibodeaux

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Psalm 130 Ezekiel 37:1-14 Romans 8:5-11 John 11: 1-45

This Sunday, beginning Passiontide, we are waiting—for miracles to occur, for the spirit of the Lord to raise dry bones and give them life, for Jesus the Redeemer, the light of the world. The Psalm for today, a text that I have sung to so many beautiful, plaintive settings, speaks to me of how much our souls look toward the fulfillment of Christ's redemptive ministry on Earth: "I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning." The emphasis of that repetition speaks of such longing. I can just imagine how it might feel to be on the night watch—lonely, perhaps a bit frightening, certainly exhausting. I can feel how much I would want morning to come, bringing the light that would mean relief and rest. We, too, long for rest and the redemption of our souls in just such an urgent way, especially when feeling low, lonely, weary, or sick in mind or body. In the Gospel reading from John, Jesus also uses an analogy contrasting the day and the night. He tells his disciples that "those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." In the Psalm, we are calling to the Lord from the depths of spiritual darkness; as we approach the dawn of resurrection, of Easter morning, may the light of Christ dawn in us again and again.

Leslye Gilchrist

Lent Week Five—Monday

Psalm 35

Jeremiah 24:1-10

Romans 9:19-33

John 9:1-17

I write this as we approach Lenten season, and I am contemplating what to give up. Usually a food item like chocolate, chips, cheese or a beverage like alcohol or diet coke. Many of my friends have chosen to stay off social media during Lent, and I'm considering this as well.

Many years ago, when my children were approaching the age to get phones, I chose to get on social media to understand the details further. Since then, I have thoroughly enjoyed being able to keep up with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. While I've enjoyed most of it, I've been in some groups that were intending to be supportive, and conversations have turned out to be anything but supportive.

Psalm 35 was written by David, possibly when he was being hunted by Saul. This psalm is a prayer to God for help against those who try to inflict injury for no reason. As I read this, I can't help but relate his struggles to some tribulations of current day life situations. David's disappointment, anxiety and fear are evident as he pleads with the LORD to "fight against those who fight against" him. For those who sought David's life, were ruthless witnesses, and maliciously mocked him, he prayed to the LORD to not be silent, to rise to his defense and to vindicate him in the LORD's righteousness. Today when communication is exponentially faster and when it is unkind, I hope you find a moment to read Psalm 35 and find solace. When others are unjust, even when we do good to them, we can appeal to God who is always just.

Lynn Massad

Brad and Lynn Massad

Lent Week Five—Tuesday

Psalm 122 Jeremiah 25:8-17 Romans 10:1-13 John 9:13-41

What Are We Seeking and Where Are We Seeking It?

Psalm 122 urges us to pray for peace. In our present world there is a critical need to pray for peace. I am drawn to the Prayers of the People in The Book of Common Prayer and believe wholeheartedly in the power of unified prayers. Forms I through VI all include prayers for peace in our community, the nation, and the world. There is no doubt that the world needs our fervent prayers, but what about the peace within each of us? Every Sunday, we offer each other a sign of peace and wish each other “God’s Peace” but is God’s peace something we actively yearn for within ourselves? I find clear direction in Psalm 122:8-9 where the Psalmist says, “May peace be within you” and to “seek your good.”

I love where that spotlight is shining...within us. No circumstance, disappointment, unpleasant encounter, fear, nor tribulation is a match for God’s peace, which is “beyond all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). Christ has freely given this gift of His peace to us, but it so easily drowned out by the din of life. Psalm 122 holds the key to His peace by instructing us to seek God’s good, not only for our sake, but also for the sake of our friends and family. It is all too easy to seek things, answers, or outcomes that are not focused on God’s good but our own personal justification. Those selfish searches predictably lead me to disappointment or regret.

God’s peace within us never leaves. He has granted it to us in abundance. Lent offers me a time to focus on God’s gift of peace, to seek it, to recognize it, and try to claim it as my first reaction in daily life.

Clare Nelson

Lent Week Five—Wednesday

Psalm 130 Jeremiah 25:30-38 Romans 10:14-21 John 10:1-18

Do you know about sheepfolds? The ancient places where shepherds would keep their sheep at night? A sheepfold was really not a large place; some earth and stones raised to a height, constructed in a circle – with an opening at one end – a gap. The shepherd would lead them all in, calm them down, and then lie down across the opening; lie down in the gap where danger might come in the night.

But that is only half of the shepherd's job. The other half is to lead them out of the fold. Because if the sheep spent their whole life in the sheepfold, those protective walls would simply become a cage. Now, it was possible for sheep to live their entire life within the fold; however, they would not really be living, they would simply be surviving. Passing their days in an enclosure; safe, but weak. Safe – but never really feeding and watering in the places that would keep them healthy and make them strong.

Perhaps the more significant job of the shepherd was to lead them to pasture, lead them to water; and the shepherd would call them each by name in order that they might follow him safely into the country where they would truly thrive. Of course, the sheep could survive in the small and cramped enclosure of the fold; but they would have no real life. And in the end surviving and living are two different things.

Jesus calls each of us to a new life by name that is outside the enclosures we have come to call home. Jesus is telling his friends that when they remain close to him, if they will be lead and shepherded by him, they will have all that they need. He will give them an abundant life.

Alston Johnson

Lent Week Five—Thursday

Psalm 133 Jeremiah 26:1-16 Romans 11:1-12 John 10:19-42

Following WWII in Europe, the Allied Forces found themselves responsible for hundreds and hundreds of hungry and homeless children, the orphans of war. The children were gathered into large camps and then they were given everything – food, clothes, toys, games, music, diversions of every kind. However, those caring for them were troubled. The children were restless, anxious, “oppositionally defiant”, at night when they should be sleeping. The camps were in a mild turmoil at night. Generally, no one was getting any rest. Finally, a military psychologist offered a solution. After the children were put to bed, each one of them was given a slice of bread, to hold in their hands. If they wanted more to eat, they could have as much as they wanted. But this piece of bread, this piece of bread placed in their hands, was just for holding. It was like a small miracle. The children would go to sleep, and most of them would sleep, and sleep, and sleep. These children simply did not know what they did not know. They were learning a new thing. The children were beginning to know something they had not known, something they had not known for a very long time; they were beginning to know a new thing, that someone cared, and they were going to be safe. You see, with that piece of bread in their hands, they knew that someone was caring for them. They knew that they would be cared for in the morning. And because they knew they were loved, they could rest. The children came to know a new thing. It is the very thing Jesus would have each of his children come to know, at least those who decide to listen to Him. I sometimes think of Jesus’s life and teaching as that slice of bread for the children. If we are still hungry in the midst of an abundant life, needing direction, encouragement, hope . . . it is not simply more information that we need; what we need is more love, compassion, and truth that comes only from God.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life; and they will never perish.”

Alston Johnson

Lent Week Five—Friday

Psalm 141 Jeremiah 29:1, 4-13 Romans 11:13-24 John 12:1-10.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.” In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

Psalm 141 is written by king David while in the wilderness. Unlike many psalms that center on joyful songs dedicated to God, this particular psalm is a combination of a cry, and a need. Psalm 141:3 Set a guard, O Lord before my mouth; keep watch at the door of my lips.

David begins by calling for God’s attention, “Listen to my voice when I call on you.” I admire quiet folks. But sometimes one wonders what they will say in case they choose to talk. I like people who know what they want. I also like people that talk. But what are “we” talking? David knew well that the mouth is a major tool to use for so many things (to curse, bless, pray, sing, magnify, name it). And since he was running away from his enemies, he knew how his mouth would affect him, had he not used it carefully, thus he prayed.

May God help us to know (like king David) what to pray for, also who and whose we are. “But my eyes are toward you, O God the Lord, in you do I trust and take refuge; pour not out my life nor leave it destitute and bare. We need to stay close to God and to trust Him at all times and in all situations because His promises are real. “For I know the thoughts and plans that I have for you, says the Lord, thoughts and plans for welfare and peace and not for evil, to give you hope in your final outcome. Then you will call upon me, and I will hear and heed you (Jeremiah 29:11 & 12).

Erinah E. Nsubuga.

Lent Week Five—Saturday

Psalm 144

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Romans 11:25-36

John 12:37-50

This psalm is believed to be written near the time David became recognized as the king over all tribes of Israel and expressed David's heart for the nation in war and peace. This passage strikes home with us symbolically. As we read it, we are touched by how closely it relates to something we are deeply praying about today. This passage gives us hope and strength as we pray for family and friends who are battling health issues. A reminder that the Lord is the rock and foundation not just to lean on, but to learn from on how to prepare for battle—a humble reminder that humans are “like a breath” and our “days are like a fleeting shadow”. As David prayed for the lord to come down, show his might, scatter the enemy, shoot his arrows and deliver and rescue them; we pray. We pray to send forth the knowledge to the doctors, to enable healing medicine and to deliver resolution. Although the enemy is different, the prayer is the same... deliver them.

After the portion of the psalm asking for delivery from war and battle, David expresses his heart for a peaceful blessed nation. Their barns will be full, their sons and daughters will be well-nurtured and like pillars. The flock will increase, the oxen will draw heavy loads. Although there is a significant time difference between David's prayer and what we have been praying, David's heart expressed ours' now too. Blessed are the people whose God is the LORD.

Brad and Lynn Massad

Palm Sunday

Psalm 31:9-16

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 26:14- 27:66

The Palm Sunday Liturgy and readings seem to me to sum up the whole of our theological understanding of Jesus' life in a way unlike any other. We begin with the entry into Jerusalem. In many ways it is a sort of return to Bethlehem—we have the proclamation of the Son of David—a King returned! And yet, is this the king we were expecting? Just as the king proclaimed by angels in Bethlehem was the child of peasants who lay in a feeding trough, now this king proclaimed in Jerusalem is riding on a borrowed donkey, announced by the unwashed masses, and, before we know it, he is killed as a common criminal. Jesus' incarnation is never as we expect it. The long-desired king who would restore Israel to its former glory is instead the suffering servant who by His suffering restores the glory of creation.

Today's liturgy sends us from exultation to despair, and we ourselves move from being members of the crowd who hails his name to members of the crowd who seek his death. In the passage from Isaiah, it is as though we hear Jesus' own thoughts—as one who has become “a reproach to all my enemies and even to my neighbors, a dismay to those of my acquaintance.” And yet the speaker will not abandon his trust in God, even as we see the crucified Christ commend his soul into His father's hands, confident still in God's power to save.

As we begin Holy Week, we are called to recognize the reality of Christ's life and death and to recognize that our acknowledgement of this reality must define our Christian faith. It is too easy to be like Peter and to deny that we are followers of Jesus, the living and dying Son of God. We would rather follow Jesus the healer of the sick and teller of parables and ignore the messy unpleasantness of Holy Week. We want to jump straight to Easter and the joy of resurrection, but to do that without recalling Christ's Passion is to be like Peter and fail to acknowledge the truth of our relationship; we need rather to be as the Centurion and acknowledge that here indeed was an innocent man.

The writer of Philippians sums up Jesus' nature when he speaks of Jesus as being in the “form of God” and yet emptying himself into a human form which is then humbled to the point of death on a cross. It is Jesus' very sacrifice in shameful death that causes God to exalt Him over every other name. Again, we see incarnation and suffering linked for our salvation, for which reason every tongue should “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord”:

Therefore, God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Chris Carter (Lent 2013)

Holy Week—Monday

Psalm 36:5-11 Isaiah 42:1-9 Hebrews 9:11-15 John 12:1-11

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Imagine the range of emotion in the room as Martha and Mary made final preparations for the supper that had been prepared for Jesus. There was unimaginable joy as they saw Lazarus seated contentedly at the table. The simple act of enjoying a meal with family and friends is newly profound. Lazarus had, after all, died only to be brought back to life (and to the table) by Jesus.

There was immeasurable gratitude bolstered by a long-established, very human, love for Jesus the man. Those gathered also were no doubt awestruck by the grace they had received from coming into intimate relationship with Jesus, the Son of God.

For Jesus, this supper must have seemed like a port in a storm; a rare moment of respite from the rancor engulfing him just outside those walls. Mary makes a grand gesture anointing Jesus with precious oil. (We are told its value was equivalent to a year's wages for the average person). The house was filled with fragrance, as it was with love and devotion; but soon the stench of betrayal wafted through the air in the person of Judas. He expressed disapproval of Mary's actions, and the subsequent rebuke of his words by Jesus must have stung and embarrassed him.

In these moments, Jesus demonstrates his humanness and his divinity. The fundamental act of sharing a meal with close friends gives him comfort. All the while he is fully aware of the ordeal he will soon endure, speaking to Judas of "the day of my burial." Yet, he will willingly submit himself to suffering and death, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

He is the anointed one, and we are to be bolstered by his resolve. We are to follow Martha's example and serve Him with unity, constancy, and peace.

Darrell Rebouche (Lent 2013)

Holy Week—Tuesday

Isaiah 49:1-7 Psalm 71:1-14 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 John 12:20-36

In the days before He is betrayed, Jesus spends his time in a last impassioned effort to explain what is about to happen and why. We often think of the second coming described in Revelations as the hour of final judgment, but as recounted by John 12:20-36, Jesus tells the crowd, (which includes Greeks as well as Jews) that “*Now* is the time for judgment on this world; *now* the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (v. 30-33).” It is a final urgent effort to explain how to get the most out of life now. “Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you (v. 35).”

A 2007 study about what makes people happy found that we become addicted to our own pleasures, and we have to do more and more to be satisfied. According to the study, the best way to increase happiness is to do acts of selfless kindness, to pour oneself out to those who are in need. Research showed that an unselfish life of service gave a sense of meaning, of being useful and valuable, and of having significance. This is exactly what Jesus has been trying to get his followers to understand. The Greeks have come to see Jesus. He tells them if they want to know what He is about, they have to do more than see; they have to follow his example. He is telling them when they surrender their own life, they will find what it means to genuinely live. Instead of seeking happiness by pursuing our own desires, he calls us to set aside what we think we want and say, God, what do you want from me?¹

The readings for today pointedly summarize the teachings of Jesus. The message is hard to ignore without willful effort: become a servant, put others first, be humble, and surrender to God’s will. This is how we live truly every day. Judgment day is not some day; it is now. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified (v. 23).” Jesus tells the crowd, anyone who loves this life will lose it, and anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternity. Because Jesus died and arose in glory, by following the path of service, humility, and faith, we, too, are glorified today and forever more.

Laura McLemore

¹ *The New York Times Magazine*, 7 Jan 2007.

Holy Week—Wednesday

Isaiah 50:4-9a Psalm 70 Hebrews 12:1-3 John 13:21-32

As we approach Good Friday every year, my mood becomes somber. It is hard, in the middle of Holy Week, to feel the excitement of the Resurrection when the Cross looms between us and Easter morning. In the Gospel reading for today, it is clear that Jesus feels it, too. In the previous Gospel reading (John 12:20-36), Jesus speaks of his “troubled soul” as he alludes to his impending death. Time is running out to persuade the crowd of his message to surrender their lives to God in order to save them. Now, it is the last supper, and once again, Jesus is troubled in spirit. For all his teaching, one of his own disciples is going to betray him, and the uncertainty of the others betrays their realization that it could be any one of them. On that night, it would be Judas, the next day, it would be Peter. What is that song? “You Only Hurt the One You Love?” Fr. Mike Marsh observes that we can only betray those “who have given themselves over to us.”* And in betraying Jesus, we are betraying ourselves. We do exactly what the lessons of this Lent have been warning us about. We betray our lives to death, love of others to self-interest, and hope to despair. Again and again throughout these forty days we’ve read that surrendering to God is the source of true happiness and eternal life. Like Peter, we sometimes fail, but then, like the thief we can surrender and pray, O Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.

Laura McLemore

* Michael K. Marsh, “A Sermon for Wednesday in Holy Week, John 13:21-32.” Interrupting the Silence Blog. 20 Apr 2011.

Maundy Thursday

Psalm 116:1,10-17 Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10),11-14 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

If you knew you were about to die, what last, urgent piece of advice, cherished hope or dream would you offer the people you love? In our Gospel reading, Jesus answers this difficult question. The crucifixion clock is ticking. Judas has left the band, and Jesus knows that his disciples are about to face the greatest devastation of their lives. So, he gets right to the point. No parables, no pithy sayings. Just one simple, straightforward commandment, summarizing his deepest desire for his followers: “Love one another.” What is staggering is this commandment is that, though “simple enough for a toddler to memorize...most mature believers are...embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice” (D. A. Carson). When I look at my own life, it is not hard to name why I perpetually fail to obey it. Love takes trust, time, effort, discipline, and transformation, and I am suspicious and busy. Love is risky business, it cost Jesus his life and I am not ready. And yet Jesus did not suggest but rather commanded; meaning, it is not a matter of personal preference; it is a matter of obedience to the Lord.

But what does it mean for Jesus to command us to love? Does love obey decrees? Most of us would say no. Love is spontaneous. We fall in love. We know that authentic love cannot be manipulated, simulated, or rushed without suffering distortion. So, the best we can do is to behave as if we love each other by being nice, sharing our goods and using kind words. But these actions — often done with gritted teeth and rolling eyes — are not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus does not say, “Act as if you love.” He does not give his disciples (or us) the easy “out” of doing nice things with clenched hearts. He says, “Love as I have loved you.” As in for real, in the whole package of authentic feeling, deep engagement, generous action. Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, to the world, if we obeyed and cultivated this “impossible” commandment? I ask these questions because I don’t know how to answer them, even for myself. Do I love as Jesus loved, feel a depth of compassion that is gut-punching, experience a hunger for justice so fierce and so urgent that I rearrange my life to pursue it, empathize until my heart breaks? Do I want to?

Most of the time — I don’t. Those things are hard and costly. And yet this was Jesus’ dying wish. Why? “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” Love is the litmus test of our Christian witness. Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus. It is through our love that we will embody and make Jesus relatable, possible, plausible, to the world. Such is the power we wield in our decisions to love or not love. Such is the responsibility we shoulder, whether we want to or not. Impossible as this commandment may be, Jesus does not leave us bereft and directionless in the wilderness. He gives us a clear road map: “Love as I have loved you.” “Live as you have seen me live,” he says. Weep with those who weep. Laugh with those who

laugh. Touch the untouchables. Feed the hungry. Welcome the child. Release the captive. Forgive the sinner. Confront the oppressor and the oppressed. Wash each other's feet. Hold each other close. Tell each other the truth. Guide each other home. In other words, Jesus' commandment to us is not something that we should wear ourselves out, trying to conjure from our own depleted resources. Rather, it is someone we are invited to abide in — Jesus — where all love originates. This is God's love and there are no parched places God will not drench if we earnestly ask. So, let us ask God to help us love one another as he has loves us.

Thomas Nsubuga

Good Friday

Psalm 22 Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Hebrews 10:16-25 John 18:1-19

Good Friday – The most somber day of the year. Many thoughts. Many emotions. Peter - Jesus labeled him The Rock, on which He will build his Church; Peter, who was with Jesus for his 3-year ministry on this Earth; Peter, one of the three disciples at the Transfiguration; Peter denied Jesus – 3 times. How many times have I denied Jesus? How many times have I sinned; when I didn't do what I should have done? Too many times. Sometimes during my morning run, I pray "Dear Jesus, Please, Please forgive me for my poor decisions, actions and yes, sins. I don't deserve your love; I don't deserve your grace – but you give it to me anyway. I don't know what to say – Thank You seems so inadequate." Because of me, you accepted your Father's will and died an excruciating death on the Cross. I used to cringe when the crowd shouts "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!" Surely, I would not be in the crowd shouting that! But because I am a sinner, my actions speak those awful words. That reality is tough to acknowledge.

"Whom are you seeking?" They answered Him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am *He*." And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. Now when He said to them, "I am *He*," they drew back and fell to the ground.' What caused this reaction of terror? Could it have been the Majesty of the person Jesus and/or, His answer, which to Jewish ears conveyed the unutterable name, "Jehovah" (I AM). Did they fall to the ground because they knew they were before the presence of God? To Judas the term must have been familiar and may have brought back a past which may well have made him tremble at the present. They have come to take Jesus by force, but conscience paralyzes all their intentions, and they lay helpless before Him.

I lay helpless before you, Lord. Jesus, thank you, thank you, thank you for being My Lord & Savior.

Jacques Lasseigne

Holy Saturday

Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16 Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24 1 Peter 4:1-8
Matthew 27:57-66 or John 19:38-42

Holy Saturday can sometimes get lost in both our theological imaginations as well as in our Easter preparations. The Saturday before Easter is understandably filled with pressing our best suits, laying out pastel dresses, and maybe even stuffing plastic eggs while mapping out the most balanced course for scattering them in the yard.

Losing Holy Saturday in the Easter hustle and bustle, however, is a great loss. We honor this day in our liturgical calendar for a reason: it's holy. It's sacred. For the friends and followers of Jesus, this particular Saturday was full of shock and utter disbelief. They woke up on this Saturday morning having just witnessed their hope, their savior, their leader and friend, brutalized and executed. Perhaps they hoped it was just a nightmare but awoke crushed with the memory.

Year after year, as we liturgically walk alongside Jesus and his followers, we're invited to remember the breadth of emotions they went through two thousand years ago. And on this particular Saturday, we are invited to lament with them.

Lament is a somewhat lost art in our modern experience. Lament is a practice of grief, mourning, and sorrow. The book of Lamentations shows us that this kind of pain and despair is an integral part of being human. Its presence in our scripture shows us it is also an integral part of being a child of God: it's holy. It's sacred.

But lament is not simply the experience of a raw emotion. It is, in fact, a practice. It is an act of faithful sorrow, which makes room for all the pain and suffering in this life, but never loses sight of the hope on the other side.

The author of Lamentations names his sorrow and cries out, and in the same breath remembers his hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. On Holy Saturday, embrace the fullness of lament in whatever corner of your heart may need it today, but always keep your eyes on the Eastern horizon, awaiting the dawn of Easter.

Madeleine Rebouche

Easter Day

Psalm 148, 149, 150. Exodus 12:1-14, Isaiah 51:9-11; Luke 24:13-35; John 20:19-23

Sitting in the pews of the Presbyterian Church in Greenwood, Mississippi, many years ago a friend of mine named Rusty Douglas stood before a gathering of local ministers during the week following Easter. He said, "What people want to know is this – Is it true? Is any of it true?" Rusty was referring to the Resurrection of Jesus. "At the end of it all . . . at the end of all the potluck suppers, the sermons, the hymns, the clothes closet and food pantry . . . at the deacons meeting, and the meetings following the meeting in the parking lot . . . all that most folks want to know, "Is it True? Was the tomb empty?" It was the week following Easter and we were all perhaps asking the same question, wondering the same thing. In Ephesians 2:8-10 there is a golden door, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God . . . ' The heart of faith, the eyes of faith, perhaps the mind of faith, is something that is received from another place, so that by the grace of God I have always had some way to nod my head in the face of that question – "Yes, it is true; it happened." For reasons that remain mysterious to me – I can accept the fact that we do not live in a time bound universe.

Others receive their yes in other ways. Another friend once told me the true story of a beloved family patriarch. He was in his last hours and surrounded by his weeping children and grandchildren at the hospital; his time was short, and he had not stirred for days. The room was full of that gravity and solemnity that come when we are seeing someone we love for the last time. In life, this man had been a hail-fellow-well-met, the life of the party, and that "Greatheart" who brings laughter and good cheer to others; essentially, he was beloved. As the sobriety of death, and waves of emotions swept over the family in the hospital room, there was a moment of stillness.

The man's eyes opened. He sat up in bed. Smiling. As though walking across the floor of a Rotary meeting to meet a friend, he stretched out his hand and began pumping it as though shaking hands. With his eyes bright, the man who had not moved for days said, "How ya doin' Lord, darn glad to meet ya. My name is John Doe. Thanks for coming today." Everyone in the room froze with their mouths open. And then very slowly the old, beloved, Greatheart eased back into the pillows and breathed his last earthly breath.

"Is it true?"

By the grace of God, and through the love of Christ for each of us, the answer is, "Yes."

Alston Johnson

Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.

²For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.

Praise the Lord

--Psalm 117