

A Season of Reflection

Lent 2011

The New York Avenue
Presbyterian Church

2011 Lenten Calendar
(Sunday Services at 8:45 and 11:00)

Wednesday, March 9	Ash Wednesday Service, 7:00pm, PMH, Supper, PMH, 6-6:45 (\$6)
Sunday, March 13	First Sunday in Lent, Being Faithful In Our Communities, 10-11 am
Sunday, March 20	Second Sunday in Lent, Being Faithful in Our Communities, 10-11 am
Sunday, March 27	Third Sunday in Lent, Being Faithful In Our Communities, 10-11 am
Sunday, April 3	Fourth Sunday in Lent, Communion Being Faithful in Our Communities, 10-11 am
Sunday, April 10	Fifth Sunday in Lent, Being Faithful In Our Communities, 10-11 am
Sunday, April 17	Palm Sunday , Being Faithful in Our Communities, 10-11 am
Thursday, April 21	Maundy Thursday Service 7 pm, Sanctuary, Soup/Bread Supper, 6 pm, PMH (\$6)
Friday, April 22	Good Friday Service, 12 noon
Sunday, April 24	Easter Sunday 7:15 am Sunrise Service 7:45 am Breakfast (\$7) 8:45 am Worship Service 9:45 am Breakfast (\$7) 10:40 am Special Music 11:00 am Worship Service

Ash Wednesday – March 9, 2011 - Matthew 6: 1-6

On moving to Washington DC, Clarke and I felt very strongly about centering our life within the District instead of Northern Virginia or Maryland. Our first step was to find a church home, which we accomplished in record time, as we decided to join after attending our first service. New York Avenue exceeded every expectation we had (great preaching, great choir, focus on mission, friendly.....) as well as being a downtown church. Next step for me was to start up my volunteer efforts. As a Navy wife, there are always a myriad of worthwhile endeavors to put my efforts into, but I chose two that I could walk to on the Washington Navy Yard, where we live. After going through the orientation classes and joining the church I figured I'd start volunteering in some of the missions at the church as well. I love a plan!

Fortunately there's something I love more than a plan – my Mom. Mom came to live with us in early November, as her doctor told her she could no longer live alone. She will be with us until my sister Betsy retires from her job – which should be soon. My plan to volunteer had to go on hold for a higher purpose - Mom. It's been a blessing having Mom here and we have received from her the nurturing love of a consummate Mom as well as the amazing stories of a life well lived.

Even though my plan to volunteer was on hold, I found other opportunities for outreach to people in need. Living on the Washington Navy Yard, we are guarded by the Marines from the Barracks at 8th and I. They stand 12 hour shifts in a guard shack a half a block from our Quarters and I check on them multiple times a day when I walk Teddy and Fenway, our incorrigible Welsh Corgi's. The Marines are approximately 19 years old (younger than our children), from all over the country, and are veterans of war having served in the Middle East. They are the best of the best as this duty is very high visibility and leads to other outstanding assignments. I consider these Marines, "my boys." I give them sports updates, Lindt truffle candies, and dog fixes as our dogs say hello to everyone. My father was a Navy Chaplain who served with the Marines multiple tours so I feel a sense of responsibility to take care of them. They know they are appreciated, because I tell them every day – sometimes with words, sometimes with a smile, a wave, fresh baked muffins, candy, cookies, and the dogs.

Once a day I usually take Teddy and Fenway on a long walk around the Navy yard. It is a wonderful opportunity for prayer, but not without some interruptions that you can imagine. The act of walking and the fresh air clear my head. There are always friendly people moving from one building to another, some stopping to engage the dogs. The three of us always feel refreshed after our prayerful "give and take" walk around the yard. During the chance encounters I have not professed my faith in Jesus Christ, but I believe that the news would not surprise any we have met.

The Marines and others working on the Navy Yard qualify in my mind as "needy" in the Matthew passage. As I read the passage, I was reminded of the old "shell game." (the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing). Not being an extremely coordinated person, and a gullible one as well, this particular portion jumps off the page at me. When I first started these walks they were purely for the dogs benefit (exercise, etc). Almost immediately I realized that their presence on the landscape was having an impact on the worker's day. Now I'm the Corgi Lady.

There are so many people we pass by in our daily lives, doing their essential service to make our lives better or healthier or safer. If we could just take the time to show our appreciation and smile at them – or just say hi! Who knows how that seed could grow?

Prayer: Remind me to turn to you in prayer as part of my daily life – an essential part. Let my response to prayer be action.

Dale Orzalli

Leviticus 25:35-55
Matthew 8:1-13
Galatians 3:1-5

Thursday March 10, 2011

This Leviticus passage is a good reminder of a few things. First, that there is a generosity of spirit in much of the scripture we hold as holy. The beginning of this passage sounds like an instruction manual for the Radcliffe Room, or for the way we should treat our friends when they are battered by life.

The second is that this beloved scripture is full of the values of its time. Leviticus 25:47-55 is one of the passages that was used to justify slavery, by “endorsing” a “just path” for slaves and their masters. It also reminds us that it’s incumbent on us to understand it and interpret anew. This is a tricky business, to be sure, because we can easily decide that the hard lessons are the ones that most need to be changed.

It’s necessary for us to develop spiritual muscles to understand what the scripture, written in historical times, can tell us about today. And how do we develop these muscles? Exercise, of course.

These exercises are the foundation of community that we practice week by week. By listening to the struggles of our friends, by praying, and by reading and studying the scripture diligently. By developing relationships that are based on trust and mutual love, so that we can ponder difficult texts and difficult decisions together, being extraordinarily honest when we need to be.

In the excellent book Callings, recently suggested to me by Amy Gillespie and Tara Spuhler McCabe, Gregg Levoy says that in the Hebrew tradition, readers and listeners knew that scripture should be read on at least three levels: literal, metaphorical, and what I would characterize as visceral. First, by reading, second, by thinking, and third, by feeling.

In this passage, I find myself entranced by verse 48, which in my online version reads:

he retains the right of redemption after he has sold himself. One of his relatives may redeem him

I think about what it means to retain the right of redemption in the metaphorical sense: we are never beyond being pulled out of the slavery that binds us, and we may be pulled out by those who are closest to us. And in the visceral sense: the feeling that I can be rescued, redeemed, loved, even when I am trapped in habits of thought and being.

Thank you, God, for the community, the friends who guide and sustain me. Amen.
Rebecca Davis

The God I Choose

Leviticus 26: 1-20
Matthew 8: 14-22
Galatians 3: 6-14

Friday, March 11, 2011

Several years ago I was in an NYA Sunday School class and we were struggling with one of those Old Testament passages where God is helping the Israelites in a battle with their enemies. I don't remember the passage, but I do remember the sage advice given to us by our teacher who reminded us that, "Christians are to view the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament."

That advice has stuck with me over the years and I find it to be particularly helpful when I encounter verses such as those in today's reading from Leviticus. This is a very stern God and he is driving a very hard bargain. He tells the Israelites that if they do not obey his commandments, he will "deal with" them. Wow. Suppose these passages represented all I knew about God. Would I choose to worship this God?

But of course we do have the New Testament and we do have two readings today that are helpful. In Matthew, Jesus is casting out spirits and curing all who are sick. This is a compassionate God who is more to my liking.

Paul, in Galatians, reminds us that it is faith, not the law, that should be at the core of our relationship with God. He reminds us that it is those "who rely on faith" who will be blessed. Jesus redeemed us from the "curse of the Law". Very reassuring.

So, if all I knew about God was in these verses would I choose this God? It turns out that faith is not always easy. Jesus reminds us that the way of believers will be difficult. And of course, I have other choices. There are lots of gods available, easy gods. I can live a very good life, at least from a material point of view, and not have to work very hard at it.

Lent, it seems to me, is about reconsidering our choices. We make choices every day. Over 2,000 years ago, Jesus made choices for me. I pray I have the faith necessary to return the favor.

Steve Dewhurst

Leviticus 26:27-42

Saturday, March 12, 2011

Matthew 8:23-34

Galatians 3:15-20

The Law and the Promise: The Stick and the Carrot

The Leviticus passage is vintage Old Testament God, and a great set-up for Paul in Galatians. Chapter 26 begins with a short recital of the blessings for complying with the law (verses 3-13), followed by a long series of escalating curses for disobedience—sobering reminders of the consequences of sin. Today's passage is the 4th and last in the series—i.e., if you continue to reject me despite the three previous warnings and punishments, you will be eating the flesh of your children, I will heap your carcasses on the carcasses of your idols, etc.—these are no slouch curses! It's easy to see how Paul (a Pharisee) views the law as a "curse" rather than a path to salvation. However, the passage ends with a glimmer of hope, assurance that the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob won't be forgotten. The people, and the land, won't be *completely* destroyed (in fact, the land will get the Sabbath it never received under the management of the disobedient), and confession and repentance can bring redemption.

In Matthew, Jesus calms the storm and chides the disciples for their lack of faith, then exorcises demons from two men, and grants the demons' request to be transferred into a herd of pigs. The pigs then run wildly over a cliff to their deaths, drowning in the sea. (One may speculate on the strategy of the demons here to distract from the impact of the miracle, a la *The Screwtape Letters*). The townspeople, who care more about the economic value of their pigs than the well-being of their neighbors, ask Jesus to leave. (How often do we choose our own "pigs" over our neighbors, or the way of Jesus?). Like the disciples earlier in the boat, the townspeople are missing the point. Although apparently not that observant of the Jewish law (after all, they were raising pigs), the Gadarenes are focused on making it on their own. Unlike the disciples, who left the security of fishing and tax collecting to follow Jesus, the Gadarenes cling to the familiar (even though the pigs are now dead), rather than considering the life-changing significance of this itinerant holy man who performs miracles.

So what is Paul's point in Galatians? Sometimes his reasoning seems a bit strained, like his legalistic emphasis on the use of the singular, rather than the plural when scripture identifies the target of God's promise to the patriarchs—Paul says it is Christ alone. His basic argument, though, is that, even with the law, human effort cannot achieve salvation. Rather, salvation is a gift of grace—the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus. It cannot be earned, but must be claimed by faith. Paul fears the Galatians will be seduced by the human impulse to stay in control, believing they can make it on their own by following the rules. They may choose the pigs over the promise—and suffer the curses of Leviticus. Instead, Paul's warning guides the Galatians and us back to God's covenant of grace and forgiveness.

Lord, watch over us and guide us as we strive to live our lives in obedience to your law, loving you and our neighbors. Help us to recognize the miracle of your transforming grace, and to place our trust in you, rather than clinging to the things we have chosen to idolize and pridefully relying on ourselves.

Jim Bird & Betsy Merritt

Temptations

March 13, 2011

Genesis 3:1-7; Psalm 25; Matthew 4:1-11; Romans 5:12-19

The concept of temptation has Biblical origins as far back as the Garden of Eden. Eating the apple led to the ultimate sin, the “fall” of humanity. In the fourth chapter of Matthew, we witness another powerful example of temptation – that of Satan asking Jesus to turn stones into bread, and tempting Jesus to bow down and worship Satan. As we well know, Jesus, in his weakened state of mind, successfully resists temptation by turning down Satan’s demands. From one extreme to another, temptation appears as a dominant theme throughout scripture.

As well, we face temptation throughout our lives, perhaps some of us more than others. We all have weaknesses and strengths, but our limitations challenge us regularly. We may be tempted to eat more than we should of what we should not have (chocolate being my sweet temptation), and the consequences of giving in too often becomes apparent! Thus, indulging in too many sweets becomes an act of sin, although sin sounds harsh (and we might tend to dismiss it as true sin). But other temptations can lead to more grave ends. The urge to renege on an obligation (especially through the anonymity of e-mail) may hurt another, even if we rationalize our behavior. We can be tempted to ignore a nagging task, only to be confronted later with more serious repercussions. We’re tempted to push the snooze alarm, skip breakfast, and end up late at our next appointment; we may think about cutting someone off in traffic or telling someone off who’s wronged us. Our lives are filled with these daily enticements, both insignificant and significant, and we often have to carefully weigh our reactions to what life hurls at us. We generally know, at least subconsciously, what the Christian or moral response should be to allurements, but our humanity and imperfections sometimes dictate how we behave. As well, doing the right thing doesn’t always make us feel good. In fact, resisting temptation in many contexts may be seen as repressive, non-assertive, or even haughty. Life can be filled with countless decisions that ultimately influence our spiritual journey, but we must also remember that we are only seeking spiritual perfection, not expecting to achieve it.

In the Matthew passage, we do not get a clue as to how deeply Jesus must reach to resist Satan’s inducement. We do not receive any glimpses of an internal debate in Jesus’ mind, nor does he argue with Satan. Having been in the desert for forty days, we assume that he is starving, exhausted, and dehydrated. He most likely could have turned the stones into bread, but apparently he still had the wherewithal to realize that he would be under Satan’s power should he do so. Moreover, though Satan offers him a chance for fame, wealth, and power, we wonder if Jesus is even remotely tempted. But, if we are to view Jesus as fully human, then we might expect that he could have at least contemplated Satan’s enticements before asserting the written passage, “*Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.*” It is unlikely that he resisted Satan easily and readily. In fact, if Jesus did not struggle in his wilderness experience, we would not be able to relate to Him at all. But the writers tend to hide his humanity from us.

As Romans says, we all have sinned and fallen short. But Jesus’ righteousness, his steely resolve, ought to infuse us with a shred of hope, for He understood the frailty of his followers and urged them to observe his teachings. When faced with daunting situations, when we would prefer to sit down and cry and kick our heels, we need only to turn our angst over to the care of our savior, in whatever way we understand that. Every decision that we make to choose the high ground esteems us, if not in the eyes of others, at least within ourselves. During this Lenten season, let us resolve to resist temptations that harm ourselves and others, or to at least understand why we sometimes do not follow the path that God has clearly chosen for us. Let us journey towards the greater good, a life with fewer regrets and temptations.

God, when life throws disappointments and temptations at us, please give us strength to withstand them.
Elizabeth Young

Jeremiah 10:1-10
Matthew 9:1-9
Galatians 3:21-29

Monday March 14, 2011

Reflection on Galatians 3:21-29

In Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, he warns the churches of backsliding from the doctrine he tried to instill in previous visits. Paul seems to have a frustrated tone; the tone of a colleague or mentor exasperated by people who have not fully thought out their current actions – colleagues who are reluctant to change their relationship with the straight-and-narrow Hebrew law that they have known for centuries.

Verses 23-27 read:

“Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

Paul's message is a generous one. Anyone placing faith in Jesus Christ's message is an heir to the promise. He suggests earlier in the passage that the strictures of the Hebrew law have served their purpose, in preparing the people for the coming of Jesus Christ.

Paul's letter could well have been written to me. I am a rule-follower. It is part of my essential nature. In another time and place, as a member or a leader in a Galatian church, I could imagine myself happy to accept the messiah, but much more reluctant to give up the Hebrew law, and the way it is integrated into my life.

I follow sets of rules and best practices in my professional life as an engineer, and I am a creature of habit in my personal and family life. Yet the pivotal personal and professional successes in my life have come from leaving my comfort zone, and turning my back on what had worked in the past.

Until I thought this passage through, I had considered the most difficult part of a leap of faith to be the affirmative action of accepting a new way of thinking. I now believe that the most difficult part of a leap of faith is turning one's back on comfortable, reliable rules and conventions.

I am blessed to enjoy a life made up largely of comfortable and safe routine of my choosing, with a curveball thrown in every now and then. This passage is a reminder to me that routines have limitations, and a leap of faith may not be complete until I let go of familiar, comfortable rules.

Kendrick McCabe

Jeremiah 10: 11-16; 23-25;
Matthew 9:10-17
Galatians 4:1-7

March 15, 2011

Jeremiah, Matthew and Paul's Letter to the Galatians seem to me to present different views of the nature of God and his relationship with the people He chooses, suggesting several questions for reflection:

- How do we experience (or define) the nature of God?
- Does God choose, or call, particular people, or us all?
- What does it mean to us today to be "heirs through Christ," no longer slaves to the "elemental spirits of the world"?

The Old Testament passage from Jeremiah distinguishes between false gods and the God of Israel, whose power is physically impressive: "*When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightnings for the rain, and he brings out the wind from his storehouses.*"

For Jeremiah, God's relationship to his chosen people is clear: "*Israel is the tribe of his inheritance.*" Jeremiah has a relationship with the Lord of hosts because he is one of the chosen, and he beseeches God to correct him "*in just measure...not in anger.*" But Jeremiah expects no such restraint from God for others: "*Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you; and on the peoples that do not call on your name,*" he asks.

In Matthew, Jesus, the Son of God, confounds convention both with the people he chooses and what he expects of their relationship with him. He chooses society's outcasts, such as the tax collector Matthew. *Jesus says: "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."*

Jesus expects his disciples not to fast when he is with them, as was the custom among the pious, but to rejoice. "*The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?*" says Matthew.

In Galatians, the relationship between God and his chosen people is portrayed as transformative, turning us from slaves into His children.

These passages show an evolution in understanding the nature of God and God's relationship with us. In Jeremiah, God is evoked most vividly by thunder and lightning, revealing his power through physical might, which can also destroy the enemies of his chosen people (Israel). In Matthew, God comes closer to us, as His son Jesus lives among men, asking them to leave their daily lives and rejoice with Him. Finally, in Galatians, Paul says that at a time of God's choosing, we will be transformed through the Spirit of God's Son, ending our "*enslavement to the elemental spirits of the world,*" becoming truly God's children, heirs through Christ of all the Father's domain.

Jean Bordewich

Living as God's Servant

Deuteronomy: 8:1-10

Matthew: 9:18-26

Galatians: 4:8-14

Wed. March 16, 2011

As I read these lent messages, I was struck by the following verses.

*You shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

*Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you. So you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him. (Deuteronomy 8:5)

*Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. (Matthew 9:22)

The message I got at the beginning of this year was "Be a peace maker", and in this Lenten season, the message for me is "God will humble, test, and discipline me". God must have lots to teach me to be able to use me as one of his servants.

It's easy to separate spiritual life from every day life. Because I was too worried about my material life and popularity. I wanted spiritual life but didn't allow it to take too much space in my heart or mind. And also limited the time that I spent on knowing him or serving him. God assures me with the story of what he had done for forty years while the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. He says: "Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years" (Deuteronomy: 8:4)

I didn't want to share God's love with others, just like a little girl who is afraid that her siblings would take her parents' attention and love away from her. I was limiting God and his love toward this world. I know for sure that spreading the gospel, sharing his unlimited love, expanding his kingdom are what God wants from his servants. What I can do now? I don't know, but I am waiting for him to lead me.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the free gift of grace that you have delivered to me through the blood of my savior, Jesus Christ. God help me open my stubborn heart, break my principles that are built on my selfishness, fill me up with your love and wisdom. I will be where you need me to be as your servant.

Shuxian Li

Deuteronomy 8:11-20
Matthew 9:27-38
Galatians 4:15-20

Thursday, March 17, 2011

¹¹Take care that you do not forget the Lord your god, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes . . . ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.” ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power.

This passage from Deuteronomy reminds that the gifts before me, including my wonderful daughter Maya, whose first birthday is today, my amazing wife, and all that we have, come only by the grace of God. It also reminds me of the challenge that I face trying to live in a way that recognizes and celebrates this grace. The passage from Matthew helps me understand just what it means to live such a life.

I can't help but imagine the Jesus that Matthew presents here as a bit of a rockstar – walking about the desert doing miracles left and right. He gives sight to two blind men. 9:27-31. He casts out a demon to restore speech to a mute. 9:32-34

³⁵Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.

Surely the disciples watched in awe. What else could they do while he was single handedly conquering sickness and death, making the kingdom of God manifest on Earth? And yet, Jesus gave a charge to the disciples, and it is a charge that falls to Christians today.

³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Jesus was telling them that if they were going to follow him, they were going to work because they were God's laborers. They were to lead the people and that meant living a life in Christ. Just as he would carry the cross for all of humanity, each of them would – and each of us must – pick up the crosses that litter the landscape of life. Remembering Deuteronomy, it is by fulfilling the charge to labor for the kingdom that I can “remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power.”

But too often I fail. On Sundays, it's easy to succeed – the celebration of Christ is fresh in my mind and whether it's in community among the Sunday School children or in conversation with a neighbor in the city, the Spirit is overflowing. But I am weak, and it recedes too quickly for me to grasp – by Wednesday I might look down rather than meet the eye of a homeless woman as I shake my head and softly say, almost to myself, “I don't have any change . . . I'm sorry.” It is in this failure that I encounter Paul's disappointment with the Galatians:

¹⁵What has become of the goodwill you felt?

But in Paul's disappointment he also offers a metaphor that gives me hope.

¹⁹My little children, . . . I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you . .

His description of the struggling Christians children resonates with me because I've been watching Maya learn to walk. Over the past several weeks she's gone from an unstable stand that she could only sustain for a few seconds, to a few off-balance shuffles, to an ever more stable totter across the room. As her every-proud father, I assume that by the time you read this she'll have a steady gait and will have all but abandoned crawling.

And so it is with my life in faith – I started in an unstable pose and waivered often, but slowly I've put one foot in front of the other in an attempt to walk. I've fallen often and sometimes it feels like I fall more than I move forward. But May's been teaching me that if I pick myself up or let some loving hands set me up to try again, one day I'll get to a confident stride in my effort to run the race of faith.

Until that day, I'm grateful that through the grace of Go, every time I fall there is someone standing there, someone who has been walking along with me, waiting to help me up.

Mike Smith

Mission Statement

Matthew 10: 7-8

March 18, 2011

“As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” [New Revised Standard Version]

Have you ever tried to develop a mission statement? The key is to be as clear and succinct as you can while capturing the essence of what the group sees itself to be. It’s not so easy, and, if it’s done by a committee, nearly impossible. In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ calling of the 12, the passage above is such a mission statement. Notice a few things, first, that Jesus’ statement has two parts – proclaim then act, or talk and do. Second, note that the mission is fairly ambitious. Third, see that Jesus is expecting that the disciples will do nothing less than he, Jesus, is already doing. Finally, check out how the two missions relate. The first mission concerns the announcement of the kingdom of heaven, which sounds, on the face of it, pretty otherworldly; but we are immediately brought down to earth. Clearly Jesus believes that the kingdom of heaven and the healing of troubled minds and diseased bodies are somehow joined at the hip.

Iris DeMent, a folksinger and songwriter, has composed and performed a lovely song entitled “He Reached Down” about Jesus’ ministry. Its refrain goes like this:

He reached down, he reached down, he got right there on the ground
He reached down, he reached down and touched the pain.

That, it seems to me, captures the heart of the second mission and relates seamlessly with the first. Preach the good news of God’s active presence in the world and reach down, reach down and touch the pain. To proclaim the good news and not touch the pain means that you’re just spouting empty words. To touch the pain and not to acknowledge and announce the good news will produce spiritual and physical exhaustion in the healer and no lesson to those healed on how they should live the new, bright life that has been given them.

*Prayer: Gracious God, hidden yet ever present, thank you for the Good News come to earth in your son. O Lord, give us the in-sight and the courage to proclaim that news in our words and our lives **and** to reach out and touch those in pain and distress. Hold us as individuals and the church accountable for your mission in the world; forgive and turn us around when we fail. In the name of the one who lived, died and rose again that we might live and live abundantly, Amen*

Paul B. Dornan

Searching for Understanding

Deuteronomy 9:13-21

Saturday, March 19, 2011

Galatians 5:1-4 Matthew 10: 16-23

As is so often the case, the Lenten lectionary lessons present Christians with challenges to find relevance in our life and time. At least superficially, the context of Paul's message to the church he founded and nurtured in Galatia (a Roman province located geographically in modern Turkey) is a situation in which diversity within the community is causing dissension. Paul is admonishing his Christian converts to reject the need for circumcision as a precondition for conversion. Paul seems to be saying that times have changed and that Gentile converts need not be required to conform to older ritual practices. Do we, too, cling to some outmoded rituals in our practice as Christians?

In the passage from Matthew, which has a remarkable parallel in Mark 13: 9-13, Jesus teaches the twelve that their decision to follow him will not be easy. There will be persecution both from religious and from Roman civil authorities. Jesus counsels them to hold firmly to their commitment to proclaim that God's kingdom is at hand. They will be given inspiration and words for witness by God's Holy Spirit. And, ultimately, they will be vindicated before God for their steadfastness and loyal witness to God's revelation in the Messiah. There are, of course, alternative insights and interpretations to these passages.

Gleaning a modern view of the passage from Deuteronomy is more problematic. The verses in Chapter 9: 13-21 are set in the larger context of Chapter 9:8-10:11 in the commentary of the New Interpreters' Bible and given the title "The Great Intercession." Briefly, Moses comes down from the mountain with the tablets of the written covenant between God and God's people which we call the Ten Commandments. Moses descends the mountain bringing the written covenant to the Israelites only to find that they have cast for themselves an idol in the form of a calf which they worship. The Israelites are imitating non-Jewish people and tribes around them. They want a tangible, accessible God -- not a presence on a fiery mountaintop whom only Moses may approach. Moses is angered by their behavior, castigates the people for their idolatry and breaks the tablets of stone. Moses tells them in Deuteronomy 9: 19 and 20 that the anger of the Lord is so fierce that they may be destroyed as a people. Even in his anger, however, Moses is prepared to intercede with God on the people's behalf.

How may we understand this passage in our time? We, too, are a rebellious, stubborn people. We defile the Lord's good creation when, by our prolificacy, we put the earth's environment at risk. Our home on this planet earth is endangered. God's people continue to act as aggressors, to make wars, to engage in acts of violence and terrorism. We hoard for ourselves scarce land and water and food and energy and all manner of resources for selfish purposes. We fail to share God's good gifts with neighbors. A few have much more than needed; the many are left with a remnant of resources. In our individual and private lives we fail to do justice, seek peace, and walk humbly with our God. In this period of Lenten reflection and repentance we, like our ancestors who wandered in the wilderness of Sinai, follow false idols. For those who profess to be Christians, our manner of intercession can be found by following the teachings and example of Jesus, whom we profess to be the Christ.

Prayer: Lord, Open our eyes that we may see, the glimpses of truth you prepare for us. Open our hearts and help us share the love that you have first and steadfastly continue to give to each child of your creation. In Jesus name we pray. Amen Jay Davenport

Travels and Calls

Genesis 12:1-8

Sunday, March 20, 2011

Psalm 105

Romans 4:1-17

John 3:1-17

Abram has been introduced in Genesis 11 as a descendent of Noah who, with his grandfather Terah, wife Sarai and nephew Lot, had set out from Ur of the Chaldeans, along the Euphrates south of Babylon and near the northern reach of the Persian Gulf, and settled for years in Haran, near the beginning of a northern branch of the Euphrates. Genesis 12 opens with a call to Abram from the Lord to go to the land of Canaan, with his kindred, household and all the persons and possessions that they had gathered, where the Lord will make of them a great nation. When the travelers reached the land of Canaan, the Lord said to Abram that he would give this land to Abram's offspring (of which there were none as yet) and marks Abram as the biological father of the Jewish people, following which Abram builds an altar to the Lord at Bethel.

Psalm 105 recaps the adventures of the generations that followed Abram, by now referred to as Abraham, including promises to Isaac and Jacob, the movement to Egypt in time of famine (repeating an earlier venture by Abram and Sarai also in a time of famine) and eventually into slavery, followed by a recital of the events, miraculous and otherwise, by which Moses and Aaron led the Israelites out of Egypt and once again into the promised land, by the end of which adventure they have acquired the statutes and laws by which they are to be governed from then on.

Romans 4 offers the Abraham story as evidence that faith justifies, i.e., makes the relation to God right. Abraham did not earn his relation to God; that was the result of God's choice.

Finally, the verses from John 3, presenting the encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus, place further emphasis on faith/belief as contrasted with works as a central element of the Christian message, including the reference in 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Prayer: Creator God, help us keep mindful of the role that faith has played in the journeys of the generations that preceded ours beginning with Abraham responding to the call to lead his people to the Promised Land. Amen. Robert L. Doan

Monday March 21, 2011

Passages: Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5; Matthew 10:24-33; Galatians 5:7-12

Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5

In this passage, Moses implores the Israelites to listen and obey God. He testifies to God's desire for His people to follow His laws. Moses preaches that the people have not obeyed the Lord and have been "nothing but rebellious". Moses, being of the people, and understanding our "humanity" is a conduit of the Holy Spirit and is likewise a conduit of humanity's weaknesses and failings from the people to God. He spends forty days and forty nights lying prostrate in front of God, praying to God not to kill the people He brought forth from Egypt. In spite of their ingratitude, stubbornness and "wickedness" Moses prays to save them for "they are the people of your very own possession, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm". And here, God provides Moses with the Ten Commandments, which he shares with the people.

Matthew 10:24-33 (Whom to Fear)

This is a comforting passage. In a few sentences it defines God's love. First, Matthew says that the Lord alone is to be feared, and we can choose to believe in the Lord. We should have no fear of those we may attribute strength to because the Lord alone will make the covered to be uncovered and all that is secret will be known, and all things die and live only through God's grace. That is a how great the Lord is. It brings to mind the old saying, that if God is with us then who can be against us? Knowing all of this, we can take comfort that we are so loved by God that even the hairs of our heads are counted. To believe in God's love of us can be easy for some, to believe that we are so loved, though sadly many of us do feel unworthy of God's love. Our humanity though, really comes into play in the last two verses where Jesus says those who acknowledge me before others I will acknowledge before my Father, but those who deny me before others, I will deny before my Father. We all know how hard, unpopular, ostracizing and radical it can be to outwardly acknowledge our love of Jesus to others. Its one thing to love and maintain a personal relationship with God when we meditate, are alone or among like minded folks, it's another to be more vocal and outward about it. In this passage, Jesus is promoting courage and in a sense, radicalism, in how we demonstrate our Christianity. Some of us demonstrate this by participating in ministries around the church and the work we do with the poor, homeless and friendless.

Galatians 5:7-12 (Christian Freedom)

The key phrase in this passage is "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough". Yeast can do miraculous things; it can make bread with the right conditions, with some warm water and the right amount of yeast, bread can feed many people. It smells good, is satisfying and nurturing. It takes only a little bit of yeast to make a big impact. In the same sense, it takes only a little of something negative to make drastic changes, too. Paul is asking the Galatians why they are making choices which are not choices made by those who are set free by faith in Jesus. Their choices and perspectives are based on their old way of looking at their lives; perhaps their choices are being made from a vantage point that feels safe. It's understandable. It can feel safe to revert back to what is known, even if it isn't right anymore. Many of us unknowingly respond to stressful situations in our professional and personal lives using old strategies that worked when we were younger because that is all we know. Like early Christians, we may not realize that to achieve our goals, we will have to entirely change our perspectives and not necessarily trust ourselves less, but trust in God more, and there we will find the freedom we seek. Jill Norwood

Deuteronomy 10:12-22
Matthew 10:34-42
Galatians 5:13-18

Tuesday, March 22

These three passages are clear reminders to me of how simple and yet radical and life-changing the message of the bible is.

In Deuteronomy, we get the good news that we are blessed children of God, chosen to be in relationship with "the God of gods and Lord of lords." This relationship is not of our making or choosing; it was not our decision to pursue relationship with God, and God's love doesn't come as the result of anything we did. God chose us and "set his heart in love" for us and our ancestors. This is foundational - it simply "is." I don't need to worry about whether or not I deserve God's love or pass some litmus test in order to prove my chosen status. I simply need to accept it and live into it. I am chosen and a loved child of God. The author of Deuteronomy tells us that the requirements of being true to this relationship are fairly straightforward - "to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God."

So - we don't have to worry about whether or not we deserve to be in relationship with God - that is ours by birthright. This is freeing! According to Galatians, "we were called to freedom" through our relationship with God and if we live into this relationship - being led by the Spirit, loving our neighbor as ourselves, fearing God and walking in all his ways - we can be free from "the desires of the flesh," the pain, and the conflict, which prevent us from fulfilling who we are and becoming who we long to be.

So far, so good. The passage in Matthew, however, was for me a wake-up call and a slap in the face. In Matthew, I am reminded of how difficult Jesus' message of love is and the world-altering implications of truly living into relationship with God. The Jesus in this passage is not the Jesus I think I know. His message - "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" - took me by surprise even though I had read it before. I want to ignore this passage - explain it away as the comments of someone under great stress, perhaps trying to shake things up through hyperbole and capture the attention of his distracted disciples. But this passage forces me to confront the fact that Jesus' message of love continues to be radical - challenging the false peace of the status quo even within the parts of our lives that are closest and dearest to us (our families, for instance). If we truly are to live into the birthright explained in Deuteronomy, to enjoy the freedom described in Galatians, and be the welcoming presence that Jesus asks us to be in the passage from Matthew, then we will have to come to grips with the fact that relationships are hard work. Things will change and, as in all relationships that matter, not necessarily on our terms.

Andy Lentz

Isaiah 58: 1- 7
Matthew 11: 1-15
Galatians 5: 19-26

Wednesday, March 23
Loosing all those Yokes

Isaiah decries the hypocrisy of self-important believers in Chapter 58:

“They seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that had righteousness and did not forsake the ordinances of their God .. “ (But then they ask,)
“Why have we fasted and thou seeist it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves and thou takest no knowledge of it?”

Our need for approval means we really want our fellow church members to see and acknowledge the sacrifices we make, giving reassurance from the outside that we are good enough Christians. Seemingly we lack confidence on our own that we are “good enough.”

Isaiah goes on to deride the believer who selfishly pursues his own interests on the fasting day, even “oppressing” his workers, while hiding behind the trappings of humility. And then Isaiah presents the contrasting vision he has for the fast, in verses 6-7:

“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house? And when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

These verses are breathtaking -- our charge is overwhelmingly ambitious, yet there it is. It is to work toward fundamental justice in our world, not only offering hospitality and comfort personally, but also working against oppressive practices and assumptions. Not only the poor or physically oppressed are in need of having their yokes broken, but any of us who have had our dignity or aspirations routinely suppressed. “To let the oppressed go free” is a broad mandate for living our lives every day with an eye to building-up those who are less able, who live in fear, have fewer rights or opportunities, or live under domineering families or government dictators (to name a few), It’s a demanding charge that requires all the wisdom and fortitude we can muster.

Prayer: Dear God, give me the judgment and courage to do the uncomfortable things in my life as I work toward breaking every yoke. Let me work towards this end, not to impress my neighbors, but to bring our world a little closer to “Thy kingdom come, thou will be done.”

Martha Davis

Isaiah 58: 6-14
Matthew 11: 16-30
Galatians 6: 7-19

Thursday, March 24, 2011

“... then you shall take delight in the Lord...”
Isaiah 58:14

In times of sobering sadness, we frequently find joy or delight. Think of the sadness which is often present at the death of a loved one or friend. Yet as persons reflect on the lost one, laughter frequently emerges as individuals share humorous stories. Delight is a part of life. And so, three questions occurred to me as I reread the above passages. What delights God? How do God's children find delight in knowing themselves? How do we as Christians experience delight with other persons?

WHAT DELIGHTS GOD? Isaiah 58: 13-15 tells us how to consider the Sabbath, or times when we focus primarily upon God. We are “to refrain from trampling the Sabbath.” We are not to go our own way serving our own interest or pursuing our own affairs. If we call Sabbath a delight, honor it, consider it a holy day, then we take delight in the Lord. God longs to share in the life of individuals even as a parent delights in the company of an individual child. In fact, we find God making us “ride upon the heights of the earth” and feeding us with “the heritage of our ancestor Jacob.”

HOW DO GOD'S CHILDREN FIND DELIGHT IN KNOWING THEMSELVES? In Matthew Jesus seems to know the propensity of individuals to be bogged down by burdensome cares. He understands us better than we know ourselves. He calls us “to take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls” (11: 28,29). God realizes he made us to live in the tensions of life, but he is there to help manage them. He asks us to be wise and yet childlike, to live with evil doers and yet to be peaceful and gracious. How delightful that we have a God who gives knowledge and wisdom if we but listen.

God gives us a spirit of adventure, of a desire to explore new worlds. Just watch a young child! For some persons that gift of living fully in God's world has been submerged in the dailiness or pressures of life. Yet God calls us to come out of concealment and invites us to reveal surprising insights we might experience along the way.

HOW DO WE FIND DELIGHT IN OUR ENCOUNTERS WITH OTHERS? Karen Armstrong, in *TWELVE STEPS TO A COMPASSIONATE LIFE*, indicates that compassion pertains to how we relate to three groups of persons: Those whom we love, those toward whom we are indifferent, and those who are enemies. We may not agree with Armstrong's categories, but I expect we all have a variety of people in our lives. As we reach out to others to listen to their stories and share our own, we know that different persons need different kinds of responses. Perhaps some persons need spiritual food, others physical food, and many both. God created us for fellowship with God and for opportunities to live wisely and delightfully with our fellow travelers.

Louise Berman

REJECTION BY ACCEPTANCE

Ezekiel 28:1-10
John 6:1-15
Galatians 6:7-18

Friday, March 25

John 6:1-15 is the very familiar story of the feeding of the 5,000. It is the only miracle of Jesus (other than the resurrection) that appears in all four gospels. If you want to compare the stories, see Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17.

John's story has two significant differences from the others. The first difference is the source of the five loaves and two fish that fed the 5,000 men and their accompanying women and children. The synoptic gospels are not specific, but hint that they may have belonged to the disciples. John relates that a boy in the crowd offered them up. Some have used this occurrence to provide a non-miraculous explanation of the feeding, saying that the example of the boy inspired all in the crowd who had brought food with them to share it with others.

The boy's gift is also an example of how God works. God uses us and what we have to offer to accomplish God's purposes. It thus could be used in a stewardship sermon.

But I am more fascinated by the second difference. Matthew, Mark, and Luke say nothing about the reaction of the crowd to having been fed so miraculously. And in those stories, Jesus merely proceeds on to a place where he can rest and pray, where he was headed before the crowd followed him and practically required him to stop to heal and teach.

John, however, in verse 15 says that after the feeding, the crowd was about to take Jesus by force and make him king. They were understandably frustrated by living under the oppressive rule of Rome and wanted to restore the free nation of Israel they had heard so much about. This was not God's plan for Jesus, who avoided it by fleeing to the mountain to be by himself.

The crowd's reaction is typical of the way we all tend to treat the gifts of God. Rather than accept them and use them to follow God's way, we instead try to use them to carry out our own will. By accepting the gifts of God we reject God. This was the original sin of Adam and Eve. Instead of enjoying the bounties of Eden, they tried to use them to become as God.

The difficulty, of course, is figuring out the difference between what God wants and what we want. How do we know when the actions we take are really doing God's work or merely trying to accomplish our own selfish ends? We can never be sure. All we can do is pray, study, and constantly talk with fellow believers to understand what God wants.

O God, Thy will be done.

Phil Hanna

March 26, 2011

Ezekiel 28: 11-19 Lamentation over the King of Tyre

John 6:16-27 Jesus walks on the water, and The bread from Heaven

2 Corinthians 1:1-11 Paul's suffering and God's consolation

These are not an easy group of texts for me. The first two, in particular, call out our worst impulses.

Ezekiel's lamentation says we are created perfect--perfectly placed and protected by God—yet we can give up our perfection if we are prideful and self-aggrandizing. We are created beautiful and wise, but we seem to hold the seeds of the opposite traits (“iniquity *was found*,” as if it's already there from the beginning, waiting to be triggered by our actions). This seems to be a delicate balance, reflected in the imagery of jewels which adorned the king destroyed by the pride and corruption caused by this very beauty.

This is a scary passage, to me. It's as if the King stepped into a trap he didn't know existed. How do we know when we've gone too far? The passive voice in this Old Testament scripture—“iniquity *was found* in you,” you *were filled* with violence”—hints to me that we can't control our sin; that we easily step over to the dark side. And in this passage, the judgment is immediate. *God, show us how to recognize when we go too far. Don't abandon us when we forget.*

John tells us that we are too focused on our day-to-day bodily needs to recognize a miracle; that as a crowd we'll single-mindedly cross a lake to get a fix of the good stuff that made us feel satisfied. What resonates with me is how keenly the people wanted Jesus. We yearn for nourishment—we'll take free food when we can get it—but also for a healing, calming solver of our most basic problems and for someone to fulfill our needs. We yearn for a direction. We yearn to turn our problems over to somebody else.

Lord, help us know when to rely on ourselves and when to turn things over to You. Help us to know what our true needs are and to seek them with Your help.

Paul's tone differs: He's grateful for God's “consolation,” and wants to show others the kind of connection that matters. He encourages solidarity among the Corinthians and asks them to empathize with his despair, portraying himself as a recipient of God's “consolation.” Consolation here seems to mean many things: rescue from danger, or healing, or support. Healing takes more than one person: “many will receive thanks” if the Corinthians endure suffering together, and believe. Paul tells us our power is simply in supporting each other. As God looks after us, so can we. God rescued Paul; we can save each other.

All three passages show us ways to live. All three remind us to examine ourselves and to live better. *Dear God, we pray that you will, as Paul does, show examples of how to live better, and help us recognize when we need to live better.*

Amy Garrou

These texts seem to have been both written and selected together in the lectionary to remind us that God has great hopes for us!

**We are invited to trust God, obey God as our guide for life – that is,
for making our daily decisions, for choosing what to do and how to do it.**

**There are consequences when we rebel and criticize and disobey,
or simply close our ears/hearts to what God is saying;
but God doesn't force us; and prayer sometimes results
in hearing new answers from God, if we listen.**

**When we obey, trusting that God will provide for our deepest needs
(acknowledging that God's answers may be different from what we think we need),
we will indeed have eternal life, living water, now and always.**

Two or three weeks into the wilderness trek behind Moses, the newly formed people of Israel, coming out of Egypt, were hungry, thirsty, and frightened that they would not survive. They had trusted that Moses really heard God's word for them, but now at Massah and Meribah, they were afraid of dying of hunger and thirst, and they doubted Moses, complained, rebelled, and turned on him. (The tradition is that complaining-in-faith to God is a valid form of prayer, so...) they attacked him for getting them into this spot. To his credit, Moses went back to God to see if he had heard God right, and to beg for guidance. The result was the miracle of living water from the rock, water for thirst and for the spirit.

The psalmist would love to have the people avoid the mistakes of the past. He admonishes, even in your need, do not complain and doubt as the people had at Massah and Meribah. Do not harden your hearts against new answers to desperate questions, but trust and obey. And, especially, praise God for the wonder of life.

In John, Jesus uses his very human need for water to tell a Samaritan woman that he is in fact the expected messiah, the messenger of God, and that if she could accept and trust him, he brings her living water. As she comes to understand who he is, she proclaims him the messiah – accepting again water which quenches not only human thirst, but our deepest thirst for renewed spirit and guidance in how to live.

Paul, writing to the Romans, has just been praising Abraham for his faithful obedience to God through all the long years of childlessness. That Abraham followed God daily, yearly, was evidence of “justification,” or being in right relationship with God – even though he couldn't possibly understand what God had in mind for an aging body. The promised child, to be the beginning of “the nations” arrived impossibly late, again new life out of trust. So, Paul says, living in faith and trust, leads to “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It's hard to see the big picture from the tiny brush strokes of our daily lives, especially when our logic is challenged by everyone and events around us – we still hold on, afraid to relinquish control. We harden our hearts and close our ears because we think we “know” best.

But Paul leaves us with the challenge to trust these words: “...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

May God help us keep open hearts and minds to make it so.

Amen

-- Ann Davie

BELIEVE

Ezekiel 30: 1 -9;

John 6: 27-40

2 Corinthians 1: 12-22

Monday, March 28

It was the morning after Jesus had fed the 5,000, and many in the crowd sought him again, and asked a very NYA sort of question: "What must we do, to be doing the work of God?" And he answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

For an activist, volunteering, meeting, serving group like much of our congregation, "believe" could sound like a pretty passive form of "doing the work of God," not asking much of us until you really think about it. But behind that word "belief" lies great challenge. Belief can be a powerful motivator to action, even more powerful, unimaginably powerful, if what you believe is that God sent this person "down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me...For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life..."

And if we believe, we trust, and if we trust we follow, and if we follow, we obey, and if we obey, we must do those things Jesus commanded, the loving, the serving, the leave-it-all-behind-and-following. And suddenly, "the work of God, that you believe,,, " becomes much less passive and much more demanding.

But belief is empowering, even if it's just belief in ourselves or our fellows. As I read today's passages, Hosni Mubarak was preparing to surrender his office, and the Ezekiel passage was startling: " A sword shall come upon Egypt, and anguish shall be in Ethiopia...Ethiopia, and Put, and Lud, and all Arabia, and Libya, and the people of the land that is in league, shall fall with them..." And as I write, they are falling, because of belief, not in the Son, but in each other and an idea of freedom. How much more change, then, could be brought by the work of God, that we believe, *if* we believe, and if we follow.

Loving God, thank you for your work. Help us to believe in him whom you have sent, to work, to trust, to obey, to follow. Amen

Mary Krug

Tuesday, March 29

Three Examples of God's Power in Vastly Different Times and Forms

Ezekiel 31:1-11: Written after the fall of Jerusalem, this is a part of the prophet's oracle against Egypt. So as God cast aside the great tree, so shall it be with Egypt. (Ezekiel was an "accurate" prophet but many aspects of the authenticity of the scripture and Ezekiel's life are still in contention.) After this set of oracles he turns to a more hopeful form of prophesy. Perhaps the angry God has entered a recovery program!

John 6:41-51: The scribes who copied this hundreds of times must have gotten things confused a bit themselves, just as the experts did here as they talked to Jesus. We are witness to a debate between priests and Jesus about who Jesus is and how He relates to the old prophets. We hear Jesus trying to speak in acceptable terms and referring to Isaiah without success. Finally, he must get frustrated as he compares himself to bread, which if eaten assures eternal life, a life where the face of God can be seen. Then they try to trick him by comparing his references to the manna of the Old Testament. Jesus tries once again to explain, finally saying that God has given Him to die so that others may have life eternal. As we study on, it appears that this conversation with theological persons only served to threaten them and their authority. We wish that this debate had gone better. They clearly decided not to believe this message from Jesus, but probably to save their own positions. I have never understood how folks who believed in an angry and punishing God would take the chance of making God angry again! Reminds me of how greed works. You know its wrong but you just can't help yourself.

2 Corinthians 1:23-2:17: Paul is tired of all the grief and sadness and so admits. He is a bit softer than other times in his life. He seems really sad about our sadness. He calls us to renew ourselves and to renew our true calling to speak on God's behalf without thought of profit. I also love his warning that we must outwit Satan. We never know his strategies, and sadness (self-pity) might be just one. It reminds me of *The Screwtape Letters*.

Eric A. Slaughter

Ezekiel 33:1-11
John 6:52-59
2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Wednesday, March 30th

“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” 2 Corinthians:1-3.

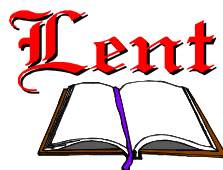
As someone who loves to read, and someone who writes--who wrestles with sentences, spends hours grasping for that elusive combination of words to convey a single image or idea with perfect clarity, I like this idea--that our lives tell the story of who we are, of who we love, of what we value and believe, as clearly, as unambiguously, than the words on a page.

The bible, of course, contains many letters, and taken as a whole, might be considered a single letter of epic proportions, albeit one with many authors. It is a letter of God’s love, and of collective yearning--of His for us, and ours for Him. It tells the story of our history together, of our evolving but imperfect knowledge of Him—of our movement toward Him, and sometimes our movement away.

This letter is sacred. It is immeasurably rich. Thank God, there are truths in its pages that are clear and unambiguous, truths to which I cling. Yet, rooted as it is in its particular cultural contexts, speaking as it does through the lives and individual lenses of its many authors writing across thousands of years, this letter of God’s love is at times opaque. It is occasionally bewildering, even for those of us who are moved to respond to the message it contains. There are many others, too, who are not bewildered--who refuse to read the letter, who leave its seal unbroken, thinking they know already what it says.

For this reason, I am comforted by the idea that we, too, can be God’s letters--that our lives can tell His story. Often enough, of course, we ourselves are bewildering and opaque. But I trust that if we love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength, and if we love our neighbors as ourselves, they will see His words inscribed, in between the lines of our lives, and they will read Him.

Nicki Gill



The Challenge of Faithfulness

Ezekiel 33:12-20
John 6:60-71
2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Thursday, March 31

Lent is the hardest time in the Church year. The journey of Advent is preparing for a celebration. The celebration of Christmas is sharing the joy of new life. Ordinary time is living life anew, confident in our faith. But Lent offers little to celebrate and a lot to ponder about the difficulties of living a faithful life.

It's common for people to make sacrifices during Lent. You may give up chocolate or sweets, try to kick your Starbucks habit, or turn around a relationship that's gone sour. In recent years, I've tried to take on something new, instead. One year, I was mindful to be more generous than usual. It's better to add joy to your life than to subtract a sorrow. But, still, it's a presents a challenge. I'd rather be preparing to celebrate Christmas or living with the assurance of grace than to be creating a new practice of faith.

The three passages in today's lectionary don't make Lent any easier for me. All three challenge us to live a righteous life. Yes, they all give us the hope of celebrating God's mercy. But only after declaring how difficult it is to meet that challenge and implying we'll see God's vengeance if we fall short.

We start with a passage from Ezekiel that presents a vision that appears to be unfair and unjust. Those who are wicked – to use the word that is repeated throughout the New Revised Standard Version – can earn their righteousness by turning to do what is lawful and right (verse 14). At the same time, those who are righteous will die because of their iniquity. We're offered the opportunity to repent by making everything right, but that's an awfully difficult thing to do, especially if we're only a sin away from leaving behind righteousness. This sounds like a merciful God, but one that is awfully difficult to please.

In the John passage, even the disciples say that Jesus' teaching is difficult. Jesus' response only seems to raise the stakes. He tells the disciples that the flesh is useless and that the only way to Jesus is by being chosen by the Father (verse 65). He makes no attempt to call back those who turn away from his demanding message. Instead, he ends the passage by reminding the 12 remaining disciples that they alone are chosen and even then, one of them is destined to betray him. This doesn't feel much like the Jesus who invites all to his table or offers mercy on the Cross.

Moving on to the 2 Corinthians, Paul tells us that we worship a God of mercy – one who has convinced us to move away from "shameful things." But this passage says that the mercy isn't available for everyone. For some, the message "is veiled to those who are perishing." They will be forever blinded and won't see the "light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." We can take comfort that God offers us this mercy, but we also fear that some among us can't see that mercy. And in our lowest moments, we may admit that we wonder if that our eyes are blinded to God's mercy.

These passages offer us three glimpses of God. All of them portray a merciful God. But in all of them, the mercy is difficult to see, earn, and keep. It's tempting to set aside these images and instead worship the triumphant Jesus of Easter morning. But the truth is: Lent doesn't offer us a choice. It asks us to embrace the God whose mercy is abundant and demanding at the same time. That's the challenge before us in today's passages and throughout the 40 days of Lent.

David Hoff

Ezekiel 33:21-33
2 Corinthians: 4:7-15
John 7: 1-13

Friday, April 1, 2011

The God's Speech

2 Corinthians 4: 10-13: Always carrying about in the body the liability and exposure to the same putting to death that the Lord Jesus suffered, so that the life of Jesus also may be shown forth by and in our bodies. For we who live are constantly being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be evidenced through our flesh which is liable to die. Thus death is actively at work in us, but life in you. Yet we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote, I have believed, and therefore have I spoken. We too believe, and therefore we speak.

The four verses of 2 Corinthians above led me in my meditation for today in connection to the words found earlier in 2 Corinthians 4: 7 where we are reminded that *"we possess the treasure in vessels of earth, that the grandeur and exceeding greatness of the power may be shown to be of God and not from ourselves."*

Each day we speak but yet how many of our words come from us, as open vessels allowing the Spirit to be present in our world, especially when our world could benefit from having the presence of God among us? Our day to day existence is so full with input. We take in sights, sounds, words, smells, physical sensations that we intentionally and unintentionally digest and respond to from our human vessels in the moment of our existence.

We constantly make decisions to speak, not to speak, speak up, and speak out. We are always hearing, listening, evaluating, planning, deciding and responding to the words from others. When are the words we say coming from us and when are the words we say or those of others The God's Speech?

When we are actively dying we are identifying those things that prevent the Spirit from being present and humbly letting go of those things that allow the Spirit to prevail. Strengthening our belief and living faithfully allows God's speech to guide the words we utter and the Spirit to be actively alive.

Prayer: We thank you God for the blessing of being your vessel. Help us to humbly allow your Spirit to be active and alive within us so that as vessels and through our belief may we allow the Spirit to be present and be our speech. Amen

Debby Dimon

Highest Authority?

Ezekiel 34:1-16
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5

Saturday, April 2, 2011
John 7:14-36

“Not until halfway through the Feast did Jesus go up to the temple court and begin to teach. The Jews were amazed and asked, ‘How did this man get such learning without having studied?’ Jesus answered, ‘My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.’” (John 7:14-17)

I had lunch recently with some friends that I met at a Bible teaching fellowship many years ago. The New Life Series, as the fellowship was known, met for more than 30 years and in its heyday was attended by a couple of hundred people. Its heyday coincided with the teaching ministry of a wonderful Episcopal priest named Terry Fulham, an intelligent, well-educated, thoroughly charming person, gifted in music and good humor and, boy, did he know his Bible! He taught with authority; about God’s grace, God’s purposes, God’s holiness, God’s love. He could take a verse or two of scripture and for an hour keep us all turning the pages of our Bibles as he referred to this and that passage. It took six months to get through Galatians. Terry chose to do God’s will (quite literally, in a little mantra he said each morning), and he spent time with God every day. He still does, in fact, reading the Bible daily even though his short-term memory is nearly gone. His teaching was in many ways formative for me.

The New Life Series was non-denominational, though most of the people who came were Episcopalian. Religiously, it was a pretty conservative group, and even though I grew more liberal as the years went by (thank you, New York Avenue), I retained a great deal of respect for the faith and integrity of many of those who taught, as well as an abiding affection for many of those who attended. Which brings me back to our lunch.

My three friends and I were talking about church, as we often do, and we got to comparing some of the views/teachings/practices of the Episcopal church and the Presbyterian church. We touched on communion and a few other topics and then Mimi asked about gay ordination. So, in this group of three other people, I did what I had never been able to do in the larger group. I said that I had helped lead NYA in our decision to become “More Light”. And Mimi’s response was that scripture is our highest authority. And as the words “Presbyterians hold that Jesus is the highest authority” were forming on my lips and my mind engaged itself in trying to marshal a coherent statement, Carolyn said that of course God loves everyone and the conversation moved on.

Today’s passage from John speaks to me about our continuing dilemma of discerning and doing God’s will, and in this dilemma recognizing what is authoritative for us. Jesus links choosing to do God’s will with the ability to discern the source of his authority and the truth of his teaching. Father Fulham has been an exemplar for me of a “teacher-like-Jesus”, but we would have disagreed about gay ordination. Scripture is indeed authoritative for me, but the six scripture passages that are most often cited as condemning homosexual practice are, to my mind, open to different interpretations and are in any case countered by Jesus’ welcome to all who believe. I came to the understanding that I have through prayer and study, in community with others, and through the witness of a member of our congregation whose life is a model of integrity, faith, service and love. It’s the best I can do.

Prayer: Gracious God, where we are in need of reform, reform us, and where we can speak truth, give us courage. Amen

Miriam Dewhurst

Speaking of Psalms

1 Samuel 16:1-13;
John 9:1-41;
Ephesians 5:8-19; Psalm 34.

Sunday, April 3

Perhaps we live in a time of deep incoherence and confused values covered over with great ads of our soon-to-be “good life” and promises from our image-savvy leaders. Since World War II America has been on an urgent, global shopping spree, perhaps the result of 50 years of endless, persuasive ads on TV. The result is that the USA has become the greatest consumer society in world history. Everyone has been urged to consume and to satisfy every material whim, even in war-time.

Does this buying spree mask our fears? Maybe people will get tired of retail therapy, of garages and workshops full of man toys, of huge houses and truck-like cars. Or, as I start to clean out the 20 years of accumulated junk in my basement, I wonder what made me buy all of it. There must be something more coherent, enduring and meaningful. I should simplify. In that spirit I offer the following psalm, which I found inspiring. My notes, which follow, are to suggest how the psalm speaks to me. As Paul says in *Ephesians*, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (5:19).” And perhaps slow down. Wait on the Lord. Enjoy your Sabbath.

(Psalm 34 is on the next page. ----->

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Upon rereading this psalm I noticed that it names the “LORD” 16 times and refers to the Lord (His, Him, He) also 16 times. Be alert; there are many facets to the Lord.

The faith journey or process of Psalm 34 begins with praise, which delivers the believer from his fears, and moves on to “tasting” (experiencing) the Lord. Then he can take refuge in and trust the Lord. When he stands humbly before the Lord, the psalmist teaches us about righteous practice. In this testimony and loving practice, there is comfort and connection to others and to the Lord. If we follow this instruction, blessings will come. We will be protected and redeemed by the Lord. This is the route to salvation in a deeply confused world of: “the afflicted ...shame...poverty...fears...enemies...lions...hunger...evil...lies... troubles... the brokenhearted...the crushed in spirit...broken bones” and broken lives. This psalm offers believers great hope in a dangerous, incoherent world. We are challenged to hold onto the Lord in the midst of all this confusion.

Prayer: Lord, we will thrive and find peace, if we come into Your presence with praise and heart-felt prayer. Halleluia.

Tom Dunlap

Psalm 34

- 1** I will extol the LORD at all times;
His praise will always be on my lips.
- 2** My soul will boast in the LORD;
let the afflicted hear *and rejoice*.
- 3** Glorify the LORD with me;
come let us exalt His name together.
- 4** I sought the LORD, and He answered me;
He delivered me from all my fears.
- 5** Those who look to Him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.
- 6** This poor man called out, and the LORD heard him;
He saved him out of all his troubles.
- 7** The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him,
and He delivers them.
- 8** Taste and know that the LORD is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him!
- 9** Fear the LORD, you His humble people,
for those who trust Him lack nothing.
- 10** Fierce lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.
- 11** Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you to stand in awe before the LORD.
- 12** Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,
- 13** keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from telling lies.
- 14** Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace *and pursue it*.
- 15** The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and His ears are open to their cry;
- 16** the face of the LORD is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.
- 17** The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them;
He delivers them from all their troubles.
- 18** The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
- 19** The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the LORD delivers him from them all;
- 20** He protects all his bones,
not one of them will be broken.
- 21** Evil will embrace and slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be desolate.
- 22** The LORD redeems His servants;
no one will be condemned who trust in Him!

Ezekiel 34: 17-31
John 7: 37-52
2 Corinthians 5: 6-15

April 4, 2011

You Don't Get It If You Don't Get It.....

Only a few sentences into Ezekiel and images were flying around in my mind: Wall Street, Mercedes, Porsches, St. Moritz.....Haiti, Sudan, the homeless, hungry children...dust, dirt, contaminated water...or no water. And the Lord God said, "I will judge between one sheep and another. You rams and he-goats! Are you not satisfied with grazing on good herbage, that you must trample down the rest with your feet? Or with drinking clear water, that you must churn up the rest with your feet? My flock has to eat what you have trampled and eat what you have churned up."

It is amazing to me that passages written thousands of years ago can conjure up modern-day applications so easily. How sad. For the wealthy, those who have so much, do they consider the consequences of how their wealth is made? Do they think about the trampled, the poor and forgotten when they spend their wealth? Is there ever guilt with having a "two Mercedes garage" (or more!) or a thought of how many people could be fed, housed, and clothed with the funds spent on cars, luxuries, and extravagant vacations and life styles? I wonder about those who lead and direct companies that foul our water, tear off mountain tops, leach our soil, contaminate God's earth. Is there any remorse or concern?

And God said, "Now I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean. You hustle the weary with flank and shoulder, you butt them with your horns until you have driven them away and scattered them abroad." Do company CEOs, officers, and Boards only look at "the bottom line" and feel no guilt turning their workers into the long-term unemployed? Do they have any concern for the lives they have turned upside down, or is it only the profit and loss statement and shareholders—and a Golden Parachute—that occupy their minds? I wonder... A pundit recently explained when asked about President Obama's efforts to convince the Chambers of Commerce to invest and hire workers that such international companies have no country loyalty. They go where costs are lowest, pay the lowest wages, produce where markets are profitable and accessible. Don't look back at the workers, small towns, and cities you have left behind....

As these passages explain, God is the judge but in Christ Jesus all of us are redeemed. In Corinthians, "To God our lives lie open, as I hope they also lie open to you in your heart of hearts....[Christ's] purpose in dying for all was that men, while still in life, should cease to live for themselves, and should live for him who for their sake died and was raised to life." Let us all remember to walk humbly with our God and to love one another enough to give of ourselves....not to ourselves.

Prayer: Dear God, keep us on Your path with love for others and actions to help those in need. Amen.

Marilyn J. Seiber

Surely The Messiah Does Not Come From Galilee

Ezekiel 36.8-21
2 Corinthians 5.6-15
John 7.37-52

Tuesday, April 5

These three passages touched me deeply. They show us that not only is God everywhere, he is for everyone and could be from anywhere.

In John, the crowd questions if Jesus is really the Messiah. I thought he was from Bethlehem and was a descendant of David. When the temple police question the chief priests and Pharisees, they become concerned that they have fallen into the proverbial Jesus trap as well, and inform them that certainly no prophet can come from Galilee. How often, do we see people that may not be our color, our socio-economic equal, or even from our neighborhood. How could this person fit in? Jesus certainly didn't fit in that day, nor did he for most of his life.

In 2 Corinthians, we are taught that, dare I say it? evangelism is everyone's mission. This is easy for some of us, as we are offering the peace during worship. We see the visitors and make it a point to introduce ourselves, welcome them, and ask them to come back. "Please take the tour. We're very proud of our church's history. There's a New Member Class next week; you should try to come and learn more about us". It becomes more difficult when we are away from 1313 New York Avenue. Often I find myself acting like a businessperson, or an out of town guest, or any number of different hats I put on. This is fine, I suppose, as long as we realize that God needs to come first, and He needs to be in my office, hotel room, friend's house, or wherever I find myself. I need to show people that I know the love of God and His family. Ultimately, we answer to God; not our boss, not our friends, or a stranger on the street.

In Ezekiel, God promises that if we follow Him, he will give us abundance. This is, at least for me, the miracle that is Christianity. There were certainly periods in my life when I was away from the flock. Church was someplace I went with my mother on Christmas Eve and Easter, and Sundays were spent doing the New York Times crossword. Well, have times changed! Being involved with God's family, and working with them, has given me more abundance, clarity, and purpose than at any time in my life. Thank you God!

This brings me to one of our greatest missions at New York Avenue: the Radcliffe Room. Often participants in this program take us out of our comfort zones and we don't know how to react. Surely Christ's followers are from Bethesda or Great Falls? Certainly not! We are all God's children and He cares about each and every one of us, from McLean to McPherson Square. We must not be Pharisees, questioning who Jesus or His followers are. We must heed what He teaches us, sharing our joy with the rest of the world, and enjoying our abundance.

Prayer: Loving and Eternal God, help us to recognize that all people are your children, and everyone deserves love and respect. Thank you for your word, and the life abundant you have given all of us. Help us in our mission as we prepare for the risen Lord. AMEN.

Jim Rhodes

Ezekiel 36: 22-32
John 8: 12-20
2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Wednesday April 6

Walking in the Light with a New Heart and New Spirit Reflecting the Majesty of the Lord

It's amazing what you can find on the internet. After reading the three passages for today, I pondered each passage, tried to discern common linkages, and determine if there was one overarching message that I could capture on one page. I came up empty. I then decided to Google each passage. I was surprised by the numbers of sermons, interpretations and commentaries that popped up for each passage.

Some of the interpretations of the Ezekiel passage focused on the terrible sin of Judah and the punishment that awaits those who forsake the Lord God. I understood those perspectives. But, the interpretations that caught my eye focused more on the promises being made by God. *"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from your impurities and from all your idols."* (v25) *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."* (vv 26, 27)

A "new heart" and "new spirit" is the promise of spiritual regeneration. What do we need to do today to be ready to accept this promise of spiritual regeneration? What *can* we do today to open our hearts in a way that allows the Spirit of Yahweh to fill us and reflect the majesty of the Lord as we walk our everyday lives?

Illuminating Testimony

The testimony of Jesus in front of the Pharisees is captured in verse 12 of John: "Then Jesus spoke out again, *"I am the light of the world. The one who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* While the passage goes on to discuss how the Pharisees quibble with Jesus over his credibility as a witness in his own defense, it is interesting that they do not question his underlying message – that he is the *"light of the world."*

Purposefully walking our everyday lives in a way that reflects the light of Jesus is certainly one way that we can open our hearts, allow the Spirit of the Lord to fill us and let all of those who we come in contact with witness the majesty of the Lord. Is this easy? It should be, but sometimes it's just easier to be closed up. Being closed up is the very thing that Paul warns the Corinthians about. He tells them that they should not receive God's grace in vain. Accepting the grace of God, but then walking our daily lives in a way that makes no difference, keeps us in darkness and reflects poorly on the God we purport to represent. Living our lives in the light of God opens our lives to the expansiveness promised by God and reflects the majesty of the Lord.

Prayer: Dear God, we praise you for your promise of a new heart and a new spirit. Help us walk in your light and reflect your majesty in all that we do everyday.

Hal Hiemstra

John 8:21-32
2 Corinthians 10:1-6

April 7, 2011

Do you ever have the feeling that you are not of this world?

The moments I wonder about my own worldliness (or lack thereof) are rather primal moments: my pure, heart-bursting joy in holding my nephew for the first time, or the first time my niece said my name; my sense of pain and injustice when someone I love is hurting, or ill, or dies. When I was 10 years old, a favorite new kitten was struck by a car and died. I prayed and prayed for that kitten to live again (it didn't). Where did I get the notion that kittens (and in years since, people), shouldn't die? And more so, where did I get the notion that I could do something about it?

I once read in a now-forgotten book that our outrage at death and injustice is proof that we are created for eternity, that we are born believing in something everlasting. We are not made for this current state of affairs, where love becomes hate and relationships are broken, between friends, lovers, families, and countries.

In 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, Paul says, "Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God and we take every thought captive to obey Christ."

There's something truly miraculous about a God who comes to live among us, yet isn't compelled by the same earthly laws of nature against which we all rebel. And yet, do we believe such redemption and resurrection is possible? Do we believe in a power that is able to "demolish strongholds" and if it wishes, bring kittens or people or a Messiah back to life? Paul predicts we don't, and urges us to contradict our own unbelief.

In John 8:21-32, Jesus speaks to followers, friends, and Pharisees, with mysterious references to what will happen to him. Although they've got a suspicion of his divinity, or at the very least his marked other-worldliness, they aren't quite ready to understand what this means, and what is to come for Jesus. He understands, though, and in his movement towards the cross, intends to connect our hardwiring for eternity with the possibility of experiencing eternity.

As we move towards Easter, what prevents you from believing in a God who's power surpasses earthly logic and understanding, and who from time to time seems more mysterious than real? Grapple with your doubt, turn it over, and choose to believe that our deep sense for eternity points us into the arms of an illogical savior.

Prayer: Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief.

Kate Hays

Watch Your Language!

Ezek. 39: 1-10
2 Cor. 10:7-18
John 8:33-47

April 8, 2011

During an animated dinner conversation some years ago, my mother averred that the use of profane language is the sign of a lazy mind. Until that moment, I had thought of it more as the sign of an inadequate vocabulary, albeit one that could be used quite creatively by certain wordsmiths. As a mature and independent daughter, however, I am willing to acknowledge that my mother did have a valid point.

Something or someone who is lazy is prone to idleness. Indeed, one who is lazy has little, if any, interest in much of *anything*. For a Christian, being lazy is a rather profane act (if one can even refer to “laziness” as an act). At all times, in all places, God expects us to grow and develop into better human beings, to live according to His will for us.

We often refer to the Bible as the “Living Word.” It is not sufficient for us to take this book off the shelf from time to time, read it, and not fulfill its message with our friends, family, and colleagues. We must remember it and work to live it out at all times, in all places.

By the grace of God, we are forgiven for our laziness. In gratitude, every day we should strive to practice what we preach—to watch our language, so to speak. I know that I can’t guarantee that I won’t slip up from time to time, but to be a better child of God (and my mother), I will try.

Prayer:

God, thank you for bringing us to this moment with You. Throughout our lives, may the words of our mouths and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. And when they are not, forgive us for not fulfilling your expectations for us, and give us the chance to do better the next time. Amen.

Sarah Grace Fuller Klyberg

Saturday, April 9, 2011: Know God and Keep God's Word

- Ezekiel 39:21-29
- John 8:47-59
- 2 Corinthians 11:1-6.

We human beings are a fickle lot, easily swayed by all that is not divine. Paul expresses this universal frailty in a letter to the church at Corinth: "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough." And this is true not only of false apostles, but also of the many pulls and distractions of our secular society.

The cost of our failure to adhere to God's will is high. In today's passage from the Book of Ezekiel, "the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity," and Jesus makes clear in the scripture from the Gospel of John that those who do not "keep my word" court death.

Jesus says, "Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God." When we fail to listen to God, God invariably withdraws or "hides," even while God remains ever present. God says of the Israelites, "I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their transgressions, and hid my face from them." When, angered by Jesus' responses, the Jews picked up stones to throw at him, "Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple." When we do not behave as though we are from God, God turns away from us until—perhaps because we feel the absence of the divine within us—we finally see and acknowledge the error of our ways and open our ears and our hearts and our minds, hoping to hear and understand and keep God's word once more.

Ultimately, however, God is merciful and desirous of a good relationship with God's human creation. Proclaims the priest and prophet Ezekiel, "Therefore thus says the Lord God: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I will be jealous for my holy name." Paul later reflects God's protectiveness of people when he writes to the Corinthians, "Do bear with me! I feel a divine jealousy for you..."

Part and parcel of knowing God and keeping God's will is remembering that all glory belongs to God. "I will display my glory among the nations; and all the nations shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them," God declares through Ezekiel. And in his exchange with the Jews in the temple, Jesus reminds them, "Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge.... If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, 'He is our God,' though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word."

And if we know God and keep God's word, what then? Nothing short of life everlasting. Jesus promises us as he promised those who heard him that day in the temple: "Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death."

Oh, God, thank you for the astonishing gift you have given us to know you through your son, Jesus. Forgive us when we forget that we are from you, and open our ears and our hearts and our minds to your word that we may keep it. In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord, we pray. Amen.

~Edith Holmes Snyder

Sunday, April 10, 2011

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 51
John 11:1-45
Romans 8:6-11

Transformations

Transformations, metamorphoses, resurrections may all be seen as themes within the scripture readings for today. The duality and dynamic tension between flesh and spirit which characterizes each of us as a human being is explored in some way in each of these passages. *Psalm 51* sings of a longing for the purging of the flesh and instilling a new and cleansing spirit, while *Ezekiel* relates the story of his encounter with God. This is the story of the valley of bones which most of us remember chiefly through the lyrics of the spiritual “Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Gonna’ Walk Around”. In this mixed metaphor (there are actually two types of transformations described –bones which assemble themselves and acquire flesh and breath and a mass resurrection in which bodies arise from graves), *Ezekiel* foretells that the Lord shall raise up Israel and restore it as a nation.

The passage from *John* is the familiar story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus. In my reading of it this time, I was struck by finding that Jesus was chastised by his loving and loyal followers on three different occasions for not preventing the death of Lazarus. Both of Lazarus’ sisters, Mary and Martha at different times gently rebuke Jesus for not arriving in time to prevent the death while the mourners who accompany them to meet Jesus asked why, if Jesus could open the eyes of a blind man, he could not have prevented a beloved friend from dying. Jesus proceeds to call Lazarus out of the tomb to prove to all that He is, indeed, the Son of God. Biblical scholars assert that this event and the recording of it by John prepares His disciples for His own death and resurrection. The short passage from Paul’s letter to the *Romans* asserts that “... to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (*Romans 8:6*)

All of these passages, of course, help prepare us for the celebration of the Resurrection marked by Easter Sunday. To me, these scriptures describe the constant tension within me and in my life between my spiritual goals and aspirations and the weakness of my “flesh” in being able to accomplish them. While our lives are marked by our sin and we are surrounded by pain, suffering and death, our flesh cannot seem to rise above it. In Paul’s words we are dead. Each of these scriptures in some way emphasizes that only by allowing the Spirit of God or Holy Spirit to enter our lives are we truly able to be transformed to love and to live.

Each of us can, on a daily basis, can be open to receive God’s transforming love. In the words of an old hymn, “We fall down, but we get up!” To paraphrase Roger’s reminder that our denomination’s tradition is “Reformed and Always Reforming”, we see that we can be transformed and always being transformed by the love of God. It is the triumph of spirit over flesh that Easter is all about. Lent is a season in which we prepare ourselves for recognizing this gift from God.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:10)

Spencer Gibbins

Ill Fares the Land that Flaunts the Law of the Temple

Ezekiel 43: 1-12 Monday John 9: 1-17 April 11, 2011 2 Corinthians 11: 7-15¹

Were we born blind? Can we not see that the passionate pursuit of material self interest is corrupting the social order? Particularly if we are currently not victims, do we not see the economic injustice that is so plainly evident: income disparity, asset disparity, taxation disparity and widespread unemployment and underemployment? Is not the evidence of sexual discrimination evident enough? Must so much of our public policy be founded on fear and willful distortion of reality? It is embarrassing enough if we limit the scope of our response to these questions to the United States or even the Washington metropolitan area, but what if we expand our horizon beyond our community and country? Were we born blind?

In the course of telling our respective introductory stories to each other, my new friend told me, "I am Puerto Rican. Politics is in our blood." Politics – the art of relating to one another in order to function as social beings – is likewise in our collective blood. In a democracy, I submit, politics is or ought to be of interest and concern to all the people, for we as a people have taken on the responsibility of promoting the common welfare. Ezekiel writes in the Priestly tradition as a member of the Babylonian exile community. Politics is his passion. He envisions a social order that honors and obeys YHWH with a symmetrical and rightly ordered community that justly balances social, economic and sexual power. He condemns a wide range of social behavior, using colorful, explicit language. Yet he also envisions a strongly, well built Temple, symmetrical in its dimensions, where the Glory of YHWH will once again "reside."

Today's scripture passages remind us how the prophet Ezekiel understands God's design and intent for us to relate to one another in order to function as social beings and how God wants us to open our eyes to the normative behavior God has designed for us because God loves us. Ezekiel thinks the Law of the Temple requires us to live with each other valuing purity, holiness, justice and economic equity. Jesus tells the story of restoring sight to the man born blind. Dare we understand this story to mean that God wants us to "see" what is going on around us in the world, yea even to envision with Ezekiel a strong, perfectly built Temple where God's Glory – the world God yearns for us to enjoy – is real? Is this the true Gospel Paul preaches to the Corinthians? Ezekiel may answer the question: if we are to participate in God's Glory, we, all of us, have to seek and promote a world with systems, laws, policies and practices that are fundamentally symmetrical and rightly ordered, justly to balance social, economic and sexual power.

We know that we need to remove the scales of blindness from our eyes – acquire self knowledge – then learn how to relate to one another, compassionately, even lovingly. Paul reminds us that God has taught us to love one another, and Jesus has empowered us to do just that: walk by faith with the Christ lovingly urging us on. Are we up to that challenge this Lenten season?

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, we praise and thank you for opening our eyes to your whole creation, for showing us how to relate to one another, and how to sustain the world that you have lovingly created for us to enjoy, all in your name and to your glory. Amen.

-- John H. Quinn, Jr.

¹ With Pauline humility, your assigned interpreter of these scripture passages acknowledges the difficulty of understanding them, in part individually and especially taken together. Moreover, the space available precludes any expansive examination or explanation of the texts. I am nevertheless grateful to Walter Brueggemann for his *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, chapter 16, "The Book of Ezekiel," for the survey review of the Book of Ezekiel. I am also grateful to the late Tony Judt for his recent book, *Ill Fares the Land*, for his vivid description of the social, economic and political conditions so prevalent in the United States and other "developed countries," particularly Western Europe. Is Dr. Judt a modern Ezekiel? I think so. That said, I remain responsible for the interpretations set forth here. Seminarians, in particular, are warned that citing Quinn on Ezekiel may adversely one's grade point average.

Tuesday April 12, 2011

Readings – Ezekiel 47:1-12 John 9:18-41 2 Corinthians 11:16-29

*B*asic *I*nstructions *B*efore *L*eaving *E*arth – BIBLE

Last week I heard this acronym in a speech at a retirement ceremony. It really made me think about God's word and how it needs to be instructional not just informative. As I read the passages for today, however I was struck at how complex and confusing passages in the Bible can be.

I recall teaching seventh and eighth graders in a church youth program many years ago that included some who did not come from church families. After struggling through the first Bible lesson, one of the students asked "Why doesn't God just tell us straight out what to do, these stories are really confusing?" I told her that God speaks to us all in different ways, and through reading, study, discussion with others and prayer, we all learn God's desires for us, we just need to be open to listen. In other words – the Bible is not always basic.

The three passages for today include visions from Ezekiel, questions by Pharisees on Jesus healing, and sarcasm from Paul. In each, I could not "speed read" to gain understanding, but rather had to spend a lot more time reading and rereading the passages. I really enjoyed the "battle of wits" between the Pharisee's and the former blind man and his family. Each side of the discussion was carefully choosing words and posturing so as not to be boxed in by the other. It sort of reminded me of TV courtroom battles such as "Perry Mason," where the good guys always win. I however did not feel moved by the spirit to write about this passage. The beauty of the lectionary is that there are three choices – like three strikes to get a hit in baseball.

Paul boasting on his own suffering is so out of character to the extent it is ridiculous. He even comments in the body of the letter on how difficult it is for him to continue writing as a fool. Paul's sarcasm is in response to false prophets who seek validity for their cause by boasting of their piety. Paul seems to be telling the people of Corinth that his love for them and desire for them to follow Christ should not be up for bids based on who has suffered the most. In a battle of suffering Paul would win, hands down, but it is not a contest and when put in those terms it is foolish.

Recently our family has had a number of health and other setbacks. In fact when asked by my doctor about stress, I made what seemed like a very long list of all the illness, death, and other circumstances that have been happening to our family and those we love. We have shared many of these including the illness of my sister with our church family and find great strength through your support and prayers. This passage from Paul has caused me to think about how blessed my wife and I truly are. I do not feel put upon or like there is a black cloud following us around. I know that it is not a contest to see who has dealt with the most suffering, and even if foolishly I thought it was, my list pales in comparison with Paul's.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel like the challenges in my life are great, remind me of those who have greater needs than I.

Clarke Orzalli

Daniel 12, 1-13
John 10, 1-18
2 Corinthians 11, 30-12, 6

Wednesday, April 13, 2011

It's certainly understating fact to assert that we are living in very distressing times. Prayers for our deliverance by angelic intervention must surely abound. Our own nation is struggling to sustain itself and, one can only pray, reinvent itself. Whether they are the most distressing times in the history of our country I can't confidently say.

Events in the Arab world over the past few weeks certainly show their hunger for justice and new human leadership.

I myself have felt disappointment and anger over our lack of progress toward peace and justice here at home. Where are the "wise leaders" who will guide us in the "true path that shall be like the stars for ever and ever"? Well might we ask as Daniel did, "How long will it be before these portents cease?" It's easy to imagine that the wise words I seek will truly be "kept secret and sealed till the time of the end". Who on earth must I be to be among the many who "shall purify themselves and be refined". I often feel distracted and purposeless and one of the unworthy destined for "the abomination of desolation".

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he writes humbly, "I know of a Christian who was caught up as far as the third heaven. And I know that this same was caught up into paradise". "About such a one as this I am ready to boast; but I will not boast on my own account, except of my own weaknesses."

Sigh. What would Jesus do?

What am I saying?

Doesn't Jesus, our "good shepherd", say, "I am the door of the sheepfold...anyone who comes into the fold through me shall be safe"..."I have come that [mankind] may have life, and may have it in all its fullness." "I know my own sheep and my sheep know me – as God knows me and as I know God – ***and I lay down my life for the sheep,***" and "there are other sheep of mine, not belonging to this fold, whom I must bring in; and they will listen to my voice. There will then be one flock, one shepherd."?

Yes. He did.

Lord help my lack of faith. Lift me up to be more your child. My heart is yours.

Nathan Moon
Lent 2011

The Clever Communicator

Thursday
April 14, 2011

Ezekiel 3: 4-11
John 10: 19-42
2 Corinthians 12: 7-11

I took away several thoughts from today's passages.

God's messengers have a hard job. Ezekiel must preach to the stubborn and hardheaded; Paul must make a fool of himself; and Jesus must flee and ultimately suffer crucifixion. No wonder messengers from God in the Bible continually lament, "why me?" Ezekiel, Paul and Jesus make clear that God has not given them an option to be His messenger. As God says to Ezekiel, "You will be so determined to speak my message that nothing will stop you."

God is devoted to our salvation. That God has sent messengers among us repeatedly is an indication of His steadfast devotion to us. God tells Ezekiel that "All of [the people of Israel are] stubborn and hardheaded, so I will make you as stubborn as they are." God could well have said, the people of Israel are stubborn and hardheaded, but I am more so!

God is inventive. The three messengers in today's scripture also demonstrate God's inventiveness. God does not send the same messenger or use the same approach every time. Instead, He sends a messenger, gains ground among us with a few more believers, and then tries again in another way. They rail at us in the street, as did Ezekiel; they try to persuade us with structured arguments, as did Paul; they appeal to scripture, as did Jesus--each using a different approach to present God's message to us. As psychologists have noted, repeated attempts to do the same thing while expecting a different outcome is madness, and certainly God is not mad. God knows that some of us will listen to Ezekiel, others to Paul and others to Jesus. Does God care whom we listen to or that we listen? Rather God's devotion to us is a welcome triumph of hope over (repeated) experience!

God continues today to send His messengers into the world among us. The historical time span of the Bible is several hundred years, during which period God repeatedly sends various types of messengers into the world. I believe that He continues to send them into the world today. Who are they? Where are they? What are they saying? Almost certainly, His messengers are berating (or admonishing), preaching and healing in the world. Are we listening?

New York Avenue Presbyterian Church—by its existence, in its policies, and through its missions—is bringing God's message to Washington, DC. And each of us, through our support and participation in the life of congregation are part of that message. That is the "feel good" part of this Meditation.

Each Sunday (or, at least most Sundays for most of us), we come to New York Avenue and hear God's message for us. I have been thinking about how I serve directly as God's messenger to the world on the other six days of each week. What are the active, direct ways that each of us reaches out to others with God's message?

Paul and Gwen RS Gebhard

Lazarus (of Bethany) Revisited

Lectionary: Jeremiah 31: 16-25
John 11: 1-27
2nd Corinthians 12: 12-21

Friday, April 15, 2011

The first lectionary passage is an example of a *Jeremiad*, defined by one authority as “a long literary work, usually in prose, but sometimes in poetry, in which the author bitterly laments the state of society and its morals in a serious tone of sustained invective, and always contains a prophecy of society's imminent downfall”. According to the author of the passage, Jeremiah, even though the Israelites have been taken into captivity in Babylonia and other countries, they “will return to their own land”. The meaning of the text regarding Ephraim is unclear to many biblical scholars and various interpretations exist. After a warning to *Virgin Israel* (Jeremiah's term for the Israelites prior to their captivity and dispersion), Jeremiah concludes on a conciliatory note:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “When I bring them back from captivity, the people in the land of Judah and in its towns will once again use these words: ‘The LORD bless you, you prosperous city, you sacred mountain.’ People will live together in Judah and all its towns—farmers and those who move about with their flocks. I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.”

The second lectionary passage recounts the well-known story of how Jesus restored *Bethany Lazarus*¹ from death to life. The passage has many symbols and references to the point that it almost invites interpretation. In researching it, I found a plethora of material on almost every verse with lengthy discussions on the meanings. The fact that Jesus did not hurry to Lazarus' deathbed but instead delayed for two days is one instance. Jesus explains the delay by saying “for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe”. The story emphasizes Jesus' command over life and death, and portends His own death and resurrection. It is a welcome entry in the lectionary pass-ages for Easter.

The third lectionary is extremely complex and takes the form of a letter from Paul to the church at Corinth, which he about to visit. One of Paul's objectives in writing this letter is to try to direct this community's attention away from so much of worldly possessions, and to encourage them to think faithfully, in the manner of Christ. He concludes that he will only set his miseries against the vain boasts of the false apostles, and with this also excuses himself, because by these troublesome boasts he was forced to speak as much of those things as he did. That is, because if his apostleship were subverted, his doctrine would necessarily fall. The meaning of this lectionary is probably clear only to biblical scholars.

Prayer: Dear Lord, give us the patience and will power to at least make an attempt to understand the meaning of the words of the holy bible. Humble us to look for help, knowing that the result may be a new insight into your message to us through the bible.
Amen

Bruce Whitener

¹ The term “Bethany Lazarus” is used here to distinguish this story from “Beggar Lazarus”, the parable told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.

“One, Two, Three” – a Re-Interpretation

Scripture: Jeremiah 31: 27-37

John 11: 28-44

2 Corinthians 13: 1-14

Saturday, April 16

It is hard, at least for me, to read these three passages and not come away thinking about the trials – and ultimately the rewards -- of parenting. While I hesitated at first to interpret the richness of these passages with such an “every day lens,” I was ultimately guided by my reassuring familiarity with God as parent, so I concluded I was on safe ground.

The themes I take away from these readings – taking responsibility, demonstrating and questioning authority, and the ultimate reassurance that God is at work in our world and in our families to keep us on the right path – seem like chapter headers for raising kids.

In our small household we have often used the “one, two three – you’re out” rule as a means of meting out discipline, and there was a time when it actually worked. The chant all too easily becomes a recitation of how many times you’ve “messed up” and, while perhaps forcing a break in the downward spiral, it doesn’t do all that much to restore us or redirect us to a better path. For the most part, it leaves us off where we started.

In the passage from II Corinthians, you can almost hear Paul counting a slow, determined, “one, two, three” to the struggling and unruly church in Corinth. Paul leaves little doubt but that the trajectory in Corinth is toward a showdown and he also makes clear that he is prepared to be the disciplinarian. But I also hear Paul saying that the power that has been delegated to him is far better used in the positive (to build up the church) than in the negative (to tear down the trouble makers). He implores and encourages the community to make themselves right, to be restored, empowered and to live in peace.” This is where my tired “one, two, three” rule and Paul’s really diverge. Paul ends with far more than a time out.

We are, of course, all growing – if not into adolescence as a certain 10 year-old in our home is – at least as a community of the faithful. As we grow, it’s both a comfort and a challenge to see our growth paths through scripture, as these passages have helped me to do. We are reminded to take responsibility and live in covenant. We are reminded that we all question the authorities of this world, and many times for good reason. It is reaffirmed for us that there is only one authority that can raise us up from tombs of darkness. And we are comforted in the knowledge that God is at work in us and around us to restore us and lead us toward lives lived in community and peace.

Dear God:

ONE: Help me better understand the responsibility, and opportunity, I have to live in covenant with You and with your world.

TWO: Help me to be open to challenges – and to challenge – when the world is not right. And help me to recognize where ultimate authority is found.

THREE: Be at work in me as an instrument of peace and comfort in my family, my community and this world. Amen Jeff Moore

April 17, Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Matthew 26:14-27:66
Philippians 2:5-11

Peter Speaks

Here I am, Lord,
Here I am.
I'm at your door at 4 a.m.
Waiting for entry and a
Wood stove beside the cold red wall.

You know, don't you, how I love You,
Slow and forgetful and weary as I am.
Your tongue, ear, back, cheeks, face
Sustain, listen and offer so my
Heaviness can receive your poured out Self.

Never will I forsake You,
I'll be there to the end, I will...
I'll walk with you.
If this lump of flesh reflects some far off, or imminent, Grace,
Let me be as You.

The time is nigh, the night has come
And I want to stay with you awhile, just awhile longer,
Where no explanation or qualification or small talk is required.
We'll share a loaf and a cup and some stories with our friends,
The way memory proceeds to the end of time.

Here I am, Lord,
Here I am.
I'm at your door at 4 a.m.
Waiting for entry and a
Wood stove surrounded by a warm hearth.

Inside I hear singing, Lord, there is singing!
Men and women come early to wait with you
Not lullabies, see, not hushed and bleary eyes...

But tongues, ears, backs, cheeks and faces
Sustaining, listening, offering and awake.

Lord, *awake!*

Kathryn Sparks

Isaiah 42:1-9

Monday, April 18, 2011

John 12:1-11

Hebrews 9:11-15

A NEW WAY OF THINKING AND DOING

Through Jesus Christ we find a new way of thinking and doing. It is, in many ways counterintuitive and not consistent, with our natural tendencies. As fallen human beings we have a tendency to sin. Instead of facing punishment for our sins, we are redeemed through our Christian faith.

Throughout the Gospel we often hear about the unexpected (consider, for example, the story of the prodigal son). In the story at the beginning of chapter 12 in John, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with very expensive oil, wiping the oil on Jesus with her hair. This is a very extravagant display and appears wasteful. We might expect Jesus to condemn this action. In fact, the disciple Judas asks, "why isn't the perfume sold and given to the poor?" But, Jesus replies "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." John 12:7. Jesus's speaking of his death must have seemed strange (and unexpected) to the disciples at the time, though we know they remembered it after his crucifixion.

Who would have thought that the Messiah would be condemned as a criminal and crucified? We might expect the savior of the world to be a powerful worldly king, right? But Isaiah speaks of a servant, and a quiet one, at that. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice." *Isaiah 42:1-3.*

The New Testament teaches us not to accept the expected ways of this world, but to have faith in Christ above all. It was a different way of thinking for the early Christians, particularly the Jewish converts, and it still challenges us today. In Hebrews, Paul is telling the Jewish community that sanctification through animal sacrifices has been superseded by the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ. "For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship of the living God!" *Hebrews 9:13-14.*

Contemplating these passages makes me want to pause before acting on my initial judgments and impulses and consider a new way of thinking and doing that puts my faith in Christ above everything else. Prayer: "Dear God, Please give me the insight to your plan for me through faith in the example of your son, Jesus Christ."

Adam Bain

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

April 19, 2011

Upside Down

I saw pineapple upside down cake on a menu recently – a cake I remember from childhood. It comes out of the oven, lightly browned, deceptively plain; then a quick turn transforms it into a cake covered in toasted brown sugar and fruit, sometimes with a bright maraschino cherry in the center of each golden pineapple ring.

The passages today all seem to be about turning upside down. About looking at the world, at our lives, at our assumptions from a new perspective.

The Isaiah passage transforms Israel's suffering and servanthood into the way Israel can become "a light to the nations." The normal order will be turned upside down:

"Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

In John, Jesus explains the seeming contradiction of his death leading to God's glory:

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

But is everything better upside down? Does this mean all suffering is good? We've all heard stories of how horrible tragedy leads someone to a new mission in life. But we've also heard of suffering that results in bitterness, withdrawal, and hatred. Roger often says that it is in the broken places that God can be found. I don't think this is because suffering is necessary, but because in suffering many of our worldly assumptions – our dependence on ourselves, our acting as if we are somehow in control – are swept away.

In Corinthians, Paul turns worldly wisdom upside down. According to one commentary, he wanted to remind the Corinthians that the message of the cross was not just one more piece of worldly wisdom to live by. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" he asks. "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

The cross challenges the world's assumptions, and through the cross, we can see new perspectives. We can put ourselves in new situations, question our assumptions, even give turning upside down a try, to better see God in the world.

Dear God. Help me to see things from new angles, to turn my assumptions upside down, so that I can better see You in the world.

Meg Hanna House

Wednesday, April 20

Isaiah 50:4a - The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary.

Hebrews 12:1-3 (parts) - Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...Consider [Jesus] who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

When asked the question, "Whose life do you admire; to whom do you look as an example of a life well lived?", what faces pop into your mind? While many people spend their lives striving for earthly treasures - fame and fortune - rarely are the "rich and famous" held up as exemplars of a life well lived. In our heart of hearts we know that the cloud of saints is made up of those who "ran the race with perseverance", who did not "grow weary or fainthearted", who used their "educated tongue to sustain the weary".

When I think about those whom I admire, in every case the person would probably be surprised to be on my list. They are ordinary people with extraordinary ability to look away from self towards the needy others. They instinctively know that what they try to hoard they will lose and that only what they give of themselves will remain in the end. Their purpose is not for personal recognition, but rather just to be about the work of God here on earth. They continue to inspire me even after their deaths. They have taught me the lesson that character is what you do when no one is watching. They do and were able to embody the prayer of St. Francis:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

May we all strive to live out this prayer.

Sally Molenkamp

Humility, Hospitality, and Hope

*Mandatum novum do vobis: ut diligatis invicem:
sicut dilexi vos, ut et vos diligatis invicem.*

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you should love one another.*

- John 13:34

Exodus 12:1-14
2011
Psalm 102
John 13:1-15, 31b - 35
Corinthians 11:23-26

Thursday, April 21,

Tonight, the lights go out. We know the story. As darkness falls upon us, we will enter into the sacred period of the Christian calendar known as Triduum; the Triduum, the three days in which Christians witness and recall the betrayal and the denial, the arrest and the crucifixion, the burial and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In these three days, a myriad of emotions will come over the entire Christian community as it eagerly anticipates Easter morn and the risen Christ.

But on this day, Maundy Thursday, it is important that we not jump ahead. It is important that we take time to reflect on the life – indeed, the words and the deeds – of Jesus of Nazareth as he began to enter into those final days. And, then equally important, it is imperative that we try to figure out how we ourselves might more intentionally enter into the Gospel story and the Christian life.

John Dear, the noted Jesuit priest, social activist, and writer, in his book, *Transfiguration*, recalls a conversation that he had with fellow priest and peacemaker, Daniel Berrigan, when they first met. Wanting some advice about what lay ahead for him as a Jesuit entering into the priesthood, Dear asked, “What is the point of all this?” The answer, Berrigan noted, was seemingly simple. “All we have to do is make our lives fit into the story of Jesus”, he responded. “We have to get our lives to make sense in light of the Gospel.”² *All we have to do is make our lives fit into the story of Jesus.*

In today’s Gospel reading, we find Jesus performing a radical act. Jesus – teacher, healer, prophet, peacemaker – humbles himself before his disciples and washes each of their feet, one by one. It is radical in that the disciples’ master, the disciples’ lord is humbling himself and offering an act of hospitality that normally would be undertaken by a servant, by an orderly. It is radical in that Jesus does not discriminate. Jesus washes all of the disciples’ feet; all of their feet even though he knows that one is about to betray him and one will deny knowing him. In this most trying time of his life, Jesus offers no litmus tests; only a simple act of hospitality (in a manner that Mary, sister of Lazarus, had recently performed on him) and a simple commandment, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another.” Radical ... but don’t we expect that of Jesus? Jesus is offering his disciples ... his community ... and, indeed, even us ... humility, hospitality, and hope. And then he charges us to do the same. Just like God unconditionally loves all in the world. So too are we to do.

A number of years ago, I attended the memorial service for Bruce Davie, a stalwart of New York Avenue and, if I may say, a friend. In the course of wonderful words and fascinating stories, I learned that this high ranking civil servant in the Treasury Department and professor at Georgetown University regularly ate his

² Dear, J. *Transfiguration: A Meditation on Transforming Ourselves and Our World*. New York: Image Books. 2007. p. 1.

lunch on a park bench sharing conversations with, and getting to know, those living on the streets. At a time when Bruce could be eating at the most elegant of restaurants in the District, he was offering humility, hospitality, and hope. At a time, when Bruce could be more concerned with his social status, he was following the commandment of Jesus to love one another. At a time, when Bruce could be following the ways of the world, he was making his life fit into the story of Jesus. Let us be like Bruce. Let us be like Jesus.

Loving and compassionate God. On this Maundy Thursday, grant us the wisdom and the fortitude to make our lives fit into the story of Jesus. Make us more humble ... more hospitable ... and more hopeful to those around us, to neighbor and stranger alike. Help us better to carry out the commandment that Jesus offered his disciples; the commandment, "just as I have loved you, you should love one another." Amen.

- Mark A. Zaineddin

Friday, April 22, 2011

Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

John 18:1-19; 19:17 - 30

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

This day in the Christian calendar is the most forlorn and solemn that we observe. We come to the end of 40 days of Lent, looking forward to the most important and meaningful celebration of Easter, but we still must go through Good Friday. It is known as Mourning Friday or Black Friday in some countries, and doesn't that seem a more appropriate name as we read through today's passages?

We read Psalm 22 and hear David use the words we associate with Jesus on the day of his crucifixion: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Even David and Jesus question God in their despair. What possible hope can there be for a mere mortal like me? In Isaiah we hear more familiar words: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." More failure.

John's telling of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus shows the anger, fear, confusion, denial, and helplessness felt by his followers. It's too awful, too sad to imagine how Peter and Mary and the others must have felt that day. They didn't know that this would be the foundation of the church. They only knew that their teacher and leader was gone.

Then we get to Hebrews. Its author, able to look back on the events of the crucifixion and knowing how it turned out, tells us that "Jesus offered up cries and supplications, with loud cries and tears," but that he "learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." We know the sadness of this day, but our faith teaches us why *Good* Friday is the better name for this day.

Lord, on this day when your son's sacrifice is utmost in our minds, we thank you for his tears and despair, for his willingness to suffer so that we might laugh and rejoice. Amen.

Kris Golden

Lenten Meditation

Saturday, April 23, 2011: Exodus 14:10-15:18; Matthew 28:1-10; and Romans 6:3-11.

While writing this meditation, I have been listening to National Public Radio (NPR). I find that NPR's reporting on current events in the Middle East and North Africa resonates strongly with those described centuries ago in Exodus, Matthew and Romans. Against a background of strife and great danger, the passages in Exodus and Matthew paint in vivid terms the people's fear, anguish, and trepidation. In much the same way, NPR's news reports on February 27, 2011 painfully outline the continuing violence, killings and terror now experienced by protestors in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia.

In Libya, Colonel Muammar el-Gaddafi's foreign mercenaries have used indiscriminate machine gun fire over the past weeks to kill a significant number of Libyan protestors who oppose his dictatorship, seeking instead freedom and a new democratic government. Libyan demonstrators in the Eastern part of the country now control the region and have set up a new government. Although Gaddafi has continued to hold Tripoli, according to tonight's reporting some of his security forces are switching sides and joining the opposition west of Tripoli. In one of many tragic twists, some opposition members have themselves murdered foreign oil workers from Sub-Saharan Africa, mistaking them for mercenaries. These fleeing workers died simply because the color of their skin led Libyans to conclude they had to be Gaddafi's foreign soldiers.

In Tunisia, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi stepped down earlier today as a result of the past month of continuing protest demonstrations in Tunis as well as outrage at yesterday's killing of five demonstrators. Tunisians welcomed this resignation based upon their concern that the Prime Minister had been a crony of ousted President Ben Ali's.

Despite the momentous victory won by non-violent Egyptian demonstrators in ousting President Mubarak two weeks ago, protestors returned to Cairo's Tahrir Square this weekend to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq. The Egyptian public views Shafiq as merely proxy for Mubarak. The public also protests the military's continuation of Emergency Law. Soldiers and military police have retaliated by beating a number of protestors and burning down their sleeping tents and supplies.

Juxtapose today's tumultuous reports from the Middle East with those found in the passage from Exodus. In the Exodus verses, we find the Israelites in the midst of their flight from Egypt, looking back in horror as they see the Pharaoh and his horsemen in hot pursuit. The Israelites severely reproach Moses, blaming him for putting them in such imminent danger. They even assert that it would have been better to remain enslaved in Egypt "than to die in the desert." The Israelites further chastised Moses, asking with near sarcasm whether a "lack of gravesites" in Egypt had caused him to subject them to what they believed to be a looming massacre.

Turning to the verses in Matthew, we find Mary and Mary Magdalene nearly frozen in fear as they encounter an angel "like lightning" in snow-white garb, seated upon the stone he has rolled away from Christ's tomb. The Roman guards at the tomb are so terrified that they themselves are akin to lifeless corpses. When the angel says that Christ has risen and instructs the women to go and tell the disciples, the women's response is joyous, yet their fear persists. Even when the risen

Christ greets the women in person and they “hold his feet in worship,” he has to remind them to fear not.

Despite this dread and fear, the verses in Exodus and Matthew give us hope and great news. In Exodus, Moses tells the Israelites to keep faith that God will fight for them. In turn, the Lord tells Moses to keep the Israelites “moving on,” knowing that Egypt’s Pharaoh with all his chariots and horses are soon-to-be vanquished. In Matthew, the angel tells Mary and Mary Magdalene that the Jesus who was crucified has risen from the dead, “as he said.” Christ himself tells the women to put aside fear and go tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee.

The passage in Romans gives us the greatest news of all. It reminds us that because we have been “baptized in Christ Jesus,” we are united with him in his death and resurrection. According to Romans 6:5: “*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.* In my eyes, the most beautiful verse is Romans 6:11, which affirms: “*In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*”

As I continue to ponder the passages from Exodus, Matthew and Romans in their profound beauty and mystery this Lent, I will continue thinking of the people in the Middle East and North Africa. I know I join NYAPC’s community in lifting up the people of the Middle East, North Africa and throughout the world seeking freedom, democracy, peace and love.

Marsha E. Renwanz

“Salubong”

Matthew 28:1-10

Sunday, April 24, 2011

“After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” (Matthew 28:1-7)

There is a tradition repeated every Easter by devout Roman Catholic Filipinos: the *salubong* (literally meaning “meeting”). Just before dawn – at 4 a.m. – men gather in one part of town following a procession with the statue of the resurrected Christ; in another part of town, a procession of women, led by a statue of the Virgin Mary veiled in black. The two processions then converge on the plaza in front of the cathedral or church.

There, a young girl, dressed as an angel is hoisted up (nowadays they use a crane) and lifts the black veil of the Virgin Mary so she sees the resurrected Christ. Tradition holds that the veil must be fully lifted up otherwise the coming year will be full of misfortune. All the while, the choir sings a chorus of alleluias. Then the two statues and the people enter the church for a one-house mass.

There is of course, something wrong with the way the *salubong* is celebrated. There is no record in the Bible that the Virgin Mary actually met Jesus Christ after He rose from the dead or that she was the other Mary who visited the tomb and met the angel. Somehow, it was reinterpreted and the Virgin Mary now meets Jesus in the *salubong* held in the Philippines.

But no matter how the story of the resurrection is reinterpreted, one truth remains immutable: Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed! Even if the Virgin Mary’s black veil is not fully lifted, and misfortune may follow, the truth remains that after three days of mourning, Christ is risen as has been foretold by the prophets.

Let us rejoice this Easter day; let us commit ourselves to another year of service, of worship, of praise to our Lord, the Risen Christ.

Our Father, remove from us the sophistication of our age and the skepticism that has become, like frost, to blight our faith and to make it weak. Bring us back to a faith that makes people great and strong, a faith that enables us to love and to live, the faith by which we are triumphant, the faith by which alone we can walk with Thee....Lord we make this our prayer. Amen. (By Dr. Peter Marshall, from The Prayers of Peter Marshall by Catherine Marshall)

Adlai J. Amor