

EMBRACE BEAUTY

2018 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL GUIDE



BAYLOR
TRUETT SEMINARY

As we follow along on the journey with Jesus to the cross, the season of Lent engages our hearts and minds so that we are truly ready to celebrate once we arrive at Resurrection Sunday. Lent is a time of contemplation, a time of dedication, and a time of preparation.

Students of Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary have written the Lenten devotionals from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Each of the Sunday devotionals are written by a Truett faculty member, ending with Easter Sunday.

Our hope and prayer in compiling and sharing these reflections is that they might encourage you and enhance your experience of the Lenten journey this year. Please read the Scripture for each day and then read the reflection.

We have included themes for each week of Lent; these themes were selected by journeying through the Gospel of Mark. We hope these themes will bring cohesiveness to the project and aid in deeper reflection on our walk toward the cross.

May you be blessed and inspired by these words.

In Christ,

Shawn Boyd
The Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching

Dr. Bill Walker
Office of Spiritual Formation

Rory Jones
Master of Divinity 2018

DEDICATED TO KYLE LAKE

“The kingdom of God is taking place all around us at this very second, and obviously, there is a sense in which the kingdom of God doesn’t just happen on its own accord. It doesn’t just appear, like, ‘Voila!’ No, it is actually quite real and takes place because people have taken it upon themselves to bring about change, either in their own lives or in their surroundings.”

Kyle Lake, *Understanding God’s Will:
How to Hack the Equation Without Formulas*

KYLE LAKE

June 1972 - October 2005

It is both an honor and a privilege to introduce this wonderful collection of Lenten reflections dedicated to Kyle Lake. In his wisdom and grace, God raises up young women and men with a passion for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in new and fresh ways, people who have a unique understanding of how the “old, old story” can be communicated in ways that capture the ears, minds, and hearts of their own generation.

Kyle Lake represents the best of that tradition. He preached that “old, old story” in clear and captivating ways that won a hearing from both his own generation and all those who were hungering for a gospel that was truly “Good News.” But Kyle was not wed to the new for newness’ sake. He was wed to the new for faithfulness’ sake. No fads for Kyle, only faithfulness to the ever-transforming message of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Two other commitments characterize the life and preaching of Kyle Lake. He had a love for beauty and saw the beauty and wonder of God’s majestic creation all around him every day. His God was the God Augustine addressed as “Beauty so ancient and so new.” He challenged his congregation to be alert to the beauty that surrounds them every day. Nowhere is this seen so clearly as in the benediction he used every Sunday:

As we approach this week,
May we love God,
Embrace beauty,
and live life to the fullest.

Finally (but certainly not exhaustively!), Kyle was committed to living life to the fullest every day. His life was a commentary on Paul’s admonition to “redeem (or make the most) of the time.” For Kyle, each new day was filled with surprising opportunities to get to know Christ better and to seek new ways to make Him known. This zest for life colored his every endeavor and invited others to come along on life’s greatest adventure - the adventure of following Jesus. In the end, this was Kyle’s *modus operandi* - to know Christ better through following Him more and more closely day by day. It is to this life that his life still calls us all.

May the devotions here do the same.
As we enter this Lenten season, may we hear Kyle’s weekly benediction once more:

As we approach this week,
May we love God,
Embrace beauty,
And live life to the fullest

Thanks, Kyle. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

Hulitt Gloer

Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching



TRIALS

ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14

MARK 1:9-13

The Revised Common Lectionary appropriately assigns one of the "Testing in the Wilderness" narratives to the first Sunday in Lent each year. While many Christians are likely familiar with the three trials or temptations that the devil puts before Jesus in Matthew and Luke, Mark's account stands apart as both brief and mysterious. Elijah and Moses ventured for 40 days and nights in times of trial, and thus Jesus doing the same invites comparison. The emphasis, however, is not on the specifics of this time (fasting, three tests, etc.), but on the clarification of Jesus's identity as the Messiah (Isaiah 11:1-2) and the beginning of new creation (Genesis 1:2).

After descending on him like a dove—confirming Isaiah's hope that God would "tear the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1)—the Spirit drove Jesus out (*ekballo*) into the desert as a time of preparation (this same verb appears later in Mark when Jesus exorcises unclean spirits.) Thus, we should not overlook that it is God who initiates the scene, entering into and leading Jesus to confront and contend with Satan.

There is the early indication that where Jesus goes, shalom follows. Moreover, the reference to Jesus's peaceful relationship with wild beasts may call to mind Adam with the animals in the garden, or other "Peaceable Kingdom" texts (e.g., Isaiah 11:6-9). At the same time, the Spirit's descent does not produce a state of inner tranquility. Rather, it takes Jesus further into a place of desolation and tribulation. Verse 13 especially underlines God's provision for Jesus, reassuring readers that God does not leave the Son of God (or any of God's children) entirely vulnerable to the ravages of the world. The takeaway in this case, then, is less that wild beasts have been made safe or that the Kingdom of God has fully arrived, and more so that God is with Jesus to protect him in a dangerous world. Ezekiel 34:23-31 may also be in view, which anticipates a new David as the shepherd-king and announces the banishment of wild animals from the land.

The prologue sequence of Mark has the testing in the wilderness immediately following Jesus's Baptism. It is as if to say, "The beloved Son of God is also the One who is tested!" At first, this may not seem to offer the relief and comfort of the garden or of paradise for which we all long. The in-breaking of God's kingdom does not create instant harmony. On the contrary, it is inevitably succeeded by conflict and struggle. So too is this often the experience for disciples and the Christian community carrying out God's mission.

On the other hand, in order to save us, does not God in Christ first elect to take on, resist, and overcome the very same trials, weaknesses, and temptations that we as sinful human beings face every day? This is close to what the early Church Fathers taught: "What is not assumed is not redeemed." The temptation of Jesus in Mark directs us to one of our greatest temptations—the temptation to doubt that God is really with us. But the season of Lent invites us to lay claim to the promise and hope of God's presence. On the journey to the cross, we remember Christ's Advent, and we await the glory of Easter.

One cannot help but think here of the assurance from the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 4: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (v. 15) This is very good news! Hence, the writer continues: "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (v.16) Amen.

Bill Walker
Spiritual Formation Office

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

PSALM 25:1-10

Imagine you have just found out that you have stage IV lung cancer and are told that it is very likely that you acquired this cancer from years of smoking. Some might think of this news as being given a death sentence, even though modern medicine has helped have a drastic increase in cancer survivors. When you are told this news, it is hard not to focus on the worst possibilities, on all the darkness that surrounds your life, especially if you feel that you caused this darkness.

This cancer, like many other daunting situations, could make us believe that there is no hope. It is during these times that the faith that lives in us can shine the brightest. Our faith and trust in our Lord give us a reason to live and a hope that shines light upon our path. It is during this time that we desperately need the Lord to show us his ways, teach us his paths, and guide us in his truth, for he is God our Savior (Psalm 25:4-5 NIV).

If you feel that you may have caused this time of trial and darkness upon yourself because of the sins you have committed, know that our Lord has great mercy and love that is everlasting, demonstrated in his death in the cross (Psalm 25:6). Repent, and he will instruct you in his way for he is good and upright (Psalm 25:8). I assure you that nothing could separate us from his love. As Paul states, “neither death nor life, neither angel nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

What is the truth, or better yet, do we know its name, its origin? Is the truth something we as Christian brothers and sisters are willing and courageous enough to stand firm for? In the ancient Greek period, the fifth-century philosopher Socrates, the great mentor of Plato and a relentless seeker of wisdom, scoured Athens in pursuit of what the meaning of life and ultimate truth was. To his bewilderment, few citizens had sufficient answers for their suppositions and beliefs upon inquiry. Socrates then claimed to possess certainty in knowing nothing, although as Paul relays in the text, the ultimate truth has been granted to the earth: the hope stemming from Jesus Incarnate and his majesty within the body of Christ.

At the beginning of the passage, Paul reminds us of our ultimate judge and judiciary, Jesus Christ. In this light, the truth must reside accordingly within the presence of Scripture, Christ-like actions, and our hearts. The truth is enacted when it calls us into the light of Jesus Christ and into a life of divine action rather than self-satisfaction. The light of truth, however, tends to paralyze and disrupt our lives in multiple respects because it urges and commands us to live in sound doctrine and in self-denial (Matt. 16:24). However, we have hope in the cross, in the truth of Jesus' powers over sin, shame, and falsehoods. A major portion of the truth rests in correcting and rebuking, encouraging and edifying, preparing us for every good work.

Paul continues writing to explain that truth and teachers must remain conjoined. We are all called to preach, teach, and live the sacred reality of Christ's love. However, Paul does later project a dichotomy between truth and myth. Many myths were/are often taught in childish or even academic ways. Although, during a fair amount of the Roman Empire, the myths of polytheistic god-worship remained a constant reality. For Christians during this period of history, persecution existed under select emperors and groups, such as Nero and Domitian. Death, violence, embarrassment, crucifixion, and grisly aggression befell many. Throughout the postmodern world, however, do these aggressions still not exist in many countries, especially universally through various distortions of the truth?

Paul finds the world has satisfaction in ignorance and entertaining myths that are pleasing to the ear. In antiquity, as well as within contemporary society, truth has become displaced for feelings and romanticized notions that masquerade as truth but ultimately serve as distractions. Today, however, we as Christians have the opportunity to flip the script and live for truth, the ever-present eschatology of Christ in community and culture, the God who has revealed himself through the Scriptures and commands and offers love, wisdom, and edification over emotion, hollow ideas, and opinions. The truth is now; the truth is Christ! May we stand firm together as evangelists and do the work of the Lord to love and offer the hope and the truth of Christ.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17

PSALM 32

In reading this Psalm, I am reminded of the hurt and pain there is in persisting sin, but also in the healing and restoration found in the confession of sin. How great it is to know that we are forgiven when we confess our sin!

Now, getting to that confession of sin may not always be as quick or as simple because sometimes we simply feel stuck. Sin has a way of slowly taking hold of our life if we let it.

For instance, we are used to relying on our five senses to guide us, to have balance, and direction. We rely so much on our eyes and our senses of hearing. If we were to close our eyes and try to balance on one foot, I think that most of us would probably end up not being able to do it very well. The same thing would happen if we are asked to close our eyes and walk a straight line; most of us would not be able to do it well. I have also found it interesting that in the quietest place in the world, Orfield Laboratories, people have not been able to last longer than 45 minutes. It is a place used for testing the noise of products that have a measurement of -9.4dBA. Some people have claimed from their experience that they felt disoriented because of how quiet it was, that they had to take a seat in order to last there for even that long.

In sharing this, I want us to think about how sin sometimes starts, in a numbing way, to disorient us. It starts off slow, as if we're slowly losing our senses, and when we come to a realization of the pain and struggle that we carry, we may be in a place where we feel like we cannot last there a moment longer. And maybe that is you today, or it has been part of your journey.

If this is your present experience, look at the hope shared by David in this Psalm. He starts off by acknowledging the richness those that are forgiven have in God. His struggle with sin was painful, but his situation immediately changed when he confessed his sin to the LORD. His guilt was lifted, and an overflowing of healing and relief came over him. Praise God that we have a savior!

If this was part of your journey, reflect back and praise God for your restoration and healing. Think about where you were and where you are now. Think about how you felt after being restored when you gained your strength and could once more breathe in peace. Because we have forgiveness and restoration in Christ, we can all say, "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit."



DISCIPLESHIP

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18

MARK 1:16-20

Simplicity is beautiful... although difficult, and, perhaps, increasingly unimaginable in our day and age. Simplicity is an often talked about subject, yet it is rarely sought with any fervor. For the average person a day without television or internet may seem feasible, but relinquishing our cell phone would be near impossible. Like hurried ants, we scuttle about our busy days in our busy lives because our schedule dictates our self-worth. We like the idea of simplicity, but not the reality simplicity requires.

The simple calling of Jesus' first followers to discipleship offers the modern reader an example of the dilemma of idea versus practice. Jesus issues the invitation with a two-word imperative accompanied with an analogy that would speak to these fishermen: "Follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people." The reader of these words might pine to hear such a simple calling from the Christ, and in fact, may desire to relate a personal calling to such sweet words. But again, the idea is nicer than the reality. N.T. Wright reflects on this idea in his Mark commentary:

"Today I happened to take a walk in the evening sunlight by a Scottish harbor, and to my surprise I came upon a man, about my own age, sitting outside his harbourside front door mending a lobster pot. I asked myself how he would have responded if I had told him to give it all up and follow me—or even to give it all up and follow Jesus. Only when you think a bit about the sort of life Peter, Andrew, James, and John had had, and the totally unknown future Jesus was inviting them into do you understand just how earth-shattering this little story was and is."

The act of following, of discipleship, is a call to a life of laying down the nets. Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John to forgo the life they know, the safety of the family business, the comfort of home, perhaps even wealth (certainly more wealth compared to a traveling trove of good news bringers). There is no great explanation from Jesus, no plan of action, no mission or vision statement. Just "Follow me." The call to discipleship is the call to denial of self and daily cross carrying (Luke 9:23).

Simple and beautiful...daring and dangerous. Simple obedience, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer terms it, is as beautiful as the simple call of Jesus. A disciple does not merely say "Yes, Lord," and acquiesce in thought, but rather is one who drops the nets "at once." It is the action of getting out of our boats and following. This Lenten season, a holy reflection of sacrifice and self-control, may we take the simple call to a simple life of simple obedience seriously. May we find the beauty of laying down our nets and following the One who calls.

Spiritual Practice: Simplify your life today. Unplug from all electronic devices and even your phone. Spend time seeking the One who calls from the shore to follow—spend time with those fellow fishers of people.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

Have you ever seen a dead person articulate exactly how they desire for their funeral flowers to be arranged? Or how they desire to be dressed and presented in their casket? Or even how they desire a particular passage or prayer to be recited at their service? I sure hope not!

The simple truth is to be dead is to be powerless, unaware, and unable to do for oneself. Death is the result of sin. It is the conditional state of all lost men and women.

Paul separates this passage into three parts: in the first (Ephesians 2:1-3) he explains the elements that have led to the death of humanity; in the second (Ephesians 2:4-6) he explains the life-giving characteristics of God; and in the third (Ephesians 2:7-10) he explains the essences of salvation. In this one passage, we are clearly presented the process of moving from death to life through Jesus Christ.

Paul begins this passage by explaining how all of humanity passes through this lifeless condition. We are not just suffering from a spiritual illness, but dead! We possess nothing. No worth. No hope. No life. Paul transitions out of this darkness by using the words, "But God." These two words describe the richness of His mercy!

We were once lost in sin, *but God...*

We were once blind, *but God...*

We were once citizens of this fallen world, *but God...*

The words, "But God," have rapidly penetrated light into the dark conditional state of humanity. God's mercy, love, grace, and faithfulness have made us alive through the priceless sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As Paul further transitions into part two of this passage (Ephesians 2:4-6), he explains how our sin nature has been redeemed and resurrected from the worthless, hopeless, and lifeless state it was once in.

Paul ends by telling us, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

As we mature in being disciples who make disciples of all the nations, we must remember salvation is a miracle! Today's prayer is that we will never forget the precious gift of life through the priceless sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

We were once dead, *but God...* has given us eternal life!

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20

1 PETER 3:8-18

Resistance is a heavy word, loaded with emotional and physical baggage. It may elicit fear of change or opportunity. It can bring painful memories to the surface, forcing us to confront them head-on or further run from them. Or maybe it just stands as an obstacle in our way, something that prevents us from achieving our goal.

No matter what resistance means for us as Christians, we have to acknowledge that resistance is part of the package. It's the fine print on the contract that we often overlook. It is part of what it means to follow Jesus Christ and approach the throne of God with humility and an attitude of worship. There are those who will stand in our way, who will oppose us. What is our response to this resistance? Another loaded word—endure.

In 1 Peter, the early Christians are being met with great resistance. They are cultural outsiders in search of the peace that is found in Christ Jesus. The evil weighs on their hearts and tempts them to turn away from God, to revert back to the cultural norms of society. The letter's author reminds the church not to repay evil with evil, but instead with blessing. They are called to endure the suffering and that suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ refines us. Just as Christ suffered for the sake of all sins on the cross, we too have a cross to bear. And how we bear that cross makes all the difference.

The letter says that it won't be easy, resistance and suffering never are. But we aren't left to our own vices to wiggle our way free from the jam. No, we have the antidote—discipleship in community.

The church was called to have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. The church is meant to be the avenue of support that helps us to endure the suffering and resistance in our lives. It is the hand that lifts us to our feet when we fall flat on our face, that gives us a hug on the day we don't feel adequate, it is the joy and grace that we find in knowing that we aren't alone and that we can experience through loving, authentic relationship with one another.

Resistance and suffering are inevitable. But walking through it with others in unity and love makes that cross a little bit lighter. And that is a hope that I can cling to.

Prayer: Oh holy and loving God. We know that this call for us to follow you is not easy, but just as your Son Jesus endured the cross, let us endure ours too. Let us walk with one another, in truth and in love, knowing that the Spirit refines us. Provide us the strength and the encouragement necessary to dispose of all fear and bring forth the hope and peace that can only be found in you. Let us delight in this truth together. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21

PROVERBS 30:1-9

“Follow me, and I will double how many fish you catch.” These are not the words of Jesus, but many believe this to be true about following Christ. Whenever someone is blessed with unexpected income, we hear joyful exclamation, but more often anxious prayers are cried out because the luxuries we want do not fit our budget.

Rather than perceive a lack of excess as a sign of failure in following Christ, one might view subsistence as a gift as Agur son of Jakeh describes in Proverbs 30:9. For this man righteous living was not material; it was not filled with a white-picket-fence or a leisurely lifestyle. Following God meant his life would honor the Creator with both his physical and spiritual welfare (v. 8). It was an act of trust to leave his welfare to a God he admits he did not understand, just as it would be an act of blind trust for the disciples. But one thing the humble writer of this Proverb understood was that “every word of God proves true” (v. 5). He would be shielded and protected by taking refuge in The Almighty. So he follows the Lord and asks to be shielded from lying and to be fed with enough that he might not profane or forget the one who provided.

Following Jesus is not a recipe for financial success; at times it is not even comfortable. And it requires a trust in the one leading. But so long as the one we are following is Christ, the reward is a life that honors God even when we do not understand the one who provides or the ways in which God gives.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22

ROMANS 3:21-31

“Blood for the Blood God, Skulls for the Skull Throne!” is the cry of the Chaos Space Marines as they march to battle to slaughter in service of their blood god...in the tabletop and video game series *Warhammer 40,000*. I shouldn't have to tell anyone this is nothing like the real God. This is not the God whom we serve, and see most fully on the cross of Christ. This is a god who exists only on painted figurines and on computer screens.

But maybe I *do* have to say God is not like this. Some have made the claim that God does require blood—that there is a lack *in* God which requires satiation. In short, it's “Blood for the Blood God” after all. This is what was derisively referred to by Harry Emerson Fosdick as “slaughterhouse religion.” Certainly, this idea doesn't reflect the reality of God's motivations. The cross was not foreordained to satisfy a divine thirst for blood.

Another option is to view the cross as something which merely “moves” us to imitation. Certainly, the cross should touch our hearts. And, yes, imitating Christ is the calling of every Christian. Yet the temptation here is to turn the cross into a sentimental motivation to change ourselves. It can presume the problems in our lives are surmountable, things we can get over. At least, if we are so motivated. The problem is, without Christ, the Powers of Sin and Death have us right in their grip. We have no room for boasting of our own salvation. Natural and predictable things have no power to un-do death. As the poet W.H. Auden wrote, **“Nothing can save us that is possible: / We who must die demand a miracle.”**

Both of these options are inadequate. The cross of Christ is not some sacrifice meant to satisfy God's bloodthirstiness. Neither is it merely a moving gesture for us to somehow imitate (as if we could ever sufficiently). It is the very miracle we need. Christ's cross demonstrates his righteousness, which is our free gift by faith. And in case we were unsure, Paul is clear: in this matter, y'all really got nothing to brag about (Rm. 3:27, paraphrased).

When considering what this metaphor of “sacrifice of atonement” or “shedding of his blood” might mean, theologian George Hunsinger may help us see more clearly, penning the following in *Disruptive Grace*:

“Christ's blood is a metaphor that stands primarily for the suffering love of God. It suggests that there is no sorrow God has not known, no grief he has not borne, no price he was unwilling to pay in order to reconcile the world to himself in Christ...it is a love that has endured the bitterest realities of suffering and death in order that its purposes might prevail... the motif of Christ's blood signifies primarily the depth of the divine commitment to rescue, protect, and sustain those who would otherwise be lost.”

Our lifelong discipleship, Dallas Willard said, is a life of becoming who Jesus would be in our place. I will add this: the reason this ongoing transformation is possible is because of who Jesus is, and was, in his place. Christ's work on the cross is Christ's work for us, and in us, today. Human-made distinctions are leveled. All bragging rights are off. All are fallen. And Christ died for all. The good news is that we all may live in Him by faith.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23

ROMANS 4:1-12

No matter how many books I've read, lectures and sermons I have heard, or conversations I've had, I inevitably forget that I am justified by faith, not works. Maybe it is the result of a Type-A personality that strives for perfection and is competitive to a fault. Although the struggle has become less over the years as a result of prayerful and compassionate pastors, friends, and authors, I still am working to truly believe that my faith, not my works, justify me. Whatever the reason, I find myself asking what exactly I need to do to become the type of Christian that will not irritate God.

When I think of the journey to which Abraham was called, I think of how strenuous and challenging it must have been. The trek must have been exhausting, and leaving everything behind must have been daunting, while the weight of his calling was surely heavy. I can only imagine that Abraham, like the rest of us, struggled at times to trust the God who called him.

Maybe the reason I find myself slipping into a relationship with the Lord based on works and not faith is because, when life is difficult, stress engulfs me, and fear seems a part of me, it is easier to work my way to God than to have faith that God is already working. When life is neither joyful nor peaceful, it can feel easier just to do the work myself instead of knowing that the One who sees and hears me is at work in my life and the world. This is not to say that suffering and struggle is the result of God's hands, but it is to say that God promised to be "with [us] always, to the very end of the age." When we feel as though we have little time and even less energy, the persistent presence of God calls us back to faith again and again.

Faith is a cornerstone of discipleship. The nature of being a disciple is recognizing that we are following, not leading, and even when chaos ensues, having faith in the One we are following. The nature of being a disciple necessitates that even when we want to steer our own lives, we allow God to speak God's calling for us first. Faith is recognizing that God is working and that our work is participating in it.

Here is a reflective prayer for us to speak to God as we continue to learn what it means to be justified by our faith:

Prayer: Holy Spirit, I pray to pay attention to your work in my life and the world, and I pray to participate in whatever way you are calling me. I pray to have faith that you are in fact moving and present, and to not attempt to do the work myself. I pray to have faith even when the conditions of life make it challenging. Amen.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24

PSALM 22:23-31

My friends Tiffany and Chris recently had their first baby, a boy named Jude. Jude is a precocious and mischievous nearly-year old typical baby. He likes to eat, play with people's hair, make funny baby noises, and sometimes even sleep. I have had the opportunity to be at Tiffany and Chris's house on a few different occasions for Jude's bedtime routine. He begins with a bottle, followed by a last little bit of playtime. When he starts to get fussy, Jude's parents know it is time for him to go to bed. He gets changed into his pajamas and put into his crib, usually with some protesting.

After putting Jude to bed, Tiffany or Chris rejoin the group. Even though Jude's parents are with me in the living room, they can still hear and see his every protesting whimper, or, after he has fallen asleep, the way he sticks his baby rump in the air. This is all because they have a baby cam that shoots nighttime video and is equipped with a robust microphone. Even as we continue to chat or play games, either Tiffany or Chris is almost always found with the monitor in hand, checking on that stinker they have created.

Sometimes, Jude doesn't feel like his parents care anymore because they have left him in a dark room by himself. He acts as though no one can hear him whimpering, so he turns up his cry-o-meter volume to shrieking hysteria. But Tiffany and Chris have been listening and watching the whole time and they often go to console Jude and remind him they are there.

We are often like baby Jude. We tend to think, like the Psalmist crying out in Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We forget that God always keeps watch over us, that God "did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him" (22:24). God stands prepared to hear our crying out. God's attention is better than any top-of-the-line blinged-out 4K HD Bose Surround Sound with subwoofer baby monitor.

If we end there, though, we have fallen short of what we are called to by this passage by the psalmist. The life of discipleship is about more than just crying out. Jesus demonstrated that perfectly when, after quoting Psalm 22:1, he proclaims God's faithfulness by trusting God in his death.

After recognizing God's faithfulness in our lives, the Psalmist says that it becomes our obligation to live a life of praise in the congregation. We must become people who proclaim God's goodness and deliverance to those who will come after us. The Message translation of the final verse of this chapter becomes our call. We are to tell others that "God does what he says."

Prayer: God, sometimes it is all we can do to simply cry out to you. Thank you for your grace and mercy in our lives when that is the fullest display of our faith. Remind us that you call us to more than that too. Remind us that you desire us to praise you with others and to proclaim your goodness. Thank you for your son Jesus who has given us the ultimate example of how to do so.

The image features a solid green background. In the center, there is a large, dark green circular area. Within this circle, the word "FORGIVENESS" is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font. The text is centered horizontally and is flanked by two thin, horizontal white lines, one above and one below. The background is decorated with a pattern of stylized palm fronds, which are rendered in various shades of green, creating a layered, sunburst-like effect around the central circle.

FORGIVENESS

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25

MARK 2:1-12

Forgiveness and Healing

Lent, as a period in the church's calendar, is a time especially designed for you to contemplate and maybe reorder priorities in your life. As you prepare yourself to travel with Jesus toward his death, so to speak, it becomes a time of repentance and self-examination, of prayer and renewal.

The account in Mark 2:1-12 connects healing and forgiveness in a special way and moves forgiveness from the realm of inner emotion to the realm of physical impact. The experience of true forgiveness causes a direct change in people's lives.

The story of the four friends who tried to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus by lowering him down through the roof tiles may be one of the most memorable image-driven stories in the New Testament. It's a picture of four friends who were willing to "tear the house down" to see healing come to their friend.

What happens next speaks both to Jesus' power and to his teaching about God's forgiveness. Seeing the paralyzed man in front of him, Jesus, knowing (v.8) what the crowd was thinking about sin and illness (cf. John 9:1-13), said: your sins are forgiven. To the religious authorities, such language was an affront against God whose forgiveness was connected to their rituals.

Has forgiveness also become a religious concept for us? Something mostly theoretical? We know we need it; we know we want it; we agree it is important! BUT – it's much easier to talk about than to truly give and often quite difficult to fully accept. History is full of both literary descriptions, and actual events, that reveal how the lack of genuine forgiveness make human life difficult.

Lack of forgiveness is the background of wars, it's the context for unspeakable evil, and it can be the reason for various kind of personal illness. The ability to forgive, and the experience being forgiven, are not theoretical truisms or axioms but foundational building blocks for healthy human lives.

The healing in the crowded house gives us at least two major thoughts for Lent. One is about Jesus' divine power and one about forgiveness. The teachers of the law were, of course, right; no one can ultimately forgive sins except God. If they came into the house thinking Jesus was little more than a great teacher, they clearly left knowing that Jesus had God's power (v.9). Jesus proved his power to forgive sin by commanding the paralyzed man to get up, take your mat, and go home.

The second lesson for lent in this passage is about the connection between forgiveness and healing. Forgiveness cannot be reduced to something like an emotional crutch for the emotionally needy. It has a direct impact on human interaction and relationships. Nothing would ever be the same for this man and his friends. That's true about human forgiveness, and it's even truer when Jesus speaks his word of forgiveness! When forgiveness is genuinely sought and received, it brings healing – what was paralyzed comes alive.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26

HEBREWS 1:8-12

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth, and it was good. However, God's creation faded due to man's actions. The effects of sin on our world caused destruction and tainted the world's view of God. Maybe sin has affected your life in a similar way, the goodness and beauty you once enjoyed has been disrupted. You may be in a struggle to keep your peace, and your joy might seem too small for the trials in life you are facing right now. But just as the sin in the garden only affected the things around God and not God himself, my hope is that you realize you too are strong enough to endure when things around you have been affected.

Grace shows us that our actions do not change the nature of God. His faithfulness and righteousness are constant. Grace reveals God's inability to change because of our actions. He is constant in an ever-changing world. He remains faithful, kind, and loving even when humanity is not to one another. Forgiveness is the outpouring of the fruits of the spirit regardless of the actions of the people in this world. God's grace is a continual act of forgiveness we must show to one another each and every day. It is a reality that while we live on this Earth, we will experience unwanted afflictions. But we must take note of the example set by God, that there are not actions bad enough for which we cannot extend grace and forgiveness.

The ultimate example of forgiveness was God's sacrifice of his son Jesus Christ. After everything God experienced with his children, he chose not to repay evil for evil, but rather good for evil. It is in those difficult moments when the eternal nature of God is revealed. Circumstances in life are going to make you think you cannot go on and that a lesson needs to be learned, but it's not the lesson you think. When hurt, anger, and frustration appear in your life, show love. Mahatma Gandhi said, "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." You must cling to the faithful One, who has shown us how to conduct ourselves, reveal the love of God to others in spite of what others say or do. Sacrifice is the ultimate display of forgiveness; whenever we forfeit the opportunity to repay hurt with hurt, we yield control to God and allow his loving kindness to transcend Earth and his glory to be revealed in the world.

Prayer: Lord, we thank you for the goodness and beauty you have given us in this life. Thank you for the goodness you created. Help us also to see you during times where that beauty and goodness are challenged. Strengthen us, O Lord, so we may extend to others the grace and mercy you have given us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

HEBREW 9:23-28

Jesus Appears

Jesus appears,
in the shedding of his blood, not the flood.

Jesus appears,
in faith through Jesus Christ, not animal sacrifice.

Jesus appears,
in seeking him boldly, not in holy holies.

Christ has appeared,
the Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost.

Christ has appeared,
in putting away sin, 'til the end.

Christ has now appeared,
as mediator and retriever for all believers.

Christ has now appeared,
Only Christ for intercession, no need for Mary, Jude, Abraham
or priestly confession.

Christ has now appeared,
an Advocate on the throne for all who do wrong.

Christ will yet appear,
raising the dead, no need a bed
judging the world, boys and girls.

Christ will yet appear,
Looking for believers, not manly achievers
No Word, Hellbound, no life with Christ
Believers caught up through Christ,
receiving everlasting life.

Christ has appeared.
Christ now appears.
Christ will yet appear.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

JOHN 12:36-43

“Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.”

I wonder if that was the case for all of them.

I don't doubt the validity of John. I love this maverick gospel, and I'm sure there were people who did lose passion in light of losing social capital. The Pharisees had high religious and political standing. Staying with them would grant one privileges that outsiders did not have. It's terrifyingly easy to sell your conviction for social standing.

But I wonder if there was more to it for some of those scared people. Maybe the thought of expulsion hit deeper. How many of them only knew the community of the synagogue? How many of them only knew safety, connection, and belonging within its walls?

Then comes this radical teacher talking about walking in the light in a world struggling with darkness. His words stir their souls, and their souls leap inside them like a baby John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb. They go to follow this teacher they believe to be of God, and the Pharisees come in and say, “Commit to follow him, and we will kick you out.” Suddenly, their souls go from leaping to frozen: do we follow this man whose words are light in this world or stay with what has gotten us this far?

As I considered how forgiveness related to this passage, I went through a few stages. I wanted those who scare people with expulsion and rejection to repent and for God to forgive them for losing sight. I moved from that to praying that God forgive those who did choose safety over the dangerous and risky path that is following the light.

Then came the conviction. Notice something about those two prayers? Not once did I pray that God work in me. A new question came to the surface:

God, who have I pushed away from your path? Will you forgive me and put them on that path?

A quick prayer to carry through this day: God, forgive those who use fear and not love in their ways. Forgive those who choose to stay comfortable and not follow the uncomfortable path. And forgive me for those I have pushed away, and give me the courage to love those you love. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 1

1 PETER 2:4-10

Undeserved Mercy

Precious. Chosen. Holy-

The names you give us.

Foolish. Lowly-

The names we merit,

now wiped away,

Your gift of mercy

has won the day.

Often times we come before God wanting to give more than just ourselves, not trusting that Jesus and his mercy are enough. We want there to be some kind of exchange that helps us know that we are worthy in his sight. Or we do not come at all because we feel insufficient or because life's busyness blocks the way. Just the simple act of coming to God feels too insignificant, so we let our excuses come between us and the living stone, Jesus Christ. We forget our purpose—to serve as a holy priesthood to God. We forget that we are already forgiven, that our identity in Christ is “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his precious possession,” (1 Peter 2:9). We forget until we stop evaluating our own efforts and come to God, letting him shape us. Then, he takes our lives and molds them like living stones used to build his kingdom, all working toward the common purpose of declaring his praises. Though it may not make sense to us, God uses foolish things to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27), and though Christ the cornerstone is foolishness to the world, He is the very foundation of true faith. Jesus is either the rock upon which we build our lives or the stone over which we stumble. We must choose: will we let his mercy be enough and build on that foundation? Or will we trip over Jesus in our efforts to climb to the top?

Prayer: Lord, forgive me for my busyness which keeps me from you, and for not believing that I am precious and worthy in your sight. You use foolish things to shame the wise, and you yourself were rejected by the world. May my life be like a holy priesthood—a reflection of the very essence of who you are—and may I build my life on the foundation of Jesus rather than trying to climb over you to get to my goals. Thank you for caring for a people who do not deserve your mercy.

Spiritual Discipline: Meditate on 1 Peter 2:9, let it sink into the depths of your soul, live out of your identity as a forgiven child of God, and ask for forgiveness for areas that you have not built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.

F O R G I V E N E S S
FRIDAY, MARCH 2

EXODUS 19:9-15

Forgiveness in Covenant

This may not ring true for everyone, but in my life, I find it incredibly difficult to forgive those who have wronged me. This could be because I am someone who takes things incredibly personal whether it was meant to be or not, but I am not entirely convinced that is the case. Rather, I believe that the issues that I, as well as others, may have with forgiveness are that perhaps we have not defined it correctly. That we have a skewed view of what we think forgiveness is, and in turn, we have difficulties comprehending it. Forgiveness is more than just saying the words “I am sorry.” In fact, forgiveness comes from letting go of the pride that we have in holding onto the actions of the past. It is loosening the grip of suffering and tragedy that we so desperately hold onto. Forgiveness is an act of true humility in the light of Christianity. It is the choice in which we give up our own feelings of vendetta and anger and in turn choose to move on to joy.

If forgiveness is about us moving away from our pride and our feelings of hurt and anger, then what exactly does the passage of Exodus 19:9-15 have to do with it? What does Moses ordering the people of Israel to cleanse themselves and stay away from the mountain have to do with forgiveness? Why is it that women cannot be touched and that anyone who does touch the mountain die by spear or stone, whether it be human or animal? Reading the passage over and over continued to leave me stumped. I felt like there was no answer, but God, being the compassionate and gracious God, guided me to look past just the small passage to the entire book of Exodus and where it stood within the realms of the Old Testament. The answer became as clear as day as if God was speaking into the dark, chaotic, and empty depths of my brain “let there be light” as God did in Genesis 1:3. Exodus is key in the realm of Covenantal theology, and in Exodus 19 God is beginning to establish what we term the Mosaic Covenant. God’s forgiveness is found in God’s coming down from the mountain in those three days. In God’s revealing Godself to the people of Israel. God’s forgiveness was setting the stage for God’s arrival.

We are people in Covenant with God and find ourselves in God’s forgiveness; I believe the challenge that we then face is, are we also allowing others into the realm of forgiveness? Do we have grudges that are still hidden deep within the depths of our conscious? Do we still find it almost impossible to get rid of the anger or hurt that someone may have caused us within our lives? May we reflect on this Scripture as God would continue to enter a covenant with people who would forsake and abandon the Lord, and who would ultimately one day nail the son of God onto a tree. In this reflection, may we pray that we find it in ourselves to forgive the ones who have hurt us, but also that we may have the ability to forgive ourselves and be able to look upon ourselves in the light that God sees us in. Forgiven. Who do you need to forgive? What is keeping you from forgiving or being forgiven?

Ben Fountain
MDiv 2020

SATURDAY, MARCH 3

MARK 9:2-8

Experiencing Christ in All of Life

As a 34-year-old, two-time seminary graduate, and pastor, I have crossed paths with many people that have given their lives over to some sort of ministerial calling, in both vocational and recreational settings. One broad thing that these people (and myself) have in common is some kind of experience that propelled them (us) to engage in a specific Christian ministry. As much as many of my colleagues and I enjoy the cognitive, analytical exercise of interpreting Scripture and appropriating theology, these, in and of themselves, fail as motivators for pursuing life and service in Christ. Yet, in a somewhat ironic fashion, I have found everyday ministry to often exclude the experiences that so often persuade initial surrender to it.

Who can blame Peter's almost comical reaction to Jesus' transfigured state in all of its glory? Truth be told, many of us would be content to "set up shop" at the high points of our service to Christ and be fine with never coming back down. For Peter, James, and John, the transfiguration was not an experience of everyday ministry with Jesus; on the contrary, it was a motivator that would permeate the entirety of their future ministry – a reminder of the reality toward which they were ultimately headed as disciples of Jesus. They would need this reminder not only in the midst of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion; but even (and ironically) upon his resurrection, the initial reaction to which Mark records as anything but a "mountain-top experience" (Mk 16:8).

If we are not careful, the common, mundane conditions of life can choke out our recognition of Christ at work in our own lives and in the midst of others'. This happened to me one morning when I encountered a church member in the hallway that I had not seen in over a year. It was common for her to sporadically show up and attend for a month or so before disappearing again. Her bipolar diagnosis and her inconsistent nature make tolerating her an exercise in frustration for me. I half-way listened as she showed me an old book she had received as a girl from our church with various signatures of people she admired. I thought this would be the extent of my interaction with her for the day until she stood up at the beginning of our service and proceeded to confess to the whole church that she struggles with alcoholism, and insisted on describing several of the negative effects it has had on her personal life. It seemed like an eternity as I stood there, waiting for her to finish, so we could continue. Thankfully, a deacon that was more sensitive and open to the Holy Spirit than I suggested we pray for her, and as I watched her embrace him with tears streaming down her face following the prayer, it became apparent to me that I was standing in the shoes of the teachers of the law that questioned Jesus' ability to forgive the sins of a paralyzed man (Mk 2:6-7). Their experience had told them that someone simply could not be forgiven at the word of another, just as mine had taught me that putting up with flakey church members was a waste of my time and energy. When we allow only such common, widely-accepted experiences to influence our capacity for ministry and service, we WILL miss out on what Christ is doing in our midst.

One way to intentionally become aware of where we may be missing Christ in our everyday experience is by reflecting upon it using Ignatius of Loyola's notion of consolation and desolation. As you allow your mind to replay the day's activities from beginning to end, ask yourself: Where did I most notice God today? Where did I least notice God today? After reflecting, respond to God in prayer with thanksgiving, confession, and intercession.

Dr. Matt Richard
MDiv, DMin



RESTORATION

RESTORATION
SUNDAY, MARCH 4

MARK 5:21-34

Too Late?

It was one of those days for Jesus—disease and death blocked his path. First it was a father, a synagogue official named Jairus, who was desperately clinging to a rumor that this itinerant rabbi could heal his dying 12-year-old daughter. He fell at Jesus' feet and pled for a touch from the teacher before it was too late. Jesus agreed to visit this anxious, frightened family.

Soon, human suffering intruded a second time. A woman emerged from the crowd, intending to steal a miracle from Jesus. Disease had afflicted her for a dozen years. Perhaps it was too late, but she clung to the hope that Jesus could make a difference. Squeezing through the crowd, she approached Jesus quietly. Reaching out, she just managed to touch his cloak. Jesus stopped the whole parade to identify this woman and confirm her healing.

While Jesus spoke with her, Jairus' servants arrived to deliver the word he did not want to hear: "Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?" Their words had the ring of finality, devoid of hope, "It is too late."

As it turned out, it was not too late. Like the woman who found restoration after 12 years of suffering, Jairus' 12-year-old daughter was restored to life. In both cases, the intersection of human need and Jesus' power and compassion made the difference.

We can easily consider our situation as without remedy. Despair is that sin against hope that comes to believe things can never change. Yet the message of the gospel is that God is the God of hope, the One who makes all things new. Restoration is the hope of God for the world.

This does not mean, of course, that all the sick are healed in this life, or that those we lose in death will be returned to us. Nevertheless, Jesus' miracles are foretastes of the kingdom of God in its fullness. They point to a time when all sickness will be healed, when death will no longer claim our lives or the lives of those we love. His voice, his touch, will restore all things.

Reflection: Consider for a few minutes something in your life that needs to be restored to health and life—a congregation, a relationship, a dream, perhaps. In prayer imagine yourself reaching out, like the woman, to touch Jesus, or falling at his feet, like Jairus, asking for the restoration of life. It is not too late.

Robert Creech
Pastoral Ministries

RESTORATION
MONDAY, MARCH 5

1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-22

In today's passage from 1 Corinthians 3, we find that the church at Corinth is dividing itself into factions: Team Paul, Team Apollos...maybe even Team Peter. It does not seem these leaders themselves are encouraging this behavior. Rather, their followers were taking it upon themselves to divide into such groups. This is not all that surprising—it reflected the culture they were living in. Corinth at that time was a city obsessed with status and out-doing the other guy. You weren't winning unless the someone else was losing.

To critique this problem, Paul uses a building metaphor. He reminds the Corinthian believers that he has already laid the best of foundations—Jesus Christ. Now it is up to others to build something lasting upon that foundation. Different builders are involved using various supplies, but all belong to Christ, and what they are constructing is nothing less than his church. This is the grandest of construction projects, requiring the finest of materials and careful craftsmanship. Inevitably, a fire—troubles and tribulations of some kind—will test just how well the church was built.

The church today is in a similar situation. We share the Corinthian tendency for tribalism. Anyone paying attention to the news in recent times knows that people are increasingly splintering into political, geographical, social, racial, and ethnic groups. This is problematic for all people, but especially for the church, as we are meant to exist across those lines. But as tensions rise along these boundaries, it has become clear the church has a lot of work to do here as well. These lesser identities have often been what has defined us, rather than our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ. Our other goals—academic, social, and financial success—have really driven us, not a shared commitment to follow Jesus. We are at a moment of reckoning in the church and in society in which we are being forced to examine what we stand for. This is our fire, and at times it is exposing that we have not been faithful to our foundation of Jesus Christ. We have not always built well. We have too often been focused on being part of “Team Paul” or “Team Apollos” and not enough on “Team Jesus.”

But the foundation remains. In this Lenten season, as the “fire” exposes our shortcomings, let us reevaluate how we are building, and together rebuild anew on that foundation that is Christ.

Questions to Consider:

- *Whose team am I **really** on?*
- *In what ways am I out of alignment with the foundation of Jesus Christ?
What do I need to do or change to restore myself to that foundation?*

RESTORATION
TUESDAY, MARCH 6

HEBREWS 9:23-29

When I read this segment of Hebrews 9, different images and thoughts flood my mind. I see the priests cleansing the people of Israel's sins with the sacrifice of young bulls and lambs. I remember all the stories of the Old Testament where God's chosen people fell into sin again and again. These people were spoken to by messengers of the Lord God and still over time failed to live out God's calling for them fully. I begin to criticize these people in my mind because of their failures, even though I fail just as much as they did. I reflect on how the guilt of my massive failures would sit upon my body. I now have realized that no matter how many times I have tried to "cleanse" myself of my sinful nature and mistakes, I can never fully take away that guilt. I can imagine that some of people in the Old Testament felt the same when their sacrifices were given. No matter how many lambs and bulls they sacrificed, there were always stains of their failures.

This is why Jesus' willingness to be a sacrifice for all of humanity is so significant! Jesus, the Lamb of God, died a death he did not deserve, to cleanse all of humanity from sin. He then rose from the dead to show not even death could limit his power. This is truly the ultimate act of restoration. This is the good news and climax of everything throughout the biblical narrative. We have been redeemed and cleansed!

As you go today, I encourage you to pray over these words:

Sacrifice - *Do we understand the type of sacrifice Jesus made for us and why he did it? Do we read the Old Testament and interpret it well enough?*

Reconciliation - *We have all been reconciled by Christ so that we can live our lives full of service and love. Do we strive for this fullness like we should as Christians?*

Glory - *Christ's second coming will show all of his glory to the world. Does Christ's action and love convict us enough to begin to show his glory to our neighbors?*

*"I feel glorious, glorious
Got a chance to start again
I was born for this, born for this
It's who I am, how could I forget?
I made it through the darkest part of the night
And now I see the sunrise
Now I feel glorious, glorious
I feel glorious, glorious"
- "Glorious" by Macklemore ft. Skylar Grey*

RESTORATION
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7

MARK 11:15-19

I can see the headlines now, “Teacher of the Law *Flips* Out in the Temple.” What would cause a man to become so violent? Was there an ulterior motive? Who are part of this “den of robbers?” Not unlike in Jesus’ time, the flair for the dramatic always seems to get the headlines, and the event becomes the issue, not so much what was behind it.

In ancient Israel’s history, a “den of robbers” was simply a gathering place, such as a remote cave, for those committing crimes to gather when the crime was complete. In Jeremiah 7, we see God’s message to his people in Judah, “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!” only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?”

As we look at the church today, does any of this still hold true? If Jesus were to walk in on a random Sunday morning, would we be forced to admit that there are reasons for him to begin flipping tables and scattering people everywhere?

When we honestly assess our lives by asking the tough questions found in Jeremiah 7, our observance of Lent is enhanced, because in this season, we want to remember why Christ died for us. Though we are all sinners, God’s restorative grace is available to all of us if we ask.

Jesus cleansed the temple that day as an outward sign of God’s disappointment for what had become the “religion” of his chosen people. Though the temple of the Old Testament was soon to be ruins, God now is available to restore and cleanse those who believe through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. In Hebrews 4:16, we read “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Are you ready to be restored and made anew? Do you desire to leave your past transgressions at the cross and make a new start in Christ? During this Lenten season, may we make our homes and churches houses of prayer and not dens of robbers through the sanctifying power of Christ’s blood and spirit.

Prayer: God, our heavenly Father, we are weak. We move forward in anticipation of eternal salvation by the redemptive power of Jesus’ blood. As we prepare this Lenten season, let us never forget the sacrifice you made for us. We ask for your restorative power to cleanse us of our sins and begin a new day living your will. Though we truly do not deserve it, thank you for your redemptive love and everlasting peace. Amen.

R E S T O R A T I O N
THURSDAY, MARCH 8

GENESIS 9:8-17

It was the worst time in history, at least according to the perspective of Noah. Everything he knew, every dwelling in his village, every person he had ever seen outside of his family was gone. He had spent endless days in a dark, smelly ark filled with animals and only his closest family members. But the light had finally dawned, and Noah's family stepped off the ark to hear the voice of God.

Would God be sending more rain? Was the God of the flood finally satisfied with the earth? Should Noah get to work on a new project, simply to stay alive? No, God instead had a promise for every living thing brave enough to get off the ark and face this new world.

Complementing an earlier promise of restoring the earth's patterns, complete with "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night," God promises to never again destroy the world in a flood. God promises balance, not just to the remaining humans, but the animals as well. God implies a future and hope. In short, God restores. God puts the arrows away, and leaves a bow for us in the sky as a beautiful, colorful reminder that the flood is over and the patterns of life have been restored.

Like Noah, this Lent we're being called into an ancient 40-day journey. The journey might be unimaginably dark, or may have the stench of Noah's ark. The journey may involve landing in a place we never imagined, or produce storms like we have never seen. Regardless, at the end of our journey, we've been promised God's restoration. A restoration for all life around us. A restoration worth waiting for.

Will you, like God, lay your weapons down and lean into this pattern of life? Will you, like Noah, be faithful to go along for the ride? God restores, this we know, but first, we must be willing to make it through the flood.

RESTORATION
FRIDAY, MARCH 9

EPHESIANS 1:7-14

"If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

Life is hard. It is heavy, weighted down with the sins and struggles of being human. Sometimes it can drown you—it can be so excruciatingly exhausting that you can barely find time to catch your breath. The reality of being human is that we are incapable of handling these things on our own. We were built for community, to share life, and to find solace in a God that is all-knowing and all-powerful. It can be like walking through the woods and only being able to see two feet in front of you at a time. We place ourselves in this mindset that life is hard but at least we can see two feet in front of us, so we trudge on, stumbling and falling along the way. We're fine. We can do it alone.

So often we feel we can be self-sufficient, self-restoring entities, and to our immense displeasure, we find all too frequently that we simply were not made to be that way. We feel autonomous to an extent, but there is a certain need for something greater—to be filled to the brim with the enlightenment of what lies at the end of the road. Our inheritance on this earth is a small glimmer of its full reality. There is something deeper, something stronger that is pulling us away from our dependence on things of this world that tell us that we can find strength on our own, something that tears our heartstrings in want for something more than what this world has to offer. We find rest in this existence: the promise of inheritance satiates this want and we must seek rest through this promise.

In our darkest hour of exhaustion and heartache, there is restoration in the assurance of our inheritance and redemption through Christ Jesus.

Questions to Consider:

- *The experience of restoration can be different from individual to individual (art, prayer, silence, music, etc.). In what ways do you find restoration in God?*
- *There are both areas of distance and areas of closeness in our trust of God in each of our lives. Reflect on these areas and how these might impact your feelings of rest.*

SATURDAY, MARCH 10

PSALM 107:1-3

There is a delightful irony in the call to worship at the beginning of this psalm. As the Church has inherited Israel's scriptures as our own, we are inclined to read these verses in their most universal sense. Indeed, verse three specifically seems to give the impression of God's redemption reaching across the globe, knowing no national boundaries or divisions. But for centuries, these words did not mean that. The "redeemed of the Lord" were not a pan-national Church; they were the people of Israel. They were the ones whose ancestors God liberated from bondage in Egypt and gave the Law at Sinai. The God we worship will always be the God of Israel. Yet even centuries before Jesus, the writers of Israel's scripture knew God had something more in store. Hints and foreshadowing of an even greater salvation permeate the Hebrew Bible.

Now in Christ Jesus, the redemption of God has overflowed out from Israel into the whole world. The Lectionary ties this passage from the Psalms together with the most famous Bible verse of them all—John 3:16. "For God so loved *the world*..." The great scandal of Jesus is not his revelation *that* God saves—the Jewish people knew that quite well already, thank you very much—but his revelation of *whom* God saves and *how* God saves. In Jesus Christ, God saves people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev. 7:9).

The Christian, then, cannot help but read this psalm under the shadow of Christ. "The redeemed of the Lord... gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south" now takes on a new meaning, a meaning that undercuts any form of nationalism. Through his Son Jesus Christ, God is creating a new nation from all nations, a new people from all peoples. In a world torn apart by wars and conflicts, God is working to reconcile and restore all things. Many have expressed hope that one day the world will rest from war and that all the peoples of the earth will grow to understand and cooperate with one another. This dream of world peace will only come true by the saving power of Christ. There is nothing less that can overcome millennia of division and war. And overcome, it will.

Prayer: "Gracious and loving Father, we are a broken and hurting world. We are shot through with hate and mistrust. Wars and rumors of wars lurk around us. Yet your love transcends it all. Even as we are working to tear ourselves apart, you are working to restore us to one another and to yourself. Your salvation defies our boundaries and overcomes our hate. Give us today the strength and courage to do the same. In your Son's name, we pray. Amen."



CONFESSION

C O N F E S S I O N
SUNDAY, MARCH 11

MARK 8:27-30

In Mark 8, Peter's response to Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" predates the Nicene Council by nearly three centuries, and as far as statements of Jesus' identity, it is straight to the point, "You are the Christ." On the way from place to place, Peter has spent a great deal of time with Jesus, and because of this, one might hope the complexity of future creeds and confessions could be summarized with Peter's elegant response. However, unexpectedly Jesus essentially rebukes Peter and forbids the disciples from saying anything to anyone.

When I was younger, I was thoroughly confused by this passage and never understood why Jesus ordered the disciples to be silent about his identity. With my evangelical upbringing, there was always an emphasis on the necessity of evangelism, but here Jesus is seemingly forbidding Peter and the disciples from evangelizing—spreading the good news.

Whether read in English or Greek, Peter's statement seems like a straightforward statement of fact: Jesus is the Anointed One. There is no arguing the fact that Peter gets all of the words precisely right, but it appears that he still somehow manages to get something wrong.

While Jesus is the Anointed One, Peter simply doesn't have the correct understanding of the proper work and identity of the "Anointed One." It would seem that Peter has the common Jewish expectation that the Anointed One would conquer the enemy, bring political upheaval, and overturn worldly kingdoms to establish a new kingdom. All of these are true things to be certain, but because Peter doesn't also understand the way of suffering that leads to those things, he only has a partial understanding of who Jesus is. The rest of chapter 8 then becomes a lesson on the identity of Christ, and from this passage and all throughout the second half of Mark, it is the suffering of Jesus that takes center stage.

Peter's misunderstanding leads to a conundrum—can Peter's confession of Christ be true if he has the wrong definition and expectation of Jesus? Is it enough to say the right words, even though one has the wrong understanding of what those words mean?

Perhaps this is the message of this passage—that it is easy to say the right words, but understand the wrong thing. But where does that leave the children and youth who profess their faith, but don't yet understand properly? For that matter where does that leave adults? Or you and I?

I know the Christ, but I am also still learning more about him. And though my words may have been accurate, my understanding is still growing. In this light, even Peter's incomplete understanding leads to a confession of faith that is closest to the human condition: one that is a confession of the beginning of belief. Peter then shows us that confession is not then so much about whether we use the right words, but whether we truly follow the right person.

Can it be a true confession if the underlying belief and understanding is not fully accurate?

I hope so because I am still learning to know the fullness of the identity of Jesus.

David Tate
Certificate of Ministry Program

C O N F E S S I O N
MONDAY, MARCH 12

HEBREWS 3:1-6

Jesus: Our Confession

Lent is a time of return and reminder. We come back to Jesus longing for renewal. This season can be a time of great devotion as we look toward the culmination of the story in the cross and empty tomb.

Though, part of the human experience is being distractible. We are prone to wander. We are seeking and searching. So, in our journey, we need a compass. I need something to help chart my course, something to trust.

Trust is foundational to most of daily living. We trust systems and structures. We trust other people. Actions and choices are often a result of long standing trust.

But, I have wrongly trusted. I have found myself in situations that were challenging and unwelcome due to misguided trust. Looking to head north, my compass guided me south away from my hoped-for destinations of love, peace, and grace. Maybe you have been there as well.

We need a better compass. We need to trust something greater, truer, and more beautiful than ourselves. We need Jesus.

Hebrews 3:1-6 points the reader to consider the supreme worth and honor of Christ. Jesus is greater, the creator, the great high priest, the one and only of his kind. Many have paved the way, pointing to the Christ figure, but in Jesus, God touches earth. He changes the world. Nothing is the same. His life is worthy of all glory and honor.

The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as “the high priest of our confession.” Our confession is the faith we possess, what we hold as the centerpiece. Our confession guides our worldview and decisions. What we confess is what we trust.

So, in this Lenten season, let us confess Jesus. As we journey toward Easter and beyond, let us hold onto Jesus as our centerpiece, our ultimate trust. He is worthy and able. All our faith and hope is far more secure in the welcoming hands of our high priest.

Prayer:

In all my days and nights

I confess Christ

No matter my circumstances

I confess Christ

In the longing and waiting

I confess Christ

With my lips and my hands

I confess Christ

Even when I doubt

I confess Christ

Until Kingdom come

I confess Christ

Karl Baker
MDiv 2020

TUESDAY, MARCH 13

NUMBERS 20:1-13

“Listen, you rebels...” Those are some harsh words from Aaron! The wilderness of Zin and the area of Kadesh are not an easy place in the Israelites’ journey. The first verse of Numbers 20 gives no details but simply records that it is in this place that the community loses Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. She both dies and is buried in this land, a barren land where seemingly there is no water.

So here we have the Israelites, a grieving community that must have been affected by Miriam’s death, being led by a grieving Moses and his grieving brother Aaron. Do we ever have clear vision while in the throes of grief? Could Moses and Aaron have been so overwhelmed by their loss that they were not even concerned with the physical needs of the people, such as clean water? We don’t know.

We do, however, know that the Israelites receive a hefty consequence in response to their lack of faith. Sure, God causes water to come from the rock, but God also tells Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (v. 12, NRSV).

Does it ever seem like it is all falling apart? The people lost a pillar of the faith, one dearly loved by many—so loved that her name and a portion of her life story are recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures! Were this not enough, God tells them that this lifelong journey they have experienced will not end as they were told and expected it would.

Where is hope in the midst of the Zin wilderness? Where is hope when our history has been lost and our future is unsure? Where is hope when it seems we have totally lost our way? Where are you in this story? I will confess that many aspects of my life resemble a dry, barren wilderness. So what are we to do?

Though this is not the brightest story of the strongest faith in the Hebrew Bible, it is important enough to their story that they had to include it in their scriptures. Perhaps the painful, faithless parts of our story are just as important as the moments of total faith and beauty.

We must also remember that though we are in the wilderness now, though dry and barren land is all we can see for miles and miles in every direction, this is not the end of our story. This place, the Zin wilderness, is an important milestone in the Israelites’ journey, but God does not write “The End” in this place. If life were a 1990s TV show, perhaps the screen would only read “To Be Continued...” God does not tell the Israelites that God is done with them; in fact, God reminds them of the promise of the Promised Land, which is not taken from their descendants.

Grief is not the end of our story. Dry wilderness areas are not the end of our story. Lack of faith is not the end of our story. Wherever you are now does not have to be the end of your story. Sure, we are not guaranteed tomorrow, and all we have is this moment, this one breath, this one point in time. Perhaps the Israelites’ lack of faith in the Zin wilderness reminds us to confess that God is our hope in this moment, even when it seems to be far, far away.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14

JOHN 8:12-20

The “Court of Women” and the “Court of Gentiles” were the only areas in the temple where women and Gentiles were allowed to gather. In the text, it is where Jesus is having a discussion with the Pharisees and reveals to them that he is Light of the World. The setting is also significant as we journey through the Lenten season. Perhaps where Jesus is standing in the text reminds us that Jesus came to help those who are considered outcast: the least, the left out and the last. Perhaps this text reminds us that we too should reflect his light in the world as his disciples, a light that shines for all of humanity. It shines towards women, the homeless, immigrants, refugees, mentally ill, those released from incarceration, those delivered from chemical dependency, and even those who may have differing opinions or political views. The Light is available for us all!

Thanks be to God for Jesus, the light of the world. Just like in the text, Jesus places himself amongst the least, the left out, and the last and is still revealing himself to all humanity. His light offers us all hope despite the challenges we face. The light gives hope to the hopeless and reveals that hope is available to everyone.

If you were in the temple with Jesus, as you listened to him profess to the Pharisees that he is the Light of the World, where would you be standing? With Jesus? The Pharisees? Be mindful that we too are shining for all the world to see, a world darkened by despair, classism, racism, sexism and other social ills that plague our cities, towns, communities, churches, homes, country and world. Let us be the Light of Jesus to illuminate the paths of the #metoo Movement, the Black Lives Matter Movement, DACA and DREAMers, and all those who dare to believe for a brighter future for all humanity. Jesus says in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life.” Let us allow the light of Jesus to shine through us in hopes that someone will confess and believe that truly Jesus is the light of the world.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to be a reflection of your divine light and presence in a darkened world. Illuminate what is dark within us so that we can be vessels for your glory. We confess that we have not always made the right choices, done what you asked, helped when needed, and we ask your forgiveness. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

C O N F E S S I O N
THURSDAY, MARCH 15

HEBREWS 4:1-13

"Seeing God in Unexpected Places"

Hello again! If my name looks familiar to you, it is likely because you saw it in this little book two days ago! Let me remind you of what we discussed there because it gives important back-story to our text for today.

In Numbers 20:1-13, the people of Israel find themselves in the wilderness of Zin, in an area called Kadesh. The community has just lost Miriam, that faithful sister of Moses and Aaron who saved Moses' life and raised and reared him as a child. While in the midst of communal and individual grief, the community is faced with drought.

To keep the story short, God commands Moses and Aaron to strike the dry rock, and God causes water to pour forth from it. But God does not stop there! Because the people quarreled against one another, and against Moses and Aaron, and the people did not put faith in God, they are told that they will not enter the Promised Land.

Fast-forward to the New Testament book of Hebrews, wherein the fourth chapter, the author reminds readers of their ancestors' wilderness wanderings. Readers are reminded that because the Israelites did not have faith in this wilderness area, God has promised, "They shall not enter my rest."

Ouch! What does God mean that they will not enter God's rest? I mean, they are told that they will not see the Promised Land; isn't that enough? If God is a God of mercy and love, why such a harsh punishment?

The Psalmist gives us a small clue. In Psalm 95:7b-9, the Psalmist writes, "O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work."

Two things stick out to me in these verses of the Psalm. First, the word "today," stands out, and second, the phrase, "though they had seen my work." We discussed two days ago the idea of making our choice today, for today is all that we really have, but what about the ninth verse, where God says that the people tested God, "though they had seen [God's] work?"

What are the things in our lives that contribute to our blindness to God-at-work in and around us? I can confess stubbornness, bitterness, hurt, I-didn't-get-my-way, and if I were honest, lots of other things. Each of these things serves to cloud my view of what God is actually doing right before my eyes. While I am complaining that there is no water in this wilderness that I did not choose for myself, God is actively at work, instructing God's ministers to do something new and seemingly crazy so that my and others' needs can be met. And this is not the first time that the Israelites have seen God do amazing things with water! So for me, in this wilderness spot where I struggle to find water, who can say that God will not be faithful again, as God has been faithful to me and to all God's people in ages past?

Let's take a look inward, shall we? What are the things in your mind, heart, and life that contribute to a clouding of your vision? What are the things that take away from seeing the hand of God in unexpected places? Would you take a moment to confess those things to God right now? You may be surprised to find God's promised rest. You may also be surprised that you are called to be Moses and Aaron, faithfully revealing to others the hand of God at work.

Michelle Shackelford
MDiv 2018

FRIDAY, MARCH 16

HEBREWS 4:14-5:4

I struggle with chronic lower back pain. It flares up often under the most inconvenient circumstances, forcing me to slow down and modify my schedule to deal with the pain. It also comes with an embarrassing limp, an outward display of an internal malfunction, a very painful and public reminder of my weakness. I am tempted to hide my limp because I do not want sympathy or to answer questions about my pain. It seems easier in today's culture just to hide, to pretend everything is fine, rather than admit to needing help. Strength is valued, and weakness is to be avoided.

But, Jesus does not avoid weakness. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, taking on human nature, including our frailty. Jesus is fully human and fully God. He does not sympathize in some abstract or distant way. He's intimately acquainted with our weaknesses because he experienced them himself.

A priest is an intermediary—one who takes our message to God, who advocates before God on our behalf. Jesus Christ is the perfect high priest because he knows our pain, yet because he is also without sin, he can enter into God's presence where we once could not. he uses his access to give us access.

Therefore, we can approach the throne of God with boldness and without embarrassment over our shortcomings because our high priest, Jesus Christ, has gone before us. We should hold tightly to the truth that through Jesus' victory over sin, we have victory. We may still struggle with sin, but we can boldly confess that we need forgiveness knowing that with every ask, every public display of weakness, we are covered by the cross.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

*Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power
may rest on me.*

2 Corinthians 12:9

SATURDAY, MARCH 17

JOHN 12:1-11

It's amazing how hungry you get after being dead for four days. Plus, one develops a new appreciation for good food and, well, *life* after he or she is raised from the dead—or at least I did. So you can imagine my excitement at the opportunity to share a hearty meal with Jesus of Nazareth, you know, the one who brought me back to life. It had been a week or two since I'd seen him last, and in the midst of the commotion following my resurrection, I barely got a chance to express my thanks to the man. I mean, getting unbound and dressed, finding a drink of water, trying to stretch out a killer back ache, and hugging all my family and friends as if for the first time, I could hardly even get to Jesus before he said he had to go. (Besides, he's really not much of a spotlight kind of guy anyway.) When we heard that he was coming back through on his way to Jerusalem we couldn't wait to sit down and visit with him without all the post-miracle hubbub.

Martha got busy right away cleaning the house and prepping the food—as she is wont to do; Mary went into town to “restock” our perfume; and I took some time to think again about all that had transpired in recent weeks. Jesus had become a fast friend. (He kind of does that with people.) And I always knew there was something... special about him. But it took that last dinner with him to finally sink in. I had prepared a thoughtful speech of thanks to offer as a toast with everyone in his honor. I was going to wait until after our main course to ask for everyone's attention and then share my latest musings of the meaning of life, but Mary had other plans.

She wasn't quite herself for a while after I came back to life. Martha told me that she hadn't even gone out to meet Jesus when he arrived at Bethany that day; Martha had to go get her—she told her that Jesus was asking for her specifically. A couple of days later, Mary finally confessed to me that she had been angry. Apparently, they sent word to Jesus about my illness (I didn't recall much about those last days), but he didn't come. I didn't think too much about this fact because I'm alive and well! But Mary needed some space to process her grief and the idea that Jesus had let her down. (Maybe it was best that he left so quickly that day...) So by the time our reunion dinner came around, so had she. Mary, like me, was a different person. We had experienced death and life in a new way.

Right after Martha finished bringing out the last of the vegetables, Mary snuck in—almost unnoticed—with a full pound of that brand new, pure nard perfume she had bought a few days prior. We all watched, eyes and mouths open, as she anointed her Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair. There was an exchange between Judas and Jesus, but I missed it... because of the smell. Its sweet aroma filled the entire house. Immediately, I flashed back to my own death, knowing that smell had once anointed my lifeless body—a body that this Jesus had brought back to life. And as I came to, Mary was still at his feet, but his eyes met mine. And he smiled. And I knew my Messiah.

Rumor has it that even more folks are on their way to Bethany to see Jesus—and me—and that the chief priests want us dead. But I've already seen death... and the One who overcomes it.

Prayer: Lord, in our wilderness journey of Lent, remind us of the ways you resurrect us daily, restore our hope in the promise of new life, and renew our souls by your grace. Amen.



CELEBRATION

C E L E B R A T I O N
SUNDAY, MARCH 18

MARK 11:1-11

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When I hear this familiar phrase, my thoughts flash back to crisp Sunday mornings filled with palm leaves and frolicking children dancing down the center aisle. Every year, I excitedly await the parade of tiny humans walking toward the front of the sanctuary waving wands of praise amidst cheerful proclamations of, “Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest!”

The joyful feelings that Palm Sunday brings and the sense of celebration that the crowds in this passage imbue during the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem lead me to see and say the expression as one primarily of praise. However, the word hosanna comes from the word yasha which means to “deliver, or save,” and anna which means to “beg, or beseech.” Literally, hosanna means, “I beg you to save!” or “please deliver us!” When we proclaim, “Hosanna!” with familiarity and ease during the yearly fanfare of fronds on Palm Sunday, we may not realize that we are actually proclaiming to the world our desperate need of a savior. Beside the wonder, anticipation, and joyful ambiance exuding from the pews, sits the weighted realization of the truth. We need a savior. We cannot save ourselves from our hatred, our bitterness, or our wickedness, no matter how hard we try, or how much good we do. No matter how many degrees we get or how much wealth we accumulate, none of it will save us. In the face of our sin and our inability to fix it, we cry hosanna, begging for a savior to come and wipe the slate clean, to rescue us from our depravity and the darkness that surrounds us, to save us from ourselves.

As the crowd’s “hosannas” in Mark move from the pages to the people around me, my gaze wanders past the children’s glowing faces at the front and up to the shimmering stained glass depiction of Christ. Jesus Christ hangs on the cross. Hosanna in the highest! When we cry hosanna, we not only admit our need for him from a place of desperation, but we also admit our faith in him from a place of celebration. For Jesus Christ is the savior we long for, who came to live and die for us, to wipe the slate clean and save an unworthy people. Jesus Christ is the one in whom, for whom, and through whom we cry, “Hosanna!” and the only king worth celebrating. When we cry hosanna we do so both in desperation and in celebration.

Beyond enjoying the Palm Sunday smiles and palm leaf parades, may we learn to cry hosanna anew in the midst of our indelible desperation for him and celebration of him. I pray that the hosannas of our hearts become louder and deeper with each fragile breath we take, with each leap of faith, and prayer we lift up in the face of pain. When compassion compels action and when forgiveness wins the day, may we say together, “Hosanna!” Let our voices overcome the sounds of violence and hatred that muddle our minds and infiltrate Christ’s church. As the redeemed, let us sing in unison, “Hosanna!” when the blind can see, when addictions cease, when poverty does not define worth, and when captives are set free. Instead of laying our coats and cloaks before the king who enters our hearts to reign there eternally, let us lay down our pride, our indifference, our complacency, our worldly achievements, ambitions, and temporal dreams and cry out from the depths of our being, “Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Save us, our worthy king, our Messiah.”

Kristen Boyd
Coordinator of Recruitment

C E L E B R A T I O N
MONDAY, MARCH 19

2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-11

After Moses received the Ten Commandments, Exodus 34:29 says, “his face had become radiant because he had spoken to the Lord,” (NLT). As glorious as this God-given glow must have been, 2 Corinthians 3:10 says, “that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new way.” And we know from Christ’s own words in John 14:6, Jesus is the glorious new way, a cause for celebration.

2 Corinthians 3:18 shows the Spirit of the living God has freed all of us who are in Christ to “see and reflect the glory of the Lord.” We may not have leafy branches to spread before the Lord to celebrate his triumphant entry as the people did in Mark 11, but we have our own life to spread before him each day.

On this day, let us bow our hearts before Jesus Christ as we gaze upon his unmatched glory. Let us make way for his triumphant entry into our life today. Let us believe in the glorious freedom we have received through the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us not put a veil over our hearts before the Lord or the world. Rather, let us walk in the freedom, boldness, and compassion that is ours in Christ.

Our eyes are opened to see the glory of the Lord, so we might reflect the glory of the Lord, in order that the world will know the glory of the Lord. Who in your life does not yet know the true name and character of our Lord today? In Acts 4:12, Peter declares God has given us salvation only in the name of Jesus, whose name means, “the Lord saves.” After this declaration of faith, people were amazed by Peter’s boldness and recognized him as someone “who had been with Jesus.” This is the new way of Jesus: a way that frees us from shame and makes us bold ambassadors for Christ.

2 Corinthians 3:12 says, “since this new way gives us such confidence, we can be very bold.” Therefore, let us be bold in love as we see, reflect, and celebrate the glory of the Lord today.

Prayer: Oh Lord, my God, you are the glorious one. No one and nothing compares to you. Thank you for opening my eyes to see your glory and receive you as my Lord and Savior. You have delivered me from darkness and freed me to walk in your light so that I will shine your light among those still stumbling in the dark. Do not let me neglect this sacred time with you. Fill me with your glory and make me bold in love today. Use me to make your name and character known. Help me to celebrate and show others this glorious way of faith in the glorious one: Jesus Christ.

C E L E B R A T I O N
TUESDAY, MARCH 20

ACTS 2:14-24

Celebration?

I found it interesting that this passage is part of the celebration section of our Lenten devotional. It's interesting because I am always in awe of Peter's words to the Jewish people on the Day of Pentecost. He is as straightforward and to the point as he ever has been. Peter, the one who covered the night of Christ's death, now stands in power and with authority convicts the Jewish people of an unfathomable sin, the crucifixion of the Savior. How can a moment of conviction be cause for celebration? And what a conviction it is.

Peter draws in the words of the prophet Joel, speaking of the great movement of God in his people, declaring that the Day of the Lord is here. But Peter reminds the people this Day could only happen because the Messiah came, was rejected, crucified, and rose from the dead, all as God had planned. And this crucifixion was not on the hands of the Romans, but fell on the doorstep of those to whom Peter was preaching at that moment. These are a people in front of whom Peter stood and declared had the blood of Christ on their hands. Where is the celebration in that? But Peter did more than convict them. Peter promised them hope: *Hope* in a risen Savior; *Hope* in a Messiah who was in power, had triumphed, and saved his people; and *Hope* in a God who loves a wayward people, even when they crucify him.

This hope is not restricted to the Jews at Pentecost; it is freely given to us, especially in this Lenten season. It is easy to trick ourselves into thinking we have done and are doing well enough to be worthy of salvation. We who profess to be Christians often overlook the moments in our lives where our hands are stained with the blood of Christ. We often overlook moments when we look more like the crowd accusing people of public intoxication than the Christians overcome by Holy Spirit speaking in other languages. We often overlook moments where Peter is speaking to us, reminding us of the sacrifice Jesus made for us while we were still unaware of our sinfulness or unwilling to fully recognize his divinity.

But in moments where we are finally vulnerable and honest with ourselves, we celebrate. We celebrate our God who raised his son, our Savior, in spite of our ungrateful, sinful selves. We celebrate Jesus who blesses us, even when we actively sabotage or reject our blessings. In spite of ourselves, God loves us. And for that we celebrate.

C E L E B R A T I O N
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21

JOHN 12:34 - 50

Fireworks, lanterns, birthday candles, and Christmas lights; these are all forms of light during times of celebration. Whether it is celebrating freedom or another year on earth, these lights give us joy and confidence in what is to come. During Christmas, we light the Advent candle celebrating the awaiting of the newborn King. Lights are used throughout the year to help us celebrate and reflect on different events throughout our lives.

Unfortunately, these lights fade as we blow out the candles and let the lanterns float into the night sky. The fireworks dim at the end of the night, and the Christmas lights get taken down after a season of festivities.

But thankfully, as Christians we have a light that others do not know or even understand. We have this light that is with us always and should be kept sacred in our hearts; we should be proud of this light and want to tell the world! This light we have is Jesus Christ and he brings *everlasting life*. We need to understand that this life we live is lived in celebration of the One who took our sins away.

During this time of Lent, as we reflect on Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, we should acknowledge the joy and celebration salvation brings to our lives. We *know* the Messiah remains forever and guides our paths. The Messiah is a glorious light in whom we put our faith because he rose from the grave!

In this season, let us celebrate this light, the light that never dims or gets taken away, the light that will guide us into eternal life.

Light a candle as you pray: Dear Lord, as I read your Word and go into the world, help me to remember that your light guides my path. In darkness, you will always be there, my comforter and all in all. Please forgive me for the darkness I bring into my own life, and draw me deeper into your light and into a better relationship with you. I thank you for your love, your life, and your light. Guide me as I celebrate your presence all the days of my life. Amen.

C E L E B R A T I O N
THURSDAY, MARCH 22

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

Imitating Christ's Humility

Humility is a pivotal Christian virtue that every Christian should aspire towards. Humility is the state of considering others first before oneself. Humility also includes respecting other people's opinions. Christ, our paragon and leader, has, in an array of ways, exemplified this virtue to his followers. A careful examination of Jesus' ministry and teachings have made this clear to his followers. For example, in Mathew 5:5 Jesus says in the sermon on the mountain that, "Blessed is the man who is 'humble/meek/softhearted' for he will inherit the earth." Jesus did not only teach this, but he lived it. In Numbers 12:3, Moses is described as the humblest man of all the earth in his own time, but Jesus can be described as the humblest of all eons and epochs.

Paul employs us as Christians to emulate this kind of Christ's life in Philippians 2:1-11. Imitating Christ's humility is at the center of this passage. Paul announces that Christians can become like Christ when they become united with Christ. Christians look all the more like Christ when they "*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*" Considering others before ourselves is surely a tall task for people today.

One of the reasons why our Christianity may look different today from that of earlier eras is that people are growing in greed, selfishness, and pride. Christians today have allowed pride to rule them for different reasons. We are found guilty because of one thing or another, from seeking power to finding too much value in material things or education. It is not forbidden to possess these things, but as we acquire them, we should clothe ourselves with the Jesus kind of attitude. Paul states that the Jesus kind of attitude is marked by humility. We should make effort as Christians to have Christ's humble attitude.

When we recognize Jesus' humility as a cornerstone of the Christian faith, we celebrate. We celebrate because God works in a different way than our depraved world. We celebrate because Jesus became human to show us how to live this life. We celebrate because we learn that Jesus will ultimately be exalted.

Remember: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Mathew 23:12).

I encourage you to carry this verse with you today. If you do not yet have it memorized, seek to do so today. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

C E L E B R A T I O N
FRIDAY, MARCH 23

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18

The gathering of God's people on the Sabbath is a time of excitement, reunion, encouragement, and great joy. Church on Sunday morning is a celebration; it should shine brilliantly as the highlight of our week. Nothing heals wounds more than joyful celebration! As evidence of this, a study published in *Psychosomatic Medicine* showed that laughter improves your health and can lead to longer life. The people of God, the church of God, should be full of encouragement, glad tidings, and joy-filled praises.

Oftentimes, "real life" is difficult. Brutal, even! The demands of our work day, the responsibility of family, and the ever-persistent cycle of bill-paying can leave one exhausted. It's okay to be honest, folks: this world, while beautiful, is a daunting place to exist. Life is hard, and as the famous saying goes, echoing the words of Christ, the church is to be a "hospital for the sick." Pope Francis described the church as "a field hospital after battle." The implications are clear: life will tear you down, beat you up, and leave you bruised and scarred. The church gathering you attend should be the place that lifts you up, builds your joy, and heals the wounds.

How can we turn our church services into true celebrations, places of peace and healing and redemption, life-giving environments of purest joy?

Here are two things to take with you from this passage in Philippians today:

A complainer is the enemy of joyful celebration. Depending upon which translation you read from, verse 14 gives things to be avoided in the church's weekly celebration of God's goodness: complaining, grumbling, arguing, disputing, murmuring, or causing division. It is important to be united as one family with your brothers and sisters in the faith. Some folks find church most boring or hypocritical when people argue over silly things, or when afterwards folks are grading a preacher's sermon. Avoid these things like the plague; they will destroy your joy! Rather than complain, be thankful. Instead of arguing, find commonality. Celebrate! Make a resolution during this season to be a person who lifts up, who encourages, and who wields Christ-centered joy.

When we live in step with Jesus Christ, our lives are not meaningless. Sometimes we wander or trudge through our days with our eyes down, questioning why this marathon of life is worth running. Oftentimes, I feel like King Solomon as he writes in Ecclesiastes 2:22, "What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?" What the writer of Philippians claims in verses 15-17 is that, as we live as Christ, as we follow His teachings, our efforts are *worth* something. We do not "labor in vain," rather, we are those who "should be glad and rejoice." The church, then, is the hosting site for this gladness and rejoicing. Let us praise the Lord that our lives are not meaningless, but that we are given great purpose!

Prayer: God, thank you for giving me great purpose, gladness, and hope. Thank you for giving me a church family with which to celebrate your goodness. Help me foster your joy in the lives of everyone I encounter. In the name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

C E L E B R A T I O N
SATURDAY, MARCH 24

PSALM 118:1-2

As I reflect on my first two years of graduate school, the main theme I recognize is what a large difference there was between my first and second years.

To say that my first year was not great would be an understatement. Right before I began graduate school, a senior in the youth group I helped with back home passed away in a car accident. Several months after that, my college minister passed away unexpectedly. In addition to those unfortunate tragedies, Truett was a very different style of learning than my business school background. On top of all of that, I really struggled to make friends during my first year. I had many different struggles piling up, and what did I do? Absolutely nothing. I tried to ignore everything going on and pretended I was doing fine, even though I was not. I was incredibly stressed, and I did nothing to help myself. Nothing seemed to be going right for me my first year, and I just sort of gave up for a while.

My second year was a different story. Towards the end of my first year, I began praying that my second year would not be the same as my first. I began to focus much more on my prayer life and began opening up to people. Slowly but surely, things began to change. I made a couple more friends, which turned to several, which turned to many. I began to gain back confidence that I had lost. I began to feel that darkness in my life fading away. There is a quote by J.R.R. Tolkien that I like to reflect on that captures this. He states: "In the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer." My second year was by no means perfect, but it was probably the best year of life I have lived so far.

I am incredibly thankful for the life that the Lord has given me. I am not only thankful for my second year here, but for my first year as well. Life is full of highs and lows, and a failure to acknowledge and seek help in the lows makes celebrating the highs less fulfilling. It has been my experience that it is important to recognize both.

Reflection Questions:

- *Have you taken the time to think about the things in your life that are worth celebrating?*
- *Who are the people in your life that you can celebrate with?*



SURRENDER

SUNDAY, MARCH 25

MARK 14:22-26

Surrender—what a terrible word. Surrender is a word that we only put up with in the context of Christianity. Any other usage is frustrating, unacceptable, and for losers. We would not accept the protagonist just giving up in a book or movie. If the evil forces are overwhelming, we want the hero to find a way to overcome. Or the only other acceptable outcome, in true Alamo form, is to lose in a blaze of glory. Then, I fully expect another group to come along and enact vengeance. We can make defeat victorious, but what do we do with surrender? If Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Colonel Travis, and company surrendered to General Santa Anna, the meaning of “Remember the Alamo” would shift dramatically. The Mexican army would have shouted “Remember the Alamo” as a taunt, instead of hearing it as a battle cry.

Jesus comes to the upper room to partake in his last supper. He sits at the table with his dear friends and students. Death has been chasing after the Messiah. Treachery is in the midst of the room. In fact, just before this selection of verses, Jesus declares that one of the 12 will betray him. Can you imagine the tension in the room? There is a turncoat among them; he should be rooted out. The eyes must have been darting around the table, each trying to guess who it might be, waiting for the villain to be revealed and then ousted from the group. Jesus would surely escape death once again.

I imagine the tension just kept building and building until something snapped; it was the bread.

Jesus broke the bread and continued to show his way is different than the world's. He was giving them an act of remembrance, but this remembrance was not in the form of a battle cry or a taunt against the world, it is a story of surrender. He said this is my body, broken for you.

After the bread, he took the cup. He then passed the cup and said this is my blood, poured out for you, take and drink. The cup contained a paradox within it. For Jesus, the cup was filled with death, but for the disciples, and us, it is filled with salvation.

Jesus did not surrender to death or the devil, but to God's will and love. He surrendered his body and blood to be overcome by the Christian narrative of love. God found a way to restore a full relationship with creation. God wrote a story for how a fallen humanity could find its way back to his presence. Jesus surrendered to that story and taught us to remember his surrender.

Jesus shows us there is actual power in surrender. Life will be frustrating, unacceptable, and we will lose if we do not surrender. Jesus is not defeated by death but surrenders to it. Jesus is not shamed by our sin but surrenders to its consequences. Jesus does not fail, but he does surrender. As you take the bread and cup, remember you too must surrender. Surrender to the same story. Surrender to the King who was broken for you. Surrender to the cup that is not filled with death but filled with salvation. As the world sees us, show them a church that surrenders to God's will and calling on our lives. In our actions and words may we shout,
“Remember the Cross. Remember the Empty Tomb.”

MONDAY, MARCH 26

JOHN 12:1-11

“But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ‘Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.’”

Yeah, why Jesus? Why not give the money to the poor? Judas’ critique of character has rung in my ears for years. As the Scripture points out, his comments are nothing more than a thinly veiled mask for personal gain as he had been helping himself to their funds as the keeper of the moneybag.

Yet his words still ring true to an audience who knows Jesus as a mighty advocate and redeemer for the poor. Was it not Jesus who said in Luke that he has come to bring justice to the poor and rest for the weary? So, when I hear Jesus say that the poor will always be among you, I shake my head and wonder if I really know Jesus.

Yet, Mary saw what everyone around her failed to see, and if I were there I believe I would have missed it too. There in the town of Bethany, surrounded by his dearest friends, sat a sinless man bound to surrender his life for mankind. And she anointed him in preparation for his burial and wiped his feet with her hair as their friends and the disciples began to comprehend the magnitude of Jesus’ life and death to come.

Set aside about 15-20 minutes for the following practice:

Find a space you can sit in silence to reflect on the day and to practice the prayer of examen.

Think on these things after rereading John 12:1-11:

- *Pray for eyes to see and understand like Mary.*
- *Review the day in gratitude.*
- *Confess the shortcomings and challenges of your day (but don’t forget God’s affirmation).*
- *What are your resolutions for the day ahead? What should I surrender to you today?*
- *Recite the Lord’s Prayer.*

TUESDAY, MARCH 27

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

I've always been fascinated by paradoxes—statements that seem impossible and contradictory, yet upon reflection are shown to contain hidden truths. What I love (and hate) about paradoxical statements is how they are impossible to digest without a healthy dose of humility. I may think I know what's true, but paradoxes remind me time and time again that my intuitions and first impressions may be utterly wrong. I think it is precisely for this reason God so often chose to work through paradoxes.

Scripture is rife with paradoxes: by giving, we receive (Luke 6:38); in weakness, there is strength (2 Cor. 12:10); in servitude, there is freedom (2 Pet. 2:16); in death, there is life (John 12:24, John 11:25, Rom. 6:11). In 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Paul addresses another central paradox of our faith: the paradox of the cross. Throughout the New Testament's accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection we see the paradox of Christ's weakness being strength and his death being life, but in this passage Paul addresses specifically the paradox of the *message* of the cross. The message of Jesus' crucifixion is "foolishness" to the world, but the "foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1:25).

In these verses Paul identifies two groups that rejected the message of the cross: Jews who demanded signs and Greeks who looked for wisdom (1:22). For the Jews, Paul describes the cross as a "stumbling block." For the Greeks it was "foolishness." Before we mount our high-horses, let us consider why this may have been. The Jews, God's chosen people, had long awaited the Messiah. Unfortunately, Jesus looked and acted nothing like the crusading revolutionary they had imagined. They expected a God of power, not a God of the cross. For the Greeks—people heavily influenced by the Great Philosophers—Christ and the cross were foolishness. If a God existed, would he be able to be killed by the hands of men? Both the Jewish teacher and Greek philosopher rejected this message because, on the surface, *the cross did not make sense*; but such is the nature of a paradox.

Paul continued by declaring that the cross is, in fact, "the *power* of God and the *wisdom* of God" (1:24). Through the cross God elected to show the folly of human reasoning. Both the Jews and Greeks thought they *knew* what God must be like—the Jews through their interpretation of the law, the Greeks by their philosophy—when in fact it was this knowledge that kept them from truly knowing him. In their pride they rejected Christ because they would not allow God's revelation to trump their preconceived notions. They refused to surrender their wisdom for the wisdom of God.

The same temptation befalls us today: do we make our understanding a precursor for our faith? Do we trust God or do we rely on our reason before we accept God's words as truth? Do we live in such a way that proves our trust, namely by obeying God even when it doesn't make sense to us? Do we live in a state of humility, allowing God to transform our "understanding" when it is inconsistent with his truths? As Christ-followers may we surrender our pride and in humility embrace the paradoxes of God.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28

HEBREWS 12:1-3

The Biggest Loser was a hit reality TV show that challenged its contestants to lose as much weight as possible in a competition against other overweight participants. You've likely seen the show or are at least familiar with the concept. At the end of the season, the transformations were stunning. Contestants would record their final weigh-ins with a loss of 200 pounds or more! Through blood, sweat, and tears *The Biggest Loser* finalists shed incredible amounts of weight and emerged almost like new beings.

I remember in one particular season, finalists, nearing the end of their weight-loss journey, were challenged to complete a rigorous workout wearing weighted body suits that simulated their starting weight. These newly-fit men and women put on their old bodies and experienced their former lifestyle from a new perspective.

At the end of the challenge, the contestants stepped out of the cumbersome suits drenched in sweat and weak from the effort. Some contestants looked at the heap of weights and cloth and were overcome with emotion, realizing how much they had accomplished and acknowledging what they had left behind. With a sense of pride, gratitude, and determination, each of them declared that they would never again live in a body like that.

Are you running your race as who you once were?

Step out of your burden and see it for what it is—the past.

You have been set you free. Christ has taken you from death to life and made you new.

It's time to give up what you once were and celebrate who you have become.

Prayer:

Jesus,

May we surrender all that we are unto you.

You have made us whole.

You have made us new.

Give us the courage to run this good race

And the endurance to finish.

Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 29

JOHN 13:1-17, 31b-35

We hear so many sermons and discussions on the importance of giving and serving. All of us would agree that such acts bring us joy and help us feel closer to God. Many of us are glad to partake in them. A not so popular topic, however, is how we can learn to receive gracefully—even *surrender* gracefully. We struggle to come up with the appropriate response to a compliment, or a well-intentioned act of service. Such acts of kindness or service make us uncomfortable, and we don't know how to respond.

I imagine Peter's response was similar. After all, this act of foot-washing was one reserved for the lowliest of servants. And here, Jesus, of all people—their Master!—was serving *them*. In this season of Lent, I think we too struggle with how to respond to Jesus' acts of love; his desire to cleanse us and wash our feet from the dirt and grime of everyday life—*our* dirt and grime. We recoil at this.

It is easy to withdraw, to hide our face in shame, and say: "Oh no, we are not worthy, Master." It is easy to reject his love, his gifts, his acts of grace offered so freely. But why? The answer, I suspect, will look different for each person, but I have a feeling it may stem from our discomfort with the role-reversal in Jesus' upside-down Kingdom. We do not expect the Master to serve. We do not expect God, our Creator, to stoop down to cleanse us. And yet, God does so. He boldly pursues us with his lavish love.

Could it be our pride that resists God drawing close to us? Could it be our reluctance to let God into the deepest parts of our being, only to confirm our worst fears that we truly are in desperate need of a Savior to wash and cleanse us from our sin? What is it that are we afraid of?

When we look on Mercy's face, there is no disgust. When Grace bends down to kiss our bruised sores and scabbed wounds from the weary days of traveling along the road of life, he is not surprised. Jesus sees all of our humanness, our frailty, our earthiness, and he understands with an empathy we can scarcely fathom. He sees all of the human experience and gently embraces it with his touch.

When we look on the face of Christ, there is unconditional love and joy. There is the invitation. He stands with the gift of eternal life in his hands, the riches of his grace. He is eager in his love for us to experience it all—the life with him that transforms us and calls us closer to his heart as we are washed in grace and his sacrificial blood. Perhaps the reason we are so hesitant to receive his gifts, or awkwardly receive them with shame or guilt, is because we have no idea how much Christ loves us, and how much joy it brings him for us to gratefully (and grace-fully) receive the gift of himself, the very One who is Life.

Will we let him wash our feet?

Prayer: In this season of reflection, precious Lord, help us to surrender ourselves to your love and care, to gracefully accept the gift of yourself as you cleanse us through Your Word. Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY, MARCH 30

PSALM 22

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The famous words we hear from Christ on the cross as he quotes Psalm 22. Today is Good Friday, the day in which we recognize Christ’s crucifixion and death on the cross. The day where we remember that we nailed his innocent hands to the wood of shame. We gave him the death of a lowly criminal and let him hang naked and broken. Even more though was it the day that Christ took on our very sins, our destructive nature, our deplorability and took them to death with him.

I have always wondered what it meant for us to call something so terrible and heart wrenching good. We see the hope of the disciples crumble and they go into hiding. We see the torment of Mary in watching her own son torn open in front of the world and torn from this world. How on God’s green earth is death good? Death takes from us, steals the joy of life; it has left an emptiness in its place. It is the ultimate thief that leaves us in such despair and anguish.

The Psalm itself was that of anguish. However, it was also a Psalm of something else. It is a Song of Praise. While there are cries of pain and suffering, God is still holy. In spite of everything going on, in the death that surrounds this world, God is not far off. We recognize that it is Good Friday. Despite the tragedy of the cross, we embrace the beauty of the cross. We see that sin is no more, that sin is crushed on that very same cross as Christ, and at that moment paradise, becomes a reality. God is near, and that is good.

Let us not belittle the suffering of Christ and skip over towards the resurrection, because in order for the resurrection to be real, the death has to happen. Let us see and feel the weight of the suffering of Christ this Good Friday, in order that we may grow closer to our loving Lord and Savior. Let us realize it is good because it is the action of Christ’s love for us that we may one day be fully present in the glory of God.

In a song called “A Prayer,” the band Kings Kaleidoscope speaks of wondering where Christ is and after a pause, comes the words of Christ “I’m right beside you, I feel what you feel, I’m here to hold you when death is too real. You know I died too! I was terrified! I gave myself for you! I was crucified! Because I love you!” May we feel the love of our God in the anguish and suffering of the cross. May we recognize that Christ is near.

HOLY SATURDAY, MARCH 31

LAMENTATIONS 3:1-9, 19-24

The Darkness before the Dawn

In his religious travelogue, *A Pisgah-Sight of Palestine and the Confines Thereof*, Thomas Fuller is given credit as being the first to pen the words “It is always darkest just before the day dawneth.”

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood behind the pulpit at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tenn. He was there as a part of his Poor People’s Campaign as he organized demonstrations to fight for living wages for garbage workers. He was a far cry from the unifying moment of the “I Have a Dream” speech. His soaring rhetoric of idealistic unity and picturesque reconciliation had all but faded under the reality of multiple public beatings, numerous imprisonments, and the constant threat of death as he fought to hold America to it’s greatest ideals that had been penned on parchment. He had recently been quoted as saying that he felt he had “integrated his people into a burning house.”

I imagine Dr. King felt the pain of the Lamentations author. As a preacher rooted in an eternal reconciliatory hope and bound by the promise and pull of God’s justice, I realize why Dr. King struggled with depression. How is it possible to fight for the King of Kings, to make his agenda your own, and to still suffer public humiliation and scorn and private defeat. It could have seemed that God had brought Dr. King out of light and into darkness. I can see how it may have seemed that God had shut off his prayers and pushed him outside of the hedge of protection. Yet Dr. King stood behind that podium the night before his assassination, feeling the imminence of death, and boldly proclaimed that “Longevity has its place, but I’m not concerned with that because I just want to do God’s will.”

As Jesus lay in the tomb on Saturday, temporarily silenced by his inadequate foe, death was caught off guard by his ultimate defeat and the resurrection that was soon to come. As we prepare to celebrate Resurrection Sunday, I believe the greatest moment of our hope is in the moments where it is darkest before the dawn. Am I able to discard the smothering reality of my struggle, my persecution, and my feeling of abandonment by God and still have hope in a victory that I can’t touch at the moment? Is the promise of his resurrection fueling my perseverance in the darkest nights of my life? Am I able to celebrate his mercies that are new every day and proclaim “Great is thy Faithfulness” when my circumstances would seem to say that my God has abandoned me? On this Holy Saturday, I pray that we are all able to reclaim the practical call to hope in our darkest hour. In these divisive times in our country where right is wrong and up is down, we need to be sure of our spiritual compass and keep pushing to do God’s will like Dr. King. With Jesus as our example, we can overcome all of the many foes that come against us in our fight for the reconciliatory justice of a loving and merciful God.

*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 1

MARK 16:1-8

The women had stuck with Jesus since the heady days of his success in Galilee. They had watched his crucifixion from afar and observed where he was buried. They came to anoint his body with spices, expecting to find a corpse grown cold from the clutches of death's icy grip. They ventured out to minister to Jesus' body weighed down by the greatest of grief, but they are the first to be let in the greatest of news. A young man dressed in dazzling white sitting on the right side, an angelic figure, announces to them that they have the right tomb. They are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified, but "He has risen! He is not here." The angel instructs them to tell Peter and the disciples to go to Galilee where they will see him again as he had promised. Instead of being filled with joy at this news, the women are overcome by fear. Mark tells us that they "said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." The Gospel *seems* to end with utter failure. That impression would be wrong.

The women's fear is the normal response to divine revelation that cannot yet be fully understood. It is numinous awe, and Mark understood the women's silence to be limited. They did not shout the news from the rooftops but relayed it only to the persons the heavenly messenger specified, the disciples. In the Gospels, initial news of Jesus' resurrection is disclosed *only* to those who are to be enlisted in a task.

The news of Jesus' resurrection makes clear that the principalities and powers do not have the last word. When they have done their worst, God steps in and saves. For Jesus' disciples, however, the news brings the glad tidings of forgiveness. When the High Priest's posse arrived in Gethsemane, they abandoned him, hightailing it out of trying to save their own tails. Peter then denied him with curses. Mark reports that no disciples were nearby when Jesus died on the cross. None were bold enough to ask that Jesus' body be released so that they could give him a proper burial as the disciples of John the Baptist had done after his execution (6:29). Implicit in this news that Jesus will see them again in Galilee, the place where it all began, is the word of forgiveness. They might have abandoned Jesus, but he will not abandon them. They have a chance to start all over again, to follow Jesus anew, knowing that it will lead to a cross, but knowing now that it also leads to resurrection.

For us, it means that the resurrection is not the end of the story. It means going back to chapter one, so to speak. We also must be retaught as we watch and listen as Jesus teaches in Galilee and then as we journey with him to Jerusalem. We also will be sent out to proclaim the good news, but not to fellow disciples as the women were. We are to go to a world that may find the message unwelcoming. We know, however, that it contains the only answers to matters of life and death.

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