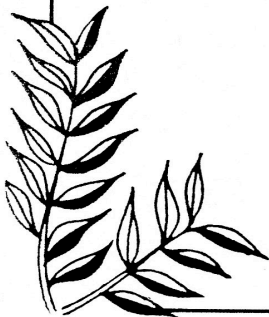


A Season of Reflection

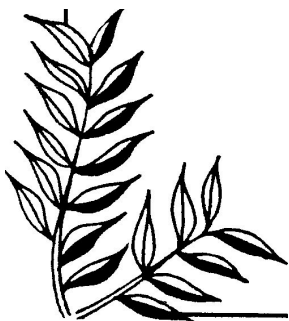
Lent 2012

The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.
(www.nyapc.org)



2012 Lenten Calendar
(Sunday Services at 8:45 and 11:00)

Wednesday, February 22	Ash Wednesday Service, 7:00 pm, Sanctuary, Supper-PMH, 6-6:45 pm
Sunday, February 26	First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 4	Second Sunday in Lent, Communion
Friday, March 9	Dr. Brian K. Blount, McClendon Scholar in Residence, 7:00 pm NYAPC
Saturday, March 10	Dr. Brian K. Blount, McClendon Scholar in Residence, 8:30 am – 2:00 pm, Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church, 1219 New Jersey Ave. NW
Sunday, March 11	Third Sunday in Lent, Dr. Blount teaches at 10:00 am, preaches both services, NYAPC
Sunday, March 18	Fourth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 25	Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, April 1	Palm Sunday, Communion
Thursday, April 5	Maundy Thursday Service 7 pm, Sanctuary (Communion), light Supper, 6 pm, PMH
Friday, April 6	Good Friday Service, 12 noon, Sanctuary
Sunday, April 8	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



Wednesday, February 22, 2012: Ash Wednesday

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17a
Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Today marks the beginning of the season of Lent, a time when God calls us to return, refocus, and prepare. Today's Scripture verses remind of the tangible manifestations associated with this liturgical season ("fasting," "weeping," and "mourning") and the commands and concepts that shape our preparation for Jesus' death and resurrection: "sanctify," "reconcile," "salvation," and "righteousness."

This day, and this season, is not simply about the actions we perform—abstaining from soda or sweets, perhaps, or bearing the mark of ashes on our forehead—but rather about the motivations behind them. God tells us to "rend hearts not clothing" (Joel 2:13) and to "beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them" (Matthew 6:1a). As I read this passage, I kept picturing photographs of Vice President Biden with ashes on his forehead from recent Ash Wednesdays and wondering how to avoid this hypocritical public piety on a day when many Christians' faith is most tangibly apparent. Upon rereading though, I noticed that the author seems much more concerned about the *intention* behind the action than the action itself, given the repetition of phrasing like "so" and "in order to."

As we engage in spiritual practices this season, giving something up, taking a discipline on or participating in a Vespers service, let's challenge ourselves to question our motivations and assumptions. Do we seek to become reconciled through these spiritual disciplines? Do we seek to use these practices as a "weapon for righteousness" (2 Corinthians 6:7b)? And if these practices can be used as weapons for righteousness (a somewhat difficult metaphor for a congregation of peacemakers!), how do we wield them wisely? For me, the answer seems simply rooted in God's call: "return to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12).

Of course, the tricky part is discernment—which path should we take to return to God and how do we sort out all the conflicting factors and pressures? I enjoyed a recent New York Times article that profiled Cornell University's "Legacy Project", where over 1,500 older Americans were interviewed for practical life advice. The article noted: "Not one person in a thousand said that happiness accrued from working as hard as you can to make money to buy whatever you want." Instead, as the Legacy Project participants made clear, our "treasure" (Matthew 6:19-21) shouldn't be about a fixation with material wealth and success. Knowing that "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," should push us to follow our values and our vocational calling... and re-invest our time and talents in pursuing the "day of the Lord" (Joel 2:1b) with hopeful expectation and a penitent heart.

Prayer: O God, be with us in our journeys this Lenten season. Guide our feet that we may find the paths that return to you, guide our spirits that we may be mindful of our intentions and assumptions, and guide our hearts to seek the "treasure" of your Kingdom. Amen.

Kristin Ford

Ezra 10: 1-17
Luke 18: 9-14
Titus 1: 1-16

Thursday, February 23
Don't Get Defensive!

Foreign Wives and Children rejected in Ezra:

²Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra, saying, 'We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. ³So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.'

Paul's letter to Titus:

⁵I left you behind in Crete for this reason, that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: ⁶someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. ⁷For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; ⁸but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. ⁹He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.

I struggled mightily with these passages. First you have a group of men whose return to a right relationship with God is made dependent upon their casting out their wives and children. Then Paul sends Titus on the quest for church leaders, leaders who must meet some pretty steep expectations. "Man!" I thought. "What's a girl got to do to get right with God on these guys terms? And who are they to be setting terms?" I was, in a word, unconvinced these guys knew what was what when it came to having a relationship with God.

I came back to these passages a few days later, looked at the notes I'd jotted down, and had to laugh a bit at my own reaction. It was so very human. Faced with stories of others being judged, I'd become defensive. A re-reading of both passages made me see these people were not just passers-by on the street, being judged and railed at by holier-than-thou zealots. The people of Ezra sought a return to the fold. Titus sought church leaders. These people would all be seeking a closer, stronger, more honest relationship with God. They would be seeking direction. The passages were not telling a story of judgment, but instead an uncomfortable truth: you cannot keep God first in your heart and last in your life. To find the joy and peace of God's grace, you must surrender your life to it.

Prayer: Dear God, let me hear your Word in the spirit it was sent – nurturing, teaching, consoling, forthright, honest, and above all, truthful. Michele Holland

Return to Jerusalem, Discipleship's Cost, and Church Doctrine

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Luke 9:57-62

Titus 2:1-15

Friday, February 24, 2012

The oldest of the scriptures cited for today opens with the recollection by Nehemiah of a key event preceding his return from Babylon to Jerusalem. Travelers from Judah conveyed to him reports of the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem and other difficulties experienced by those who had been left behind when many were forced to move to Babylon. He characterizes these events as a reflection of the Lord's admonition to Moses that if his people did not honor the commandments, statutes and ordinances set down by the Lord they would be scattered. Nehemiah then notes that the Lord had also said to Moses that if sinners resumed obedience to the Lord, they would be gathered together at the special place chosen to revere the name of the Lord. Nehemiah confesses that he has sinned, impliedly promises to return to the Lord's commandments and prays for an opportunity to return to Jerusalem. In the closing line of the passage, Nehemiah notes that at the time he received the news from Judah, he was cupbearer to the king of Babylon, clearly inferring a standing that would facilitate his return.

The closing passage from Chapter 9 of Luke is a brief recital of the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus meant leaving the amenities of life and not even taking the time to honor one's deceased father with the traditional burial obligation or the time to say farewell to the living members of one's family.

The stated identify of both the author and the recipient of the Letter of Paul to Titus as well as of the related Letters of Paul to another co-worker, Timothy, are now generally considered by historians to be fictitious by reason of having been written after the deaths of the named individuals. To enhance the puzzle, the Letter to Titus states that Titus has been left in Crete to organize some churches that Paul had recently established, yet neither Acts nor Paul's other Letters mention a mission to Crete. And the Letter to Titus, including the cited Chapter 2, is much more concerned with organizational directions than is typical of Paul's other Letters. The Sound Doctrine that Chapter 2 urges readers to teach covers older and younger men, older and younger women, and slaves, though it is silent on any directions to masters. And it reflects anticipation of a long wait for the return of Jesus as contrasted with the near-term anticipation of Acts and Paul's other Letters.

Prayer: Creator God, keep us mindful of the perseverance and messages of those who preceded us in our faith history. Amen.

Robert L. Doan

Nehemiah 2: 1-20
Luke 4: 1-8
Titus 3: 1-15

A Christian's Use of Authority

In Luke's story of Christ's temptation by the Devil soon after the beginning of Christ's ministry, the Devil appears to Jesus and offers Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the world. Wow! The quid pro quo is that Jesus worship the Devil. Jesus of course does not even consider the offer, saying:

It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.

The preceding part of the story gives further context: the Devil tauntingly challenges Jesus to prove his power by turning a stone into bread. After all, Jesus is very hungry after 40 days praying in the wilderness, but he does not take up the Devil's challenge.

Jesus does not take up the Devil's offer to *display* power (transforming stone) nor to *take over* ruling power (over all the world's kingdoms). He just does not embrace the Devil's definition of power, and you might say he rejects our typical human power-definition also. Jesus has his own, more complex definition of power, which we spend our lives trying to learn.

As a 21st century Christian, I want to embrace Jesus' definition of power, i.e. the power of love (that active verb of love) like making moral decisions, promoting justice, loving my neighbor as myself, and loving myself too. But I *do* want to have authority too. Not authority over all the kingdoms of the world, mind you, but authority as a tool for making change in the world. This feels like it's part of taking responsibility for living a fully moral life. The challenge, I suppose, is to earn the right to that authority through the exercise of love, and not through a deal with the Devil. If only I can always figure out where the Devil lies ...

Prayer: God, help me not just to avoid the Devil by hiding out in safe territory, but to wrestle with the responsibilities of an active Christian in this world, while holding on to Jesus' alternative definition of power.

Martha Davis

Sunday, February 26

Mark 1:9-15 Genesis 9:8-15
Psalm 25:1-10 | Peter 3:18-22

All four gospel writers recount Jesus' baptism—each in his own way, with different emphases. Mark tells us that as Jesus rose from the baptismal waters, he saw *“the heavens torn apart,”* and he heard a voice from heaven saying, *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* To call this an affirming, magnificent moment only hints at the glory Jesus must have experienced. But he had no time to savor it, no time to explain anything to the bystanders, for *“the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness”* where he was tested by God, tempted by Satan, and threatened by wild beasts.

It's an almost irrefutable principle—that we cannot go from emotional high to emotional high, from mountain top to mountain top, except by way of the wilderness or, at least, through a significant drop in altitude. Great moments are likely to be followed by painful times, temptations, loneliness. How do we handle silence, diversions, confusion, and outright attacks?

From Matthew's and Luke's gospels we know that Jesus responded to Satan in the words of the Scriptures, and the words of today's Psalm can give voice to the cries of our hearts: *To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me . . . Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long . . . Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord! Good and upright is the Lord . . .*

Only after his time in the wilderness was Jesus clear about his calling and clear about his message. The time had come for the world to hear and believe the Good News—God had a better plan, a better way, a better life than people had understood or seen before. God's love was far greater, far more freeing, and far more costly than anyone had imagined.

What is it time for in our lives today? The passage from I Peter tells us to be *eager to do what is good* and to be ready to respond, gently, when asked about the *hope* we have in Christ. We are not expected to live faithfully on our own, for as God saved Noah together with his family, God gives us companions for our journeys. And as angels ministered to Jesus, God will send angels to minister to us, though we may not recognize them at first. Then there are those unexpected times when the clouds burst open, giving us reminders of God's power, unconditional love and commitment to us, as unexplainable and awe-inspiring as a perfect double rainbow stretching clear across the sky.

Linda LeSourd Lader

Putting God (and Ourselves) to the Test

Nehemiah 4: 1-23
Luke 4: 9-15
1 Peter 2: 20-25

Monday, February 27th, 2012

As we enter the liturgical season of Lent, many of us will use this time for reexamination, reflection, and rejuvenation. Individually, or as part of a community, we'll take a step back and ask ourselves a number of questions: questions like, "Where have I been and where am I going? Who am I? Whose am I? Am I moving towards or away from God?" At the same time, some of us may give up material or nonmaterial things that get in the way of living authentically; others may adopt new practices that reaffirm the Christian life, evidenced in the teachings and actions of Jesus. Indeed, just as Jesus so often did, hopefully we'll find the value of taking a step back from our hectic and hurried days to appraise, to pray, and to rest.

And, yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that even with the best of intentions -- even during Lent -- we at times fall short. We become preoccupied with the here and now, with the mundane and inane, and with societal expectations and norms, many of which seem to conflict with our ethical and spiritual values. We're tempted. Tempted by money; tempted by power; tempted by societal status; tempted by pride. At times, it seems too easy for us to separate Sunday from the rest of the week; too easy for us to compromise one value for another. Living the Christian life is not without effort. Decisions in life are difficult; often there are no real good answers to pressing dilemmas.

In some respects, it is refreshing to see that even Jesus himself was tempted. And it is also refreshing to see how he addresses these temptations. In today's Gospel reading, we find Jesus tempted by the devil. In the verses immediately preceding Luke 4:9-15, Jesus is commanded to turn a stone into bread; for by doing this, the devil reminds him that his deep hunger will be relieved. But Jesus sees through the devil. Using scripture, he retorts, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" *How often do we seek to have our economic or material needs met at the expense of other needs?*

The devil then addresses Jesus a second time suggesting that, if Jesus will only worship the devil, all glory and authority will be given to him. Again using scripture, Jesus notes, "Worship and only serve the Lord, your God." *How often do we put other individuals, other things, even ourselves before God?*

And then a third time, in today's reading, Jesus is tempted. This time, he is told to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to see whether, indeed, God will save him. This time Jesus replies, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" *How often do we seek to test God? How often do we suggest that if only God does (fill in the blank) for us, we'll (fill in the blank).*

Following the way of Jesus -- indeed, being like Jesus -- is not easy. And yet that is what we are called to do. Thank goodness for grace. Thank goodness for the season of Lent; the season of reexamination, reflection, rejuvenation, and action. Thank goodness.

Loving, compassionate God. As we enter and move through this liturgical season of Lent, let us take the time to reexamine our lives, to reflect upon our ways, and to rejuvenate our bodies and our souls. Let us acknowledge the temptations, large and small, that we face each and every day. With patience, and humility, and grace let us seek to be like Jesus. And let us not test you, but rather love and worship you with all our hearts, our souls, our strengths, and our minds and, then as commanded, let us love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

- Mark A. Zaineddin

Salt and Light

Nehemiah: 5: 1 – 19

Tuesday, February 28, 2012

Luke: 4: 16 – 21

Romans: 5: 1-8

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

- Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no Land. (Nehemiah 5: 14 – 16)
- Recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. (Luke: 4:18)
- We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that 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. (Rom 5:3-5)

As I grow as a Christian I want to know more about the meaning of my life. Not because I'm not happy with my current life. I'm very happy with my married life, work and Self-Study that I can keep on with a full time job. I think my life is well balanced now, at the same time I feel something is missing. Because it's mostly for myself.

At the beginning of this year, Tara mentioned "shifting ourselves" in her Sunday sermon, and this touched me. Shifting myself, so my life will not only fulfill my own needs, but others' also. What I do is not to please people but to please God. It requires redefining and revaluing the things in my life.

God poured his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. God wants us to love one another, with patience and encouragement, to recover the sight of the blind, let the oppressed go free. He wants us to be the salt, the light of the world.

I know what God wants from us, but isn't that too big, too heavy of duty for a girl like me?

I do think so. But I believe God will give me the strength, the power and the wisdom when I need them.

Prayer: Thank God for your grace and love that you have given to me. Please show me how to live out the grace and love to encourage, influence and serve others around me. Teach me what it truly means to be the light of the world, and help me to daily manifest your light wherever I go. Amen.

Shuxian Li McKenna

A fatal countdown, but to the Greatest Sacrifice of all

Nehemiah 6:1-19

Luke 4:22-30

Galatians 3:2-9

Wednesday February 29, 2012

I feel privileged on two counts. First, for the second time in a row, I have the honour of contributing to the devotional of our church. Secondly, because my contribution falls on special day that only happens every four-year period just in case you did not notice. Talking about the content of my contribution, even this time, I had to overcome the same challenges that arose with the previous devotional, after taking cognizance of the biblical passages I was assigned to ponder on: try to find the likely missing link between two texts that respectively narrate the conspiracy against a king's cup-bearer who took upon himself the duty to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem and purify the Jewish community back then, the rejection of the Messiah by His own hometown's fellows and an epistle focused on the justification by faith for a Lenten devotional. As several days of writer's block went by, it eventually became crystal clear to me that the quest for the presumed missing link I had assumed was either beyond the scope of my theological proficiency or I was twisting myself in knots. Like squaring a circle. Then it occurred to me that, since we are gearing up to commemorate the Death and Resurrection of the Messiah, to think over the way He spent his days before the D-Day (D stands for Death!). How did He cope with that fatal countdown to his impending death, the bleak 'prognosis' upon his life given by his Heavenly Father? Did He keep a diary where he jotted down what He would do if He were given more days or his regrets for the things He should have done better? Did He spend those last days drawing up the list of his debtors and the people who have wronged him and pass it down to his loved ones to make them pay back what they owed Him? Did He spend those last days withdrawn from the society, surrounded only by His loved ones, enjoying every single minute as the most precious of all, to make up the lost times He could spend with because He was busy dealing with His other life's solicitations like a job? Did He set all His affairs in order before the D-day? Did He set out a series of 'Last Lecture' on reaching one's childhood dream like that professor of Computer Science at a famous university after being diagnosed with a terminal illness? No way! He kept doing His business until the last second. His diary was His Father's Word and Will for Humanity that He followed through faithfully. As paradoxical it might appear He gave His life for His debtors. He spent His last day with His enemies and those who have wronged Him because they were also His loved ones. He even forgave them. He gave us the best lecture of all by showing us His love through His sacrifice upon the cross. He lived His passion till the end and accomplished His utmost life's mission despite all the sufferings He went through.

Prayer Heavenly Father, as we prepare to commemorate the Resurrection of The Messiah, through which You make all things new, may You mend our unhealed wounds, rejuvenate our unfulfilled dreams and replenish our unmet expectations with Your everlasting Peace and unfailing Hope. In the name of Your Beloved and Risen Son Jesus Christ. Amen

Youssooupha NYAM

Nehemiah 8: 1-18
Matthew 5: 17-26
Galatians 3: 10-18

March 1, 2012

The Joy of Learning

Today's passages from Nehemiah, Matthew, and Galatians all talk about learning and adhering to "the Law"—the book of the law of Moses, God's law, the Book of the Law—all with a slightly different take, perspective, and time. But the common thread seems to be learning the law, knowing the law, acting on the law.

When Ezra, the priest and scribe, went before the people ("those who could understand") gathered in front of the Water Gate (and it is hard not to link the law and Watergate in our recent history), the people listened intently, attentive, enraptured, entranced, weeping. There is an image in this passage that is familiar: people focused on a speaker or teacher who is standing at a raised lectern or stage, as they listen to learn and understand something new, taking notes, mental or written. What is it about people's hunger to learn, to be informed, to understand? I think new learning brings new energy, excitement, joy. And that is what Ezra and the Levites said to the people, "Don't be sad...Joy in the Lord is your strength." Nehemiah said, "Day by day, the book of the law was read."

And this, perhaps, is part of our lesson, our "take-away." The more we read and study the Bible, as a daily practice, the more we learn and move toward understanding, the deeper our relationship with God, and the more joy we experience in our lives. But Matthew extended the idea of not only keeping the Law, but also teaching others, mostly by action. Jesus' teaching in Matthew is that of forgiveness and peace, forgiving one another—a 'peace and justice' that begins at home with ridding oneself of feelings of anger and animosity, of making amends, of putting the Law into practice. In Galatians we are told that "life is justified through faith" as well as following the Scripture, hence extending the learning and making amends to also having faith.

When I read these passages, I can't help but think of New York Avenue and all the learning, studying, and teaching that goes on: the many Adult Christian Education classes, the Bible studies, meditation gatherings, Presbyterian Women's Circle Bible study, the children's Sunday School, Rev. Gench's preaching and leadership in creating ways to teach theology, Community Club. All these are efforts to expand learning, to better understand God's world and God's Law, and to interact with our fellows in joy and peace. In God's law and teaching, we live life to the fullest in joy and peace.

Prayer: Dear God, make us continuous learners of your Law and Word, to seek the joy of learning, sharing, and reaching out in love.

Marilyn J. Seiber

Nehemiah 9: 1-15
Matthew 5: 27-37
Romans 4: 1-8

Friday, March 2

In Romans 4, “The Example of Abraham,” Paul writes that Abraham did not win favor with God through his actions, but through his faith.

“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

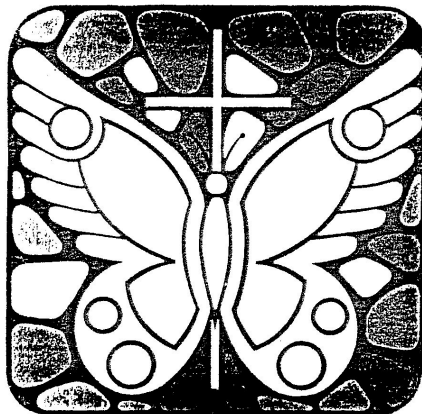
For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’”

Similar to Paul’s argument in Romans is Nehemiah 9 verses 7-8. These verses are part of Ezra’s prayer leading the people of Israel in confession and worship.

“You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham;
And you found his heart faithful before you, and made with him a covenant...”

Matthew’s reading presents Jesus’ teaching on Adultery, Divorce, and Oaths. Jesus states the historic law in each lesson, “Your have heard that it was said,” and continues with his new teaching, “But I say to you.” The new teachings each emphasize that there is more involved in a life with God than just going through the motions.

Adam McColley



Nehemiah
Mark 8:22-30
Romans 4:9-15

Saturday, March 3

We humans have an ingrained tendency to divide ourselves into groups of “us” and “them”. Maybe it is one of our legacies from the Fall. It is everywhere. Its more innocuous manifestations include school and sports team rivalries, but it only takes a moment to think of some of the very many ways in which this tendency leads to all manner of perverse and destructive thoughts and actions. Even so, the tendency is sometimes difficult to resist.

Perhaps we can understand those early Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile believers had to be circumcised before they could become Christian. For hundreds of years the Jews had understood themselves to be the children of Abraham, the one nation that God had raised up, the one people to whom God had given the Law and the promise of blessing. The Law revealed what it meant to be righteous and the sign of belonging to that nation, to that covenant, was circumcision.

In the Romans passage for today, Paul argues that Gentile believers need not be circumcised to be included in the Christian community. Paul sees a parallel between Abraham and Gentile Christians. Abraham believed God, put his trust in God, and acted on his faith, leaving his homeland for a promised land years before God told him to become circumcised. Paul argues that the faith of Gentile Christians is the same as the faith Abraham exhibited and that the righteousness that God attributed to Abraham on the basis of his faith, God attributes to Gentile Christians as well, on the basis of their faith in Jesus as the Christ. This righteousness cannot be achieved: it can only be conferred.

We are seeing the tendency toward division at work now in the PC(USA) where some of our more conservative brothers and sisters are looking into ways of distinguishing themselves from the rest of the denomination now that the prohibition against ordaining gay and lesbian Presbyterians has been removed. There is even some talk of forming yet another Presbyterian denomination. Those of us who have been advocating for the removal of the ban and those who have long supported it are all sincerely striving toward righteousness as we understand it. We all want to do what is right and just. We all want to conform to the revealed will of God, to what is true. It's just that we can't always agree as to what the will of God is. Paul would feel right at home.

Gracious God, we try to live as righteous people and yet so often we fail. Thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ, who is our righteousness. Help us to follow humbly where he leads. Amen

Miriam Dewhurst

Genesis 17:1-10, 15-19
Psalm 150
Mark 8:31-38
Romans 4:16-25

March 4, 2012

These passages all surround the theme of faith. Romans has always been my favorite, giving straight advice that I can relate to. The other three verses help set the context for the Romans text, including a break in the theme with Psalm 150 of complete Praise to God. It is good to give joy and praise to God!

With the naming of Abraham and Sarah, this passage of Genesis marks the covenant that God enters into with Abraham, Sarah and Isaac to be the ancestors of a multitude of nations. Abraham must keep the covenant with God by ensuring all males are circumcised.

Psalm 150, I highlight this text using the King James Version because I love the power in the language (do you remember the song-and-response, Halleluj-Halleluj-Halleluj, hallelujah; Praise yes the LORD!):

- 1Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.
- 2Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness.

In Mark, Jesus predicts his death, saying he must be killed and will rise again in three days. Peter rebukes him, and Jesus in return rebukes Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus then preaches of the way of the cross, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

How wonderful to take up our cross and follow Jesus!

Then Romans. "16Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham."

The Romans passage discusses Abraham's faith in God. That through faith he made a covenant with God, even in the midst of 100 years of age. When doubt was so close at hand that he laughed out loud when God first said that his wife would bear him a son.

"24for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

Lord, may we have faith like Abraham; may we pick up our cross and follow you. Amen

Karen Milam

Involving God in our Choices

Nehemiah 9:26-38 Matthew 5: 38-48 Philippians 4:4-9 March 5, 2012

In reading the Bible, I always am amazed at the applicability to my current life situation. Usually I don't even have to stretch to gain insight and perspective on issues that I have been wrestling with. For some – it would be easy to say that the Bible is written like many horoscopes – so general that it applies to everyone in every situation. To those who analyze how our brains work, it just may be the way we synthesize information and group what we are reading with what we are thinking and fabricate a relationship. I believe however, that the Holy Spirit working within us, allows us to discern the word of God, as well as how it applies to our own situation. It is not coincidence – it is intentional and we need to allow ourselves to hear.

When asked to write an entry for the Lenten devotional, I said yes immediately, saying I had a topic I could write about. The process of preparing a devotional or sermon had been a wonderful growth experience for my faith in the past and I was looking forward to this opportunity. Miriam assigned me the lectionary day where the epistle reading does not exist, saying “pick something” that will work with your message. I thought that would make the assignment easy – but given the realization of my first paragraph – that God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit – has made it more difficult. Somewhat like the game Jeopardy – where you have to come up with the question given the answer. I was worried that I would be trying to shape the outcome rather than God shaping the outcome.

I recently received my orders to retire from the Navy this summer when I will have over 34 years as an officer. Since my father retired from the Navy 3 months before I went to the US Naval Academy, my entire life has been about serving our Nation in the Navy. With transition out of the Navy, comes great anticipation as well as anxiety. What to do? Where to live? Can I find a job? Should we buy a house? Questions that seem routine to most, but many of them have been answered for me as I have responded to the 18 change in duty orders received in my career. This time we have lots of choices, and lots of concerns on making the right ones.

A few years ago, I preached a sermon at one of our many churches. The sermon was about being called by God, and I discerned that rather than fretting over whether we have made correct choices in our lives, we need to listen to God and allow him to use us as a disciple for Christ in whatever line of work we are pursuing. I thought that for this Lenten meditation, I could just revise my thoughts from a few years ago and share them. That would have been too easy and would not have been near the learning experience I needed.

The issue today is about choices and I know I need to listen to God in making those choices. In the past the issue was making the most of the choices I had made, which I admit may not have always had reflection and prayer as part of the process. This time I want to make choices involving God. The children of Israel had lots of choices as well in our reading from Nehemiah. God always has the best in store for his people. All we need to do is turn to him and follow. I want to make sure I am not “stiff-necked and refuse to listen”(vs 29). The gospel reading from Matthew can be very upsetting if one is comfortable in life. Jesus commands us to go beyond our comfort zone. The familiar passages of “turn the other cheek” and “love your enemies” need to be more than just statements – they need to be actions. For me in my upcoming choices – I need to get out of my comfort zone and not just “love those who love me” but rather those who do not.

When given the option of choosing an epistle, I looked for a single passage that had all the answers, one that would be a checklist of things to do, or one that gave me clear insight into what to do next. As I reviewed references looking up “how to choose a job/career/home” - I came up short. Even internet searches cannot substitute for reflection and prayer. As panic and deadlines started to set in, I stumbled across the epistle lesson, which not only applies to this devotional, but also to my future choices. I know that with “prayer and petition, with thanksgiving” that God will be part of my choices and knowing that, I will make the correct ones.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I know that you have the best in store for your children, and all we need to do is follow you. Help me to turn to you first, not just to pick up the pieces when I make a poor choice. In Jesus name I pray. AMEN

Clarke Orzalli

Tuesday, March 6, 2012

Nehemiah 12: 27-30 & 43-47

Matthew 6: 1-6

Hebrews 11: 8-12

What Does God Want From Us? Reverence for the Past, Selfless Obedience, and Faith for the Future

On this Lenten day we have three passages of scriptural instructions: Nehemiah's recounting of how post-exile Israel dedicated the rebuilt wall of Jerusalem by reviving the rituals commanded by David and Solomon; Jesus' teaching about selfless service and worship in the Sermon on the Mount; and the account of Abraham and Sarah's faithfulness to God's promises in Hebrews. What are the themes or lessons here as we contemplate the annual celebration of Christ's death and resurrection?

In Nehemiah 12, the people celebrated the dedication of the wall with joyful music, thanksgiving, and the singing of psalms. The focus is on looking backward to historical traditions and rituals, with a recommitment to sacrifices, offerings, and purification rites. The offerings were carefully collected and managed, with great emphasis on this stewardship responsibility, and care was taken to ensure that the musicians and others who performed received compensation.

In Matthew 6, Jesus urges us to shift our focus away from ourselves and toward God, exhorting us to be sure that our charitable deeds and prayers are carried out in a manner that avoids public self-promotion. He warns against behaving like the "hypocrites," who want others to know all about their good deeds and their prayers, in order to show off their self-righteousness.

In Hebrews 11, the author addresses the first-century Jewish Christians, who were discouraged and under pressure to renounce their faith in Jesus. Focusing on hope for the future, the epistle reminds them of the faithful obedience of their ancestors – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. In response to God's call, Abraham left his home for an unknown land. He followed faithfully, even though he had no idea what the future would bring. In the same way, the scripture encourages us to let go of our fears and our need to try to control our lives, and instead to place our faith and trust in God's plan for our future.

As we celebrate Easter, our focus on the rituals and traditions of the past reminds us of God's promises, fulfilled and yet to be fulfilled, and renews our faith and hope looking forward.

Help us, oh God, to live faithfully, with joyful abandon, in obedience to you. Teach us to let go of our desire for control, of our desire for recognition and praise, and our desire to know what the future holds. Inspire us to make that leap of faith, as we surrender our future to you, and leave ourselves in your loving hands.

Betsy Merritt & Jim Bird

"Remember Me"

Nehemiah 13:4-22
Matthew 6:7-15
Hebrews 11:13-19

Wednesday, March 7

"Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service."
Neh.13:14.

"The [Nehemiah Retail Center] was given a name it could not possibly live up to: Nehemiah rebuilt a blighted Jerusalem." Outstripped, Oct. 17, 2008, Washington City Paper, by Jason Cherkis.

On one of my exploratory walks after I moved to DC in 1992, I came across the Nehemiah Retail Center on 14th St., NW between Belmont & Chapin streets, and wondered about its name. I had only a hazy idea of what was in the book of Nehemiah and vaguely associated the strip mall center with some of the re-development in that area funded by religiously based nonprofits.

But, according to Cherkis, the director of the nonprofit behind the Center was a man of suspect integrity, the Center was poorly designed, and it failed to attract healthy businesses. It is described in the article as "a symbol of lame government-spurred development" and was torn down a few years ago. It is being replaced with a privately funded multi-family apartment development.

I assume – charitably -- that at least some of those responsible for the Nehemiah Retail Center were motivated by a desire to rebuild a blighted area. But good deeds require more than good intentions. Nehemiah himself not only had good intentions but was effective and, as detailed in today's reading, took many steps to rebuild Jerusalem.

And Nehemiah recognized that more than good deeds were essential for his salvation:

"Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love." Neh. 13:22.

Dear Lord, thank you for your steadfast love. Help us to use the abilities you have given us to respond to problems with good intentions and wise actions. Show us the steps to follow and guide us in the many decisions good deeds require. Amen

Kirsten Kingdon

Jeremiah 22:13-22
Matthew 21:12-22
I Corinthians 2:1-9

Thursday March 8, 2012

Reflection on Matthew 21: 12-22

A bad morning for Jesus

I am married to a woman with substantially more knowledge of the Bible than I have. A few years ago, I asked her offhand whether Jesus ever lost his temper.

One of the passages she mentioned in answering me was the first part of today's Matthew reading, in which Jesus loses it with the moneychangers in the temple, and turns over their tables.

After the incident, Jesus performs miracles for the blind and the lame with faith, and has words with the angry church leadership before leaving town for the evening.

Verses 17-22 read:

He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there. In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" Jesus answered them, "Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."

This passage is alternately comforting and troublesome for me. I have discovered that there is an interpretation out there that Jesus' cursing the fig tree symbolizes his dominion over the natural world, questioning whether figs were even in season, and even suggesting that this action is a symbol for the end of most-favored-nation status with God for Israel.

These interpretations cut little ice with me. I am more drawn to the idea of a Jesus still troubled from the events of the previous day, and maybe even a bit spiteful that he will have to walk farther without a morning meal, and he curses the tree because he is still hungry.

As a parent, I'm often thinking about impulse control, and I'm aware that Hungry, Angry and Tired are a trifecta of preconditions for acting inappropriately. I see in this passage a demonstration that Jesus is saddled with the same inappropriate impulses as the rest of us. A suggestion that he acted out of spite even once amplifies my regard for the rest of his works and his mission.

From this perspective, I am more troubled with Jesus' response to his disciples. An assertion that power is available through faith has less power for me a fuller picture of the humanity of Jesus.

Kendrick McCabe

Lenten Meditation

Friday, March 9, 2012: Jeremiah 23: 1-8; Matthew 21: 33-43; and 1 Corinthians 1: 20-27.

These texts underscore God's clear rejection of lofty words and the manipulation of language, which fosters competitiveness and worldly power plays. Moreover, "...*God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty,*" (1 Corinthians 1: 27). The contrast could not be more striking between the image of God evoked during recent national political debates and that conferred by respective biblical authors of Jeremiah, Matthew and 1st Corinthians. The texts clarify that God empowers through the kinds of self-giving love, which builds community as opposed to division and strife.

What has captured my imagination in these texts is the repeated reliance on social outcasts, the weak and the most vulnerable to shine a spotlight on God's great gift of self-giving love. Such actors play pivotal roles throughout the teachings and ministry of Christ, whose own crucifixion affirms God's self-giving love. During this sesquicentennial commemoration of our own Civil War, I keep turning to Harriet Tubman as the personification of such an extremely vulnerable outcast. Her absolute faith in God supported and spurred her to tireless and unyielding acts of self-giving love as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, a spy and nurse to African American soldiers during the Civil War, and the founder of a home for vulnerable, elderly people.

Born into slavery on Maryland's Eastern Shore in 1822, Harriet Tubman was prohibited from learning to read or write – as were her parents and all slaves -- and hired out to do hard labor at the age of five. Biographers surmise that even though she lacked access to regular church services, her parents taught her all the Bible stories they knew. Harriet routinely joined her father in fasting on Fridays, which was the practice of Methodists and Catholics at the time. Harriet's faith in God continued to grow. After a grievous head injury from an anvil thrown by an overseer, she began to have dreams which brought her closer to God. Some have described these dreams as narcolepsy or epileptic seizures, yet Harriet related them as clear messages from God. Even when she could not interpret them, Harriet believed their meaning would become clear in God's time. As she said: "*I was always talking to the Lord.*"

Harriet saw her recurring, vivid dreams of women dressed in white pulling her across a river as a clear signal she was meant to escape from slavery. With a strong voice, Harriet signaled her husband and family members she would escape by singing "*I'll meet you in the morning, I'm bound for the promised land, On the other side of Jordan, Bound for the promised land.*" With the North Star as her guide, Harriet fled on foot by night some ninety miles through swampland. She risked her life so many times by returning to lead family members and other slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad that she became known as Moses.

When the Civil War broke out, she told others: "*The good Lord has come down to deliver my people and I must go and help him.*" She led a Union raid with Colonel Montgomery and 300 African American troops on the Combahee River, which rescued 800 slaves and much property. She also traveled incognito to Beaufort, South Carolina where she served as a Union spy and nursed wounded African American Union soldiers. Quaker Thomas Garrett said: "*I never met with any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God,*" than Harriet Tubman.

I thank God for the amazing gifts of self-giving love and courageous anti-slavery activism of Harriet Tubman. I look forward to pondering her life and legacy in front of the stained glass window at NYAPC, which includes her image. During this Lenten season, Harriet Tubman's profound and abiding faith in God provides an important model for us all.

Marsha E. Renwanz

Saturday, March 10, 2012

Jeremiah 23:9-15

Mark 11:15-19

II Corinthians 13:2-9

Examinations are a part of life. Pop quizzes, take-home tests, and end of the semester exams were common in elementary and high schools. The Socratic method was one of my least favorite methods of examination in law school. And the constant questions to be answered at work are yet another source of being tested.

Paul exhorts us in II Corinthians 13:5 to “examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?” Some examinations are harder than others, and this examination is a difficult one. Lent is a traditional time for such reflection, and it is difficult to admit that you’re not measuring up to what you should. But at the end of this reflection, we get to experience the grace of Easter – a reminder that we aren’t perfect and never can be, but that God still loves us despite our imperfections.

As the oldest child in my family, my parents always stressed to me that I was setting an example for my younger siblings. Some days that felt like a lot of pressure to be perfect! But we don’t have to be – what a relief! We are reminded by Paul that God is our strength. It is He that is perfect, and when we listen, He will guide us down the right path. And lest we forget, when we don’t follow his guidance, we will be corrected. But most importantly, we will be FORGIVEN. It is often hard for my imperfect mind and heart to understand God’s true forgiveness. Why do I deserve such mercy and love from the Perfect Being when I am so imperfect?

That is when I look back to the teachings of Lent –that when we reflect and repent – God will forgive us and show us that Jesus Christ IS in each of us.

To borrow from a recent prayer of confession:

Merciful God, we come to You not because we have it all together, but because we are not perfect. We cannot live up to the way Jesus leads us. Forgive us, and make us more like Christ in all we say and do.

Leigh Hildebrand

Wanderings

Exodus 20-34; Psalm 103; John 2:13-22; Romans 8:31-39.

Sunday, March 15, 2012

In January 2012 a huge blue “Tent of Dreams” blossomed in McPherson Square, raised by the Occupy DC protesters (See <Wikipedia.org>). That got me thinking about tents and their uses. How necessary they are after a disaster or to get homeless people off the street in winter. How for 1000’s of years nomadic tribes lived only in tents. (St. Paul was a wandering tent maker.) How all the liberated but homeless Jews wandered in the Sinai wilderness for 40 years and lived only in tents. Then Moses set up a “Tent of Meeting” where he prayed, praised and argued with God before there was a Temple or even a Promised Land in sight.

Some background: Moses’ tent was outside the Hebrew camp, in a special place, set aside for these special meetings. This is where Moses was commanded by God to “chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke (Ex 34:1).” Dutifully Moses went back up and carried these blank stone tablets up Mt. Sinai and the Lord wrote (burned) the Ten Commandments into them. Moses stayed on the mountain for 40 days. What a mountain top experience with the Lord! It changed the world. (So too Jesus stayed in the wilderness for 40 days before he began his ministry (Matt. 4:1-11)). In this holy time of Lent (40 days) how can we too draw near to God?

What did Moses do before he began his sojourn on the mountain? He hears the Lord say, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin (Ex 34: 6-7).” These gracious words are repeated in Psalm 103, a powerful praise psalm and the one assigned for today. In a classic spiritual discipline, *Lectio Divina*, this psalm may be read as a way to draw near to God. Read it out loud and hear how compassionate our Lord is. We have been given the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s teachings so that we may understand and draw near to the Lord.

Deeply involved in Psalm 103 is the Hebrew concept of fear of the Lord, which could be translated as “awe.” (“Fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7).” The ancient insight is that if a believer fears the Lord, then what else is there to fear? Once you stand in awe of this eternal Lord, there is no greater power to fear. (“Nothing in life nor death...can separate you from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39).” Truly you are blessed and have nothing else to fear – for the Lord “crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, He satisfies you with good as long as you live, so that your spirit soars like an eagle (Ps 103: 4-5).” The psalm continues with its good news.

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will He harbor His anger forever;
He does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is His steadfast love for those who fear Him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has He removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:8-12)

This is what Moses discovered on his mountain retreat; he returned with the Ten Commandments and saved the Hebrew tribes from their pagan ways (calf worshipping) and their wilderness wandering. The Laws were revealed and God’s “awesome” covenant is given (Ex 34:10).

Prayer: Praise the LORD, O my soul. (Psalm 103)

Tom Dunlap

Jeremiah 23: 16 – 24
Mark 12: 38 - 44
Romans 8: 18 – 25

March 12, 2012

Blind trust. Discernment. Risk. Financial and spiritual vulnerability. And hope. All three passages challenge us to push these boundaries to the limit.

Jeremiah warns of false prophets “who buoy you up with false hopes . . . they say to those who spurn the word of the Lord, ‘Prosperity shall be yours’; and to all who follow the promptings of their own stubborn heart they say, “No disaster shall befall you.” And it’s true. All the trappings of our material world promise prosperity, and make us desire it. We want to serve others, but we want to live by our own schedules, and love whom we want to love. I think of all the promptings of “my own stubborn heart,” wondering which ones are the most stubborn.

It’s easier to believe the parts of Christianity we want to believe. God’s true word, though, comes “in a scorching wind . . . it whirls around the heads of the wicked.” God does not let us get off easily, and expects us to wait and listen.

Mark’s text echoes Jeremiah’s: We are to discern false leaders, and resist yearning for money and power as the solutions to our problems. In fact, if the Occupy movement wanted support from the Bible, here it is! Mark paints the scene of Jesus watching as people drop their money into the temple treasury chest. “Many rich people were giving large sums . . . then a poor widow dropped in two tiny coins, together worth a farthing . . . This poor widow has given more than any of the others; for those other who have given had more than enough, but she, with less than enough, has given all that she had to live on.”

So true “wealth” means generosity of spirit, and vulnerability to what might happen if we give away all we have. Mark’s words carry an age-old tension. We want financial stability and what it brings. Wearing new clothes makes us feel better about ourselves; driving a newer car means we’re providing for our family’s safety. How much is enough, to provide for us and our families? How much can we give and still survive with a bit of comfort? It’s hard to have the kind of trust and faith Jeremiah and Mark ask for. Can we really assume that in our society we, the widow, will be cared for if we give everything away?

Paul frames this vulnerability differently, as hope for a time when we will be free and happy and partners with God. “For we have been saved, though only in hope,” Paul declares. “Why should a man endure and wait for what he already sees? But if we hope for something we do not yet see, then, in waiting for it, we show our endurance.” There is hope, in this kind of blind hope. Paul sees strength in us, to hope for something we cannot see and do not know.

As I read the Bible I’m always struck by the challenge God sets for us, to be the most discerning, trusting, open people we can be. God asks us to take huge risks: to give first and ask questions later; to live on the edge of financial uncertainty; and to be led, not to lead. But there’s the glimmer of hope that we can actually do this!

Maybe we are simply being asked to look out for the widow, and to listen for the whirling wind, with all our being and in every single minute.

Amy Garrou

Jeremiah 23: 25-32
Luke 12: 1-10
Romans 8: 31-39

March 13, 2012

Courage or Despair

The prophet Jeremiah warned against false prophets who were leading the people into sin. Jeremiah was persecuted, and his message was largely ignored. Troubled times were ahead. Jeremiah would live to see the invasion by Babylon's armies, the deportation of his people and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. It is interpreted as divine punishment visited on the entire disobedient society. We are reminded that multiple "media outlets" and messengers who claim to be authentic have been around for a long time.

Luke's Gospel recounts that Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for hypocrisy, because they adhered to the mere formalities of religious law, rather than substance of living a life of faith. Jesus warned that all our secret misdeeds eventually will be revealed. The mighty and judgmental God of the Hebrew Scriptures remains in the teaching of Jesus.

The readings (to this point) are discouraging – and frightening. They warn against relying on what is merely popular in contemporary society, and also against relying on our hollow personal customs and rituals. We may have developed a good deal of reliance on those things, and the prospect of coping without them might bring feelings of despair.

Yet Jesus goes on say that the same powerful God that can reveal all secrets, and can condemn us, is also a God with a similarly powerful compassion and understanding of the earthly creation. As much as one should fear a God of such power, still, the God who values sparrows and who numbers the hairs of our heads is a God to be trusted and approached.

Paul wrote to the Romans about the eternal love of God. These passages can be comforting and empowering to believers.

If God is for us, who is against us?

He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us,
will he not with him also give us everything else?

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor
depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from
the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

With such abiding love on our side, we may find the courage to face life, to face the adversity that will still come our way – and not to despair.

What will we do with that courage? In our reflection during this season of Lent, we may devote further study to that question, and to other choices we all must make.

Prayer: Almighty God, let us find courage in your eternal love. We pray that you will guide us along your path.

James Turner

Second Chances

Jer. 24:1-10; Luke 12:11-21; Col. 3:1-17

March 14, 2012

Texts Sent/Received First Century:

Jeremiah: What's the metaphor with two baskets of figs? Half the fruit's inedible. **Lord:** Bringing Judean exiles back to their land. Taking care of them. Zedekiah, princes, and families who remain will be destroyed.

Rich Man to staff (as reported by Luke): Tear down barns; crops abundant this year. We're gonna party! **God:** Fool! Laying up treasure for yourself? How about a little sharing?

Paul: Time's awasting. No more cursing and losing your cool. Try a little kindness, patience, and compassion. Be grateful. Give a lot of thanks. **Colossians:** Wait one second. You expect us to change, just like that?

Texts Sent/Received 2012:

Pastor: Congregants, You need to be penitent and self-reflective. Unearth those defects of character that keep you from functioning fully. Face up to those niggling flaws that have prevented you from getting to know God better.

Congregants: Can we really change our negative aspects? People make resolutions January 1st to save money, practice patience, get organized, or spend more time in spiritual contemplation. Lots of self-help gurus tell us how. Much advice sounds simple (pray every morning for thirty days and you'll see miracles), but we stumble. Most New Year's resolutions fail by March. Results don't come quickly enough. Old habits die hard. The mantras return: we'll never change, what's the use? We've always been this way. Wondering how the Colossians made out? Paul stressed the urgency of getting right with God, convinced that Jesus' return was imminent. Could people turn themselves around pronto, eradicate the sinful parts of themselves?

Pastor: Perhaps, if they turned to others in the community for support rather than relying on sheer will power. Those who share at Weight Watchers or AA meetings have better results than those who set out on individualized courses of action with no support. Most self-help books suggest partnering up with another, confessing our weaknesses. You may not connect with God by shoring up your individual piety nearly as well as journeying with others in community.

Congregants: Problem. Politics, personalities, and fundamental theological differences often bar us from wanting to publicly share our weaknesses. We fear we'll be challenged or held accountable if we ask for help. So we make our resolutions to change silently, ever hopeful that this time they'll work. We're disappointed when these efforts fail, but at least no-one else knows. We want to change, we really do, and we hate disappointing God and ourselves.

Pastor: Understand. In Jeremiah, God had no mercy for the "spoiled figs," and imposed harsh punishment for the wicked. Even in Luke, God quickly rebuked rich man. But did you hear Paul's message? God can be infinitely patient and forgiving. You can be changed through prayerful consideration, exposing your vulnerabilities, asking for support, and getting up when you've fallen. God will support you, but that requires trust, persistence, and self-forgiveness.

Congregants: Here's our prayer then. God, help us to let go of those weaknesses that keep us from knowing You more deeply. Push us towards community, support us as we unveil our struggles. Teach us to be more grateful for the dark sides of ourselves. Help us to remember that we are on a journey of progress, not perfection. Amen.

Elizabeth R. Young

Jeremiah 25:8-17
2012
Luke 12:22-31
1 Peter 2:4-10

Thursday, March 15,

DAILY LIVES AND WORLDLY PURSUITS

Trust in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit should be the focus of our daily lives, but often it is not. The Bible shows us that an obsession with worldly pursuits often leads us astray of God's commandments. The Old Testament is full of examples of God's chosen people straying from God's law with disastrous consequences. In Chapter 25 of Jeremiah, the people of Judah are rebuked for failing to heed God's call for repentance, and the seventy-year Babylonian captivity is prophesied. The extent of God's wrath is described in shocking detail, "I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace . . . This whole land shall become a ruin and waste. . . ." *Jeremiah 25:9, 11*. This is hard for us, as Christians, to reconcile with the loving God we find through Jesus Christ, who seems always willing to forgive us, whenever we seek repentance.

In the New Testament, through Jesus Christ, we find that God accepts us as a fallen people yet asks us to continually try to overcome our obsession with worldly pursuits and the worries that necessarily accompany those pursuits. The goal is complete trust in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. For me, the ongoing effort to overcome sinful human nature – while acknowledging a continual failure to live up to the spiritual aspiration – seems a key part of a Christian life. Lent is a time to really reflect on this and renew a commitment to faith.

Jesus' message to his disciples could be no more plain: "do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. . . do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying . . . Instead, strive for God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." *See Luke 12:22, 29, 31*.

The wrathful God of the Old Testament is gone. We aspire for the spiritual life to replace material pursuits. But failure to live up to this aspiration is accepted, and forgiven. We strive to do God's will by letting ourselves "be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." *See 1 Peter 2:5*. Yet, even if we fail, because we strive for the spiritual and acknowledge our failure, we are ultimately forgiven: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." *See 1 Peter 2:10*. It seems to me that Easter represents the moment that we receive this mercy, and therefore is an appropriately joyous conclusion to the somber reflection of the Lenten season.

Adam Bain

Jeremiah 25:30-38
Luke 12:32-40
1 Peter 2:11-17

Friday, March 16, 2012

It is not easy to draw common themes from these three passages. But all three are delivering messages to God's people, through different voices in different places and times.

Jeremiah, the Old Testament prophet, is speaking to a Jewish people whose old world is ending, at the time of the last of the kings of Judah, a time of loss and change. He relays what he says are God's words: *...[T]he Lord has an indictment against the nations; he is entering into judgment with all flesh, and the guilty he will put to the sword...* As a spokesman for God, he is saying what God's people don't want to hear – the harsh, loud, roaring message that their suffering is a result of their own actions and falling away from God.

The tone of Luke is very different. First, reassurance: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* That assurance is followed by an admonition to remain alert and ready for God's coming: *You also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

Finally, Peter is concerned about the Christians in the outer reaches of the Roman empire, in northern Asia Minor, in places like Cappadocia and Bithynia. Isolated, under the thumb of the Roman emperor, they receive what must have been welcome and very helpful guidance from Peter about how to reconcile their Christian lives with the demands of the Roman authorities. One imagines their relief that Peter understands their difficulties and is straightforward and gentle with them: *For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors... Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

There is one section of the passage from Luke that may help link the three passages together: *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* God has told the Jews of Jeremiah's day, who had turned away from God, and later the early Christians, who were struggling to interpret Christ's message for their lives in the midst of a hostile Roman empire, to focus their lives on Him. A life attuned to God's will is the path out of destruction and despair. It is a life ready to receive the gift that is the Father's pleasure, "to give you the kingdom."

Prayer: God, help me to become an instrument of your peace in an often hostile and unhappy world. In the words of Peter, help me to conduct myself honorably, even if others speak ill of me. Attune me to your will for my life. And open my eyes and my heart to receive your gifts. Amen.

Jean P. Bordewich

An Early Sacrifice for Lent

Ephesians 1:15-23:

Saturday, March 21, 2012

¹⁵ *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people,* ¹⁶ *I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*
(Ephesians 1:15-23)

In his letter to the Christians of Ephesus, Paul reminds us to pray and give thanks always – just as he prayed and gave thanks for the early Christians in Ephesus. This message was reinforced recently, when a 6.9 earthquake hit my home island of Negros in central Philippines (about one hour by plane south of Manila).

One of the areas most badly hit was Guihulngan, the largest city in the Philippines by land area, which is only 30 minutes from the epicenter. Despite the many prominent politicians it has spawned, Guihulngan remains a quiet, backwater of a city, the kind where people still go home for lunch and a siesta to break their workday.

This is where my late father was born, and where hundreds of our relatives still reside. Fortunately for them, the earthquake struck just before noon – a highly unusual event since there is no known earthquake fault in Negros Island. Through the internet and cell phones, we immediately got hold of our relatives and assessed what they needed. None of my relatives died or was injured, except for an aunt who lost two fingers. But their houses were severely damaged, especially those made of concrete; the wooden ones were spared. They told us that their immediate need was for prayers, then for food and clean water.

They were isolated in the three days following the quake since the bridges and the wharf which linked Guihulngan to other towns were destroyed. Among the biggest buildings that were destroyed was their church, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (or Aglipayan Church, part of the Anglican communion). My grandmother's family has been among its most ardent supporters when they revolted against Spanish colonial rule in the late 1890s.

It was, in a sense, a family church where my paternal grandmother had me baptized as an Aglipayan (though I later chose to be Presbyterian). As I looked at pictures of the remains of the church today, memories came flooding back of playing in the church grounds, preparing the *carrozzas* for processions, attending masses with relatives – especially with strict grandaunts -- and Aglipayan priests in their funky habits.

This time of the year, the statues and the crucifix would have been covered in purple and black, only to be taken off at Easter. My grandaunts would be wearing somber clothes, and only silence or religious music was allowed, especially during the *semana santa* (Holy Week). Then it struck me. Unlike in previous years, there is no need for my family to sacrifice for Lent this year. Their Lenten sacrifice came early, thanks to the earthquake.

One thing I am sure of, though, is that their – our fervent -- prayers will continue to rise in supplication and in thanksgiving for God's boundless mercies and love, especially amid disasters. (*A special thanks to the NYAPC congregation for the prayers.*)

Creator God, we thank you for your constant presence and saving grace when earthquakes hit our lives. We give you thanks for all that we were. We give you thanks for all that we are. We give you thanks for all that we will be. Amen.

Adlai J. Amor

2 Chronicles 36:14-23
Psalm 34
John 3:14-21
Ephesians 2: 4-10

March 18, 2012

Not the End of the Story

I said something stupid the other day - words I wanted to grab back from the air. My words rang in my ears in the car on the drive home, and I hit the steering wheel in frustration.

I was tired; it had been a long day. Once I regained my equilibrium, I realized I'd been too hard on myself. The words weren't ringing in anyone else's ears. And if they were, it wasn't a big deal. I also realized that today's passages held some wisdom for me.

Of these four passages, the end of Second Chronicles is the one that's fascinating me. There are two endings to the book. In the first, the people of Israel lose Jerusalem, the temple is destroyed, and the Babylonian exile begins. But some ancient editor decided not to leave the story there, and tacked on the first few verses of next book, Ezra, about the return to Jerusalem.

I prefer the first ending. Maybe it's because something in me enjoys the yearning feeling I'm left with at the end of a sad story. Maybe I want to enjoy the space between the end of one story and the beginning of the next. Maybe it's because this is a lectionary reading for Lent, and I figure that's what I'm supposed to be thinking about - sin, separation from God. The bad stuff.

But the other passages for today aren't about separation or yearning. They're about God's good response. The psalmist in Psalm 34 celebrates how God has delivered him from trouble. The John passage includes the verse Luther called "the gospel in miniature." And the passage from Ephesians emphasizes God's grace.

Good news, all of it. So why do I want to stay in Second Chronicles?

Maybe it's because it's so relatable. I'm not about to be sent into exile, but on some days, I can feel that way. Life is messy. It's all very well to hear the good news, but then I go back to a life that includes sometimes difficult relationships, tasks I don't always want to do, and frustrations with myself. And then I feel far away from God.

There's one more thing that sticks with me from Second Chronicles. The word "persistence." God "persistently" sends messengers, the people ignore them, and Jerusalem falls. But even in the sad ending, God's persistence wins out: Jerusalem falls into a rest, into a Sabbath. And the ancients had the wisdom to add that bit from Ezra onto the end, to make sure everyone knew that the story wasn't over.

I love this reminder that no one event in the Bible is the complete story. Even Jesus' crucifixion doesn't end the story. And our story isn't over either, no matter how frustrating a particular moment, day, or year might be.

Meg Hanna House

SINGING THE BLUES

Monday
March 19, 2012

Lamentations 1:1-13
John 8:21-30; Colossians 2:8-15

The Book of Lamentations is a creative response to hardship and in that creative act there is hope, even in despair. The poem – written as an acrostic with the first letter of each line corresponding to a letter in Hebrew – was composed during a dark time in Jewish history when the country of Judah was held in captivity after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

*Bitterly she weeps at night,
tears are on her cheeks.
Among all her lovers
there is no one to comfort her.
All her friends have betrayed her,
they have become her enemies. [Lamentations 1:2]*

Artists – poets, painters, writers, dancers – are often drawn to create in response to war, to pain, to death and grief, and to oppression. Picasso created one of his most striking and famous pieces – “Guernica” – in response to the horrific destruction of that city by the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War.



Similarly, the themes of modern blues poems or ballads revolve around woes in a world of harsh reality: lost love, despair, cruelty, oppression, urban poverty, and hard times. One can see that in the title of poems such as *The Weary Blues* by Langston Hughes or *Grief Calls Us to the Things of This World* by Sherman Alexie. One can hear the same emotional intensity in Lamentations:

*All her people groan
as they search for bread.
They barter their treasures for food
to keep themselves alive. [Lamentations 1:11]*

This biblical poetry, like the blues, is a creative response, a human reaction that is both a display of hope and a reason for hope. I believe that if there was no hope, there would be no creative response.

And this is one message for Easter: in spite of difficult times, in spite of the problems and troubles that come our way that cause in us a desire to weep, we must seek within ourselves for a creative response – it could be music, poetry, writing, painting or sculpting. The creative response is a form of faith and hope.

Gwenn and Paul Gebhard

Lamentations 1:14-22
John 8:31-38
1 Peter 3:8-12

Tuesday, March 20th, Lent 2012

The past year or so has been very, very difficult for me. Health issues of many kinds – injury from scalpels, microbes and asphalt -- have played whack-a-mole with me...better to say “on me”... barely letting me get a gulp of air before the mallet fell again on me, knocking me under.

“Under what?”, you may ask. I certainly have had to.

The little godless, agnostic voice in my head that masquerades as my own thinking prattles incessantly, “What kind of God would create you and then let all this nasty stuff happen to you? You obviously are not what you pretend to be or God wouldn't be charging you this high price for your woeful inadequacy and inauthenticity. Your life has been one great failure after another. You've gotten everything you deserve! God is just your desperate attempt to feel included in something good. How pathetic!”

“You're completely alone you fool! Those people over there...look...they look happy and healthy. They're perfectly willing and able to grab and stow good for themselves without concern for you! When is your God going to treat them like He treats you? You should see the way they orate, pontificate and gesticulate as they go through their lives. Why doesn't God hold them to account for their inner thoughts and unseen sins? If nothing else, they're probably Republicans! A merciful God would have let you die long ago. Where is this Truth that's gonna make you free?”

Well, I've come to think that the Truth is that if I have to become something that God didn't already make me then I'll just never be free.

Inside my heart the “still small voice” continues on calmly, having been speaking all along through the hurt and madness, “Come now little one. Don't worry about those others. In addition to their apparent happiness and wellness are secrets of sadness and sin that you know nothing about. Most of those secrets are the same as your own. You don't really have the imagination to invent new and “original” sins. The Truth will free all of you. Sin and sadness have no power over you.”

“Remember your instructions that I gave you through my Son Jesus. You all need each other. Love one another and be compassionate and humble. You are far too wise not to realize that if you want good in life you must look and move in that direction. Don't be distracted by your own fear or by the knee jerk reactions of others to theirs. Neither has anything to do with you. You are my beloved child. If you look for peace in life you will find it, I promise. I'm not as good at seeing you through your mortal filters as you think. Your goodness always attracts my attention.”

With humble affection,
Nathan Moon

Lamentations 2:1-6
John 9:1-7
1 Peter 3:13-22

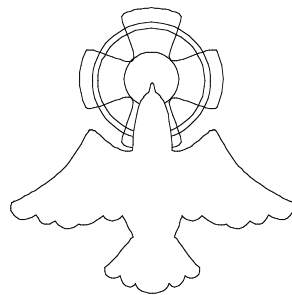
Wednesday, March 21

At first reading, the Lamentations and the John verses seem contradictory. In Lamentations, God has punished the Israelites for angering him with their sinfulness. In John, Jesus says that the fact that a man must go through life blind is not punishment for sins by either the man or his parents, but rather a way through which God's works might be revealed. Peter discusses that it is better to suffer for doing good, than to suffer for doing evil. Peter reminds us that God sent his only son to cleanse us of our sins, so that we may be brought to God.

However, upon reflection, these three selections seem to highlight some of the most important points of the relationship we have with God. First, God's overwhelming power – that he could destroy ordinary men and women, princes and priests alike if they anger him. Second, that God is with us through good times and bad, and that sometimes we don't always understand his works until we've come through a difficult time and had the space to reflect upon it. Finally, God's undying love for us, and the sacrifices he has made to ensure our eternal life. God has the power to destroy us when we disobey him, but he doesn't. He shows mercy and gives us a way to Him.

These are especially comforting thoughts in times of trouble. It is very easy to "blame" God for the difficulties we have in life – "Why are you letting this happen to me?" – or blame ourselves – "what have I done to deserve this?" But these passages indicate that neither of these is the case. Knowing that he has sacrificed everything for us, that he has been through hell, literally, and that he understands our problems is comforting. Knowing that things – good and bad – happen for a reason, though maybe not always an obvious one, is also comforting. In this time of Lent, these passages help us remember the pain and suffering of Jesus Christ for all of us, and remind us to give thanks for the sacrifices made for us and the comfort God brings to us.

Stacey Gagosian



To Light a Candle

Lam. 2:7-16

1 Peter 4:1-6

John 10:1-6

Thursday, March 22, 2012

According to my dictionary, to lament is to express grief by weeping or wailing. Turn on the TV news any night and you will likely see it. For people caught in webs of death and violence from which there seems to be no escape, lamentation seems to be the ultimate expression of despair.

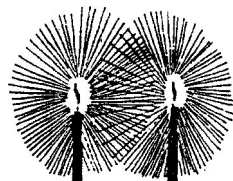
The Jews have experienced more than their share of lamentation across the ages of their history. Witness these words from today's first reading which were written after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, "The Lord has grown weary of his altar, has come to loathe his sanctuary, and handed her palace walls over to the enemy:..." How sad. How seemingly hopeless.

Why are we asked to read Lamentations during Lent? My Bible says the lectionary wants to remind Christians of Calvary. According to Luke's Gospel, as Jesus carried his cross, "Large numbers of people followed him, and of women too, who mourned and lamented for him." Another sad and seemingly hopeless situation.

What are Christians called to do in a world filled with lamentation? Our study group is currently reading a book titled "The 6th Lamentation" by William Brodrick. It's a mystery with the holocaust as its backdrop. The protagonist is a monk named Father Anshelm. Toward the end of the book, Father Anshelm and another monk are discussing the role of monks in a world of mindless violence and hatred. Their answer is, "We have to be candles, burning between hope and despair, faith and doubt, life and death, all the opposites." I like that and I think it is good advice for all Christians.

Prayer: Dear God, help me to express my faith and to be a candle in a sea of candles testifying to your redeeming presence in the world.

Steve Dewhurst



Lamentations 2:17-22
John 11:55-12:8
Hebrews 2:10-18

Friday, March 23, 2012

The People of God and God Reconcile, and Death is Vanquished

In Lamentations 2, the prophet Jeremiah first laments and ponders the tragic history and grave misery of Jerusalem. He must be wondering what is going on here, what caused this, how did their enemies prevail; are these not the people of God? Then Jeremiah answers his own questions. He writes a powerful exhortation of how God punished as He promised, how sorrowful this is, that repentance is called for, and then offers a vigorous prayer that almost thanks God for doing the right thing!

So, we have now a God that is disappointed and has laid down punishment, and He has expressed his sadness through the prophets. He is separated from his children by their disobedience and by Satan's use of death.

In John 11 and John 12, the disciple tells us first about how the people were in the time near Jesus' death. As people gathered for Passover in Jerusalem, many came early not only to be cleansed and prepare, but also to see Jesus. At the same time, prominent priests and Pharisees were publically asking that anyone who saw Jesus should report so that they could arrest Jesus. About a week before Passover, Jesus comes to Bethany and has dinner with Lazarus that is served by Martha. The powerful story of Mary washing His feet with perfume and drying Him with her hair follows. Judas, a former thief who now handles finances for the disciples, openly criticizes Mary saying that she could have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor. Jesus defends Mary fervently and reveals what must have been a powerful and disturbing truth, "You will always have the poor among you, but I will not be here with you much longer."

Hebrews 2 is to me one of the most existential chapters of the Bible, for it is here that God explains the mystery of Jesus and God's own story. We already know that God has been trying to bring his children into glory since the Garden of Eden. Time and time again He tried to find a way for a disobedient people. Jesus was the ultimate answer. Jesus said that He would stand for and with His brothers and sisters to bring them back into the family of God. Finally, the last problem to be solved was to break the power of Satan who had the power of Death and to relieve God's children from their fear of dying. It was then the ultimate sacrifice for God and Jesus that accomplished vindication, salvation, forgiveness and taking away the sting of Death...God One...Satan Zero!

Thanks Be to God.
Eric Slaughter



After getting my assignment for the devotional this year, I anxiously read the three passages to begin the process of deciding what to write about. I must admit-nothing came immediately to mind, so I began to mull it over and re-read the passages. One might say-study. Being a PK (Preacher's Kid) doesn't make you a biblical scholar, by any stretch, but I'd like to focus on the passage from the Gospel of John, and hope that Dad's influence shines through.

Verse nine picks up the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem just after the dinner with Mary and Martha in Bethany, where Jesus speaks those foretelling words, "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not have me." The chief priests have decided they need to put a stop to Jesus and Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. The great crowd who greeted Jesus with palm branches and shouts of Hosannas has set the stage for what we Christians of today know is to come.

Even though this is being read in March, I am writing this in February, which is when we highlight Black History. Last month we celebrated the first Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday with a memorial to the leader of the civil rights movement on the National Mall. Dr. King through the non-violent means of civil-disobedience, sought to bring about equality and justice for all peoples. He was shaking up the establishment-the well connected, the well to do, in some cases-the powerful. This put his very life in jeopardy, for a cause greater than himself. I remember that day in April 1968, running home in tears, when I heard the news of his assassination. As a sixth grader, in Annapolis, Md., I was scared and confused and needed the comfort of my parents, who needed comfort themselves. My parents had sought out the opportunity to hear Dr. King preach five years earlier in a Hawaiian church in downtown Honolulu so had been touched by the person and his message. Since I was so young at the time, I was unaware until a number of years ago, that my parents hosted a Cluster of Methodist Clergy at our home on the Naval Academy shortly after the assassination. Some of these ministers of the Word expressed that they were glad that it had happened. Glad....How could that be? All who profess they are Christians are not united in belief, thought or action. However, that does not excuse the unkind thoughts behind those words spoken in 1968. These ministers were behaving like the chief priests of Jesus' time. I can only hope that they had a change of heart, because apparently, God wasn't done with them yet!

Both Dr. King and Jesus challenged the status quo and are still challenging us today if we let them. We can go through life keeping our head down and merely surviving this thing we call life, or we can live up to our faith and the risks that are inherent with that choice. I often say I don't mind being a salmon. They swim against the current. We can't be afraid to do the same in the name of Christ. Don't go along to get along, as the saying goes. Get involved in your church and your communities to build on "the dream."

Dale Orzalli

In Christ there is no east or west, In him no south or north;
But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.
Join hands, then brothers of the faith, whate'er your race may be.
Who serves my Father as a son is surely kin to me. Amen.

Get It in Writing

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 119:79-96

John 12:20-33

Hebrews 5:7-10

Sunday, March 25

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
“when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors
When I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt,
Because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.
“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the
Lord.
“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

-- Jeremiah 31:31-33

Is someone offering you a great deal? Get it in writing. Did someone promise to provide a service for you? Get it in writing. Have you and a partner decided how to split the profits? Get it in writing. In many situations, we are told not to leave anything to chance. Make sure there is a written agreement about how things are supposed to turn out.

I work for a Federal agency that awards grants. Applicants must tell us in writing exactly what they want to do with the money that they are requesting. If they are awarded funding, we send them a document outlining exactly what we expect them to accomplish. If they want to change some aspect of the project, they must write to us explaining the proposed change, and we write back reiterating what the change is and giving them our approval. No telephone calls. No “gentlemen’s agreement.” Everything is in writing.

God used this same method with the people of Israel when he provided Moses with the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. As noted in the Jeremiah passage, this method did not produce the desired results. As a result, God takes a different path and decides to put God’s law in the hearts and minds of the people of Israel.

I suppose this could be a problem for some. A recent radio program featured a woman who did not believe in God because no one could prove to her satisfaction that God actually exists, that God created the world, or that God could speak to us. It appeared that in order for her to believe in something, it had to be supportable through unquestionable factual evidence that could be found in writing. It appeared that the heart had nothing to do with belief.

This reminded me of the church I attended when I lived in Cincinnati. The church’s motto was “Faith Exposed to Reason. Reason Enlarged by Faith.” This melding of heart and mind said to me that there should be neither blind faith nor unquestioned reason. For God has put God’s law in our minds and written it on their hearts

Daniel Stokes

Monday, March 26, 2012

Scriptures:

- **Lamentations 3:19-39**
- **John 12:23-40**
- **1 Peter 1:13-21**

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune--without the words,
And never stops at all...*

The first stanza of Emily Dickinson's poem echoes the theme of the scriptures for this day in Lent. Hope suffuses these passages from Lamentations, the Gospel of John, and Peter's letter to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. God is hope's source, and--far more concrete than the poet's "thing with feathers"--Jesus is hope's embodiment.

For me, these scriptures called to mind the years David and I lived in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and particularly the minister of Salem United Church of Christ where we were members. Rev. Kendall Link rejoiced with us in the birth of our children and baptized Richard and Sarah with water he carried home from a trip to the Holy Land and the River Jordan. He called Richard his "zipper buddy," because they both bore the trademark scar of open heart surgery. And he died at the age of 51 from AIDS contracted as a result of a tainted transfusion received during that surgery in the early 1980s--just before awareness of and screening for HIV/AIDS led to adequate protection of blood supplies.

Kendall had every reason to be angry and to despair--in the opening words of the passage from Lamentations, "¹⁹The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me." But that was not his response any more than it was the response of the prophet Jeremiah. "²¹But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²²the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; ²³they are new every morning..."

Pastor Link continued his ministry at Salem, beginning each Sunday sermon with the words, "It's not just another day; it's another chance." He confided in a few trusted members of the congregation about his situation and, when the time was right, told all those to whom he ministered so faithfully. As his health declined, the congregation responded with love and support, taking up a collection to buy the scooter Kendall wanted so that he could remain mobile enough to visit the local prison where he brought hope and comfort to prisoners with HIV/AIDS.

In the way he lived and especially as he faced death, Kendall followed Christ's teachings and in doing so provided an example for all who knew him. "While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." (John 12:36) Kendall was a child of light. "Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed." (1 Peter 1:13) Kendall never stopped acting; he never ceased hoping; he believed in the grace of Jesus Christ.

A prayer: Dear God, thank you for your servant, Kendall Link, and for all we know who, like him, trust in you and set their hope on you. Give us the courage to hope and to act in ways that give others reason to hope and believe. Amen.

~ Edith Holmes Snyder

Lamentations 3:40-54
John 12:41-48
1 Peter 1:22-2:3

Tuesday, March 27TH

Making Sense of the Facts

The commentators tell us that Lamentations was written in response to the destruction of Jerusalem and the subjugation of the Jews; while 1 Peter was addressed to churches in Asia Minor suffering religious persecution. So in response to serious challenges the authors of these two books are trying to reconcile and use their faith, their theology to terrible events in an effort to survive and move ahead. The two passages balance each other nicely.

In Lamentations 3:40-42 it is clear the punishment is well deserved and at God's hand,

40 Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord .41 Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven. 42 We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven.

While in 1 Peter the persecution, properly endured, shows God's hand in liberating and cleansing His people.

22 Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply* from the heart.* 23 You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.**

The above appears to be a sensible synopsis of punishment and hope until I turn to the comments section that follows nearly every story, article, essay, blog posting on the web. Putting aside the cowardice of anonymous mobs in cyber land there is no mistaking a lot of comments are fueled, in part, by people trying to make sense of the facts as they see them. Most distressing is the use of religion to confirm their positions in the world people have made. However, it is not novel to observe that some of the language urging deficit reduction and get the sense that such a reduction is a morally correct response to economic punishment. How else to make sense of good people losing jobs, homes and the ability to ensure a better future for their children? My point is not to judge the merits of the response, but to acknowledge that it is the using a moral lens to sort the facts of the day. Where is the love and humanity in my response, if I just say the other guy is nuts? So does that mean surrendering to points of view I consider seriously flawed? No, I afraid it is a call to change, for in this passage from John, Jesus declares,

41 Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him. 42 Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.*

So I'm afraid in this context we are called to spread the Good News in acting and living differently and not using the tactics of those who oppose us, because we enjoy our seat at the table just fine (and believe you me I very much like my position at the table.) Fred Dann

IS IT I, LORD?

Lamentations 3: 55-66
John 12: 49-50
Romans 10: 14-21

March 28, 2012

Today I am 63 years young and still upright, for the most part! Happy Birthday also to Warren Krug and his twin brother. I thank Miriam for the continued opportunity to write Advent and Lenten passages and to connect with my NYAve. friends.

We may not use the word lamentation much in our everyday conversation, but we can all relate to the lamentations of God's early people. We are all stressed and thus experience many emotions in our lives. We call out to God—even complain and get angry--and we believe that God hears our pleas. God hears us, but do we hear God?

Jesus often quoted the passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah that ask why people do not see, hear, or remember God's words and promises. St. Paul yells at the Romans for not paying attention to God's calling.

We may not have Moses' "burning bush" experience (Exodus 3:4), Eli's nighttime call (I Samuel 3:6), or a live coal burn our tongue as it did Isaiah's (Isaiah 6:8). However, we need to recognize that God is calling us every hour of every day to glorify Him and use the skills and talents He has bestowed upon us to be His hands and feet in this world. We need to respond as Moses, Eli, and Isaiah did, and say,

"Hear I am! Send me."

How do we know what our call is and what to do? My calls to work in Indonesia, play the piano at 7 to 9 and in the Radcliffe Room, and serve food at homeless shelters have had these things in common: I did not plan them; they seemed irrational, and they were absolutely the right things to do at the right time. This Lent, please try to listen more and let the Spirit move you to be the person God wants for you to be.

Prayer: Here I am Lord.
Is it I Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.

Ella Cleveland

Thursday, March 29th

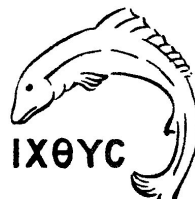
Lamentations 4: 1-10

Mark 13: 1-13

Romans 11: 1-12

The passage from Lamentations describes the desolate, seemingly post-apocalyptic city of Jerusalem after its fall, saying “the chastisement of my people has been greater than the punishment of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, though no hand was laid on it.” Mark 13: 1-13 has the disciples marveling at the sights in the great city, and Jesus tells them, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” and later tells them they will be persecuted for following him. In Romans 11: 1-12, Paul talks about “a remnant” of Israelis “chosen by grace” while the rest stumbled benighted. These reminded me of seeing a neighbor’s car the other day with one of those bumper stickers with the fish symbol that has sprouted legs and has Darwin written inside it. When I first saw those years ago, I thought they were pretty clever, and they appealed to my subversive side. But this time it struck me that early Christians, the subversives and revolutionary thinkers of their time, risked their lives every time they drew that fish in the sand. My neighbor’s a nice guy and his car also has a sticker for a Catholic school, so I don’t think he’s mocking God or Jesus or brave early Christians, but rather people who deny Darwin’s ideas. Those ideas have been validated by a century and half of science and help us understand ourselves better. Why deny them? But everything we’ve learned in the last two millennia has validated what Jesus taught us: Love, peace, forgiveness, gratitude, service and faith are keys to living a fulfilling live. Why deny that? Seems like it’s easy for us to assume that we are a chosen people, just like the Israelites did, and forget that we also have choices. We accept one kind of truth and close ourselves off from another, and we do that at our own peril. Jesus teaches us about peace, but left to our own devices, we talk ourselves into believing that “mutually assured destruction” and “peace” are the same thing. You can believe Darwin and believe in Jesus, but which one would you stake your life on?

Doug Norwood



March 30

Lamenting

Lamentations 4:11-22, Mark 13:14-27, Romans 11:13:24

The three passages above are the passages for today. They are difficult passages for me. I hear in the New Testament passages an us-versus-them undercurrent. We (the us) assume that we are the chosen ones. We are the elect. We are the ones God made space for on the olive tree.

Lamentations reminds us not to make assumptions that separate any of us into we and they categories. Lamentations challenges the view of God that many of us hold.

Carolyn Sharp is an associate professor at Yale Divinity School. She has recently written that “Lent is a time for introspection and spiritual candor. Believers are to acknowledge our complicity in the deep brokenness of the world, seek to amend our lives, and wait in hope for the healing grace of our God. . . . The prophets [spoke] against political, social, and clerical exploitation of others. But a fearless moral and spiritual inventory needs to be undertaken within our own hearts and in our communities before we dare to speak words of judgment to others. Lent is a time of humility.”

In *The New Interpreter’s Bible* commentary, Kathleen O’Conner, a professor of Old Testament Language, Literature, and Exegesis at Columbia Theological Seminary, writes that Lamentations “is largely ignored in public worship, in preaching, and for meditative use.” She attributes this neglect to many factors but mentions two: “its troubling content of relentless grief and anger and the predominance of denial in the dominant culture of North America.”

I found, in preparing to write this piece, the book of Lamentations ---read aloud and alone—to be powerful meditative scripture. But then, most of the writings by prophets are.

The tradition at New York Avenue is to recognize the congregation as ministers in this church. Lent calls us, as Sharp says, to look deeply inside our own selves, to look with objective eyes, to look with spiritual candor –acknowledging what is there that shouldn’t be, what isn’t there that should be, and to lament the difference in our own lives and in the life of our congregation and our world.

Lamentations, according to O’Conner, “is a practice of truth-telling.” Lamentations “is a form of speech that enables people to tell the truth of their lives and to see the real lives of others in their deprivation, their pain, and their abandonment . . . Lamentations enables a type of seeing that both expresses and creates discontent . . . [i]t is a mode of survival as well as a profound act of resistance and of solidarity with the afflicted. [It] is a complaint, a protest, and a search for meaning.”

Lamentations is maybe a pretty good definition of Lent.

---Bonnie Davis

March 31st: Lamentations 5:1-22; Mark 13:28-37; Romans 11: 25-36

I don't know about you, but I am tired.....

...tired of bad news on the economy

...tired of wars

...tired of injustices

...tired of attack campaigns

...tired of worrying about whether our country is in a downhill slide

...tired almost to the point of immobility

So, how true did the words of Lamentations 5 ring in my ears! Life IS hard, pessimism reigns. "5 - With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; we are weary, we are given no rest." "15 - The joy in our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning." The passage ends with the soulful wail, "20-22 - Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old – unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure." Whew! If this was the end of the story we should be thoroughly depressed.

However, thanks be to God, it is not the end. We have the New Testament, the good news of the promises made to us from God; that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and a much, much, much better future ahead. Romans 11:32 tells us, "God has made all people prisoners of disobedience so that he might show mercy to them all." We are asked only to wait dutifully and to diligently watch for that time promised to us by God through his son, Jesus. Mark reminds us in 13:31, "Heaven and Earth will pass away...no one knows, however, when that day or hour will come...only the father knows...be on watch, be alert." In the meantime we need to rest from our tiredness in the arms of God and be filled with optimism, knowing that, ultimately, God is in charge.

Praise to God: How great are your riches, God. How deep is your wisdom and knowledge. Who can explain your decisions? Who can understand your ways? As the scripture says:

Who knows the mind of the Lord?

Who is able to give him advice?

Who has ever given him anything, so that he had to pay it back?

For all things were created by you and all things exist through you and for you. To you, God, be the glory forever! Amen (Romans 11: 33-36)

Sally Molenkamp

An Attitude

Isaiah 50: 4-9
Psalm 29
Mark 11: 1-11
Philippians 2: 5-11

Palm Sunday
April 1, 2012

Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: (Philippians 2: 5 CEB)

Mark tells the familiar Palm Sunday story: Jesus assigns a task to two disciples. They are to go to a nearby village and there find a particular unriden colt, untie it and bring it back to Jesus. He then triumphantly rides the colt to the temple in Jerusalem, in the middle of a parade of people shouting, "Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Mark 11: 9b CEB)

One of the details in Mark's account might easily be overlooked. Jesus is not simply the honoree in this story. He is a part to detailed advance planning for this event. He has obviously made prior arrangements with the owner of the colt to borrow it for the day and tells the disciples exactly what to expect when they follow his instructions. His journey to the temple has been carefully planned too. The advance word was spread so that throngs could gather and join the parade. The events of the day unfold as they have been planned.

Jesus understands his role in God's "big picture" and the necessity for detailed, advance planning in order faithfully to implement God's mission. Paul points us to Jesus' *attitude*, and we are directed to emulate it. What is that attitude?

Jesus understood that his entire life, from birth in humble surroundings to painful, humiliating death, was an essential part of God's strategic plan to manifest God's steadfast love for humanity. His daily activities, including his stories and prayers, were consistent with this understanding. Perhaps Paul is directing us to make this same connection when he directs us to adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus. Are we not called to think concretely about how our energy and other resources can effectively be used? Surely we are called to use our educated brains and tongues, together with the energy and strength the psalmist prays for, to develop and follow a strategic plan that expressly links to Jesus' strategic plan, which we are told is coexistent with God's strategic plan for humanity.¹ At the risk of over simplicity, perhaps the following two Scripture passages made clear the essential parts of God's plan, both for humanity and for each of us: (1) "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life." (John 3:16 CEB) and (2) "He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8 CEB)

Our challenge is to absorb the ideas these words convey to us, then think how they relate to the lives we are called to live, including our role in implementing the mission of this congregation, in the very circumstances we daily confront and experience. We then, emulating Jesus' attitude, are called to integrate our strategic planning with God's strategic plan for each of us as well as for each and every other part of the human community and the rest of God's creation too.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, thank you for the steadfast love that has sustained humanity and blessed me with life and all that has made life possible. Help me to so live each day that my thoughts and actions are consistent with your strategic plans for all of your creation. In the name of Jesus, who was from the beginning part of your strategic plan and who faithfully continues to implement it, Amen.
-- John H. Quinn, Jr.

¹The psalmist prays: "Let the Lord give strength to his people! Let the Lord bless his people with peace!" (Ps. 29:11 CEB) The prophet Isaiah understands that he is to use his talent as an instrument in God's service: "The Lord God gave me an educated tongue to know how to respond to the weary with a word that will awaken them in the morning. God awakens my ear in the morning to listen, as educated people do." (Isaiah 50:4 CEB)

ALWAYS WITH US

Isaiah 42: 1-9, John 12: 1-11, Hebrews 9: 11-15

Monday, April 2

The passage from John is one of the most familiar, most quoted Gospel passages in the Bible, when Judas chastised Mary's anointing Jesus' feet with costly ointment, and He responded "the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me," anticipating his coming crucifixion. Many have used this statement as a rationalization to do nothing about poverty, since it will be futile anyway in the long run. But today's other passages put that into perspective.

As he prophesies the coming of the Christ, Isaiah says that "he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth..." Paul carries the promise beyond the now, beyond the earth, to a "new covenant ... the promised eternal inheritance.."

Jesus has told us, in Matthew 25, that passage that we like to claim for NYA, that what we do or not do for "the least of these" "you did it to me." If the poor are always with us, then so is Jesus, within them, and in rejecting them we reject Him. If "he will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth", ours are the hands and the voices that must cry out for it.

Ouch! How in the world can I take on a task like that? Fortunately, it's not solely my burden, although there is onus on each of us to do what we can, day to day, in our daily lives, through our individual acts of charity, speaking out to and through our elected officials, organizations, and media outlets, voting for those who support justice. But fortunately we don't have to do it alone. Ours is a church with an active witness and ministry, and though we can't all be with it physically throughout the week, it is incumbent on us to witness within the church, encouraging CE classes on justice issues, and attending them and following through on what we learn, working in Community Club, Radcliffe Room, 7-2-9, etc., and WITH OUR DOLLARS. Even volunteer ministries need physical and staff support and funding. The Session grappled at its January meeting with the fiscal realities of keeping our complex and aging physical plant running, and of responsibly compensating our overworked and underpaid staff, and pledged giving that will not cover everything. As one Elder observed a few years back, if we are failing to pay our staff adequately, it is not we, but they, that are doing our work of mission.

After the resurrection that we so eagerly await this week, Jesus promised His disciples that He would be with them "always, to the close of the age." We may have the poor, and injustice, with us always, but we will not face it alone.

Lord God, help us to see You in those we serve. Give us strength of mind, spirit, and generosity to care for Your people in need, to seek justice for all, and to be with You always, as You are with us. Amen.

Mary Krug

YOUR JOB IS TOO SMALL

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

Tuesday, April 3, 2012

Isaiah 49:1-7 is the second of the four Servant Songs found in Isaiah. These were written to the captive Israelites in Babylon who, having been exiled for 70 years after the destruction of Jerusalem, were probably thinking that their return to the promised land would never happen.

In this song, the servant --

*Who was this servant? Was he Isaiah himself? Or was he all of Israel?
Was he a special Israelite who would make himself known among them?*

complains that he has spent his whole life preparing for the job of bringing Israel back to God (v. 5), but that he has not been allowed to carry out his task. But then God tells him that such a job would be too easy for him, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel." --

*Too easy? To give courage to the exiles in Babylon? To break out of
captivity? To make the trek back to Palestine?*

No, his job, God said, was to be "a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

*Is this what God is telling all of us? Break out of your petty concerns
about day to day living and see what you can do to serve God's
people everywhere? And are people everywhere called to do the same?*

The other passages in today's reading give us some hints that this might be so. In the selection from the gospel of John, some Greeks (standing for all gentiles?) tell the disciples they want to see Jesus. When the disciples tell Jesus, he does not say he will see them, but hints at the mission that all who wish to "see him" must follow. "Whoever serves me must follow me", "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." Not just the Jews, but all people everywhere. Saying this, when the Greeks wanted to see him, hints at the universal nature of his purpose.

The members of the church in Corinth were all tied up in their petty disputes. Not many were wise; not many were powerful; not many were of noble birth. Yet they were the ones called to spread the gospel, not only to Corinth, but to the world. God chose the foolish to shame the wise; God chose the weak to shame the strong; God chose the low to reduce to nothing the things that are.

Jesus died. But Christ lives to lead us on.

"It is finished!" so the Savior cried. and meekly bowed his head and died;
"It is finished!" yes the race is run. The battle fought, the victory won.

"It is finished!" let the joyful sound Be heard through all the nations round;
"It is finished!" let the triumph rise And swell the chorus to the skies.

Samuel Stennett

Phil Hanna

“YOU WILL BETRAY ME”

Isaiah 50: 4-9
Hebrews 12: 1-3
John 13: 21-30

Wednesday
April 4, 2012

“... Jesus was deeply disturbed and testified, ‘I assure you, one of you will betray me.’” John 13 : 21 CEB)

“Betray” is a very strong word. We rarely use it in everyday conversation. Yet Jesus is at supper with his closest friends. He does not accuse outsiders of past action. He *assures* his tablemates that one of them is to betray him. They are confused. Which one of them is to be the betrayer? And how?

We too profess to be Jesus’ disciples; he has called us friends. Could any one of us possibly be the one who betrays Jesus? We who have read the beginning of John 13 are temporarily relieved to know that it is not one of us friends but Judas who is the identified betrayer. His act of betrayal was simple: he sold information for money. We are told that the devil made him do it. Yet, is greed Judas’ motivation? That seems unlikely. He, like the other disciples who remained at table with Jesus, repeatedly manifested a lack of understanding of who Jesus really was and what his mission was. None of them ruled out the possibility that any one of them might be Jesus’ betrayer. Why? Because they plainly did not understand Jesus’ core message that “Teacher” and “Lord” are not just titles. If one is to use them with integrity, with understanding, then one’s world view is changed; one’s life style is directly affected. Although all the disciples heard Jesus teach this lesson and watched him apply it, they still did not understand it. We quickly learn of Peter’s three denials and the other disciples’ effective abandonment of Jesus as he encounters acute injustice and cruelty. Only one of them accompanies Jesus’ mother to witness the crucifixion. Is it possible that we, Jesus’ modern friends, like those at table long ago, still do not “get it.”? Is our world view, our life style, in sync with Jesus’ new commandment: ***Love each other***? Or do we, like Judas and the other disciples, likewise betray Jesus?

Who of us can claim that we measure up to the test the *Hebrews* writer poses:

“So then let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let’s throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right hand of God’s throne. Think about the one who endured such opposition from sinners so that you won’t be discouraged and you won’t give up.”
(Hebrews 12: 1-3 CEB)

Prayer: *Gracious God, we acknowledge that we daily fail to love one another and consistently act in accord with your commandment. Forgive us, empowering us once again to be your joyful and faithful servants, running the race laid out in front of us. Just as You are not discouraged with us and won’t give up on us, help us not to become discouraged with ourselves and each other, and not to give up in our efforts to love one another. In the name of the risen Lord, Amen.*

-- JOHN H. QUINN, JR.

Drink Ye All of It

**Lectionary: Exodus 24: 3-8
Psalms 69: 1-15
Mark 14: 12-26
1 Corinthians 10: 16-17**

Maundy Thursday, April 5, 2012

Holy Thursday, or *Maundy Thursday*, commemorates the institution of the *Eucharist*, a sacrament that involves consecrating bread and wine. The term “Maundy” derives from the Latin word for commandment (*mandatum*). The New Testament describes events that took place on the first Holy Thursday. These events include Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and the Last Supper before he was arrested. Many Maundy Thursday church traditions come from practices that took place in Europe for centuries. Maundy Thursday services springing from those practices have been a longstanding tradition at NYAPC.

The first lectionary passage recounts the conclusion of the presentation by Moses of the commandments that comprise the First Covenant, a lengthy and detailed elaboration upon the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 23, you may be surprised at some of the laws that are included. Many of these seem to me strange and archaic, until I considered the ancient conditions of health and social standards that prevailed. For example, the dietary laws were meant to protect the Israelites from obvious problems of disease and sanitary conditions.

The second lectionary passage is a lengthy and emotional song of praise where the psalmist bares his soul to God and asks for salvation and forgiveness. The passage contains the instruction: “For the director of music: To the tune of “Lilies of David”, so an instrumental accompaniment was apparently called for.

Mark 14, verses 12-16, the third lectionary, describes the *Last Supper* in which at the beginning, Jesus says:

“Verily I say unto you, one of you who eats with me shall betray me.”

The story is familiar to all of us from Easter services in years past. Renew it today.

The final lectionary passage is a plea for unity from St. Paul, whose congregations suffered from divisions and schisms uncommon for such a small population. He writes:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we enter this Holy period, make us humble as we commemorate the sacrifice and resurrection of our dear Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen**

Bruce Whitener

Good Friday, April 6

Psalm 22
Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12
John 18: 1-19

“I am He”

(breath)

I have carried your diseases and your dis-ease.

I have borne your pain and made it mine.

(breath)

I have endured punishment for your wholeness.

I have been bruised and beaten that you might be healed.

(breath)

I love you, more than my own life.

*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,
(for what was written was written)*

did not open his mouth at the solemn hour.

*Though his grave was with the wicked,
no deceit was in his mouth.*

He, a lamb led to slaughter, did not open his mouth.

But if he could speak now –

as we wait, and watch, and wonder again how it could have come to this –

perhaps we would hear him say:

I love you. I love you. I love you.

*And amid the fury of this life, the ever-present to and fro,
perhaps we would become very still, and silent, and
breathe for a moment with Him as we remember that last*

breath... which makes us and all things new.

Kathryn Sparks

Holy Saturday

Exodus 14: 10-18; Mark 16: 1-8; and Romans 6: 3-11

Saturday, April 7, 2012

For the disciples this was a sabbath day. Mark 15 describes the day of Jesus' trial, crucifixion, death and burial, the evening before the sabbath day. Mark Chapter 16 picks up the narrative when the sabbath was past, and the women coming to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body found the tomb opened and no body there, but beheld a young man clothed in white who told them Jesus was risen. The canonical gospels do not tell us what happened in between the evening before the sabbath when Jesus was laid in the tomb, and the evening of the sabbath, when the sabbath was ended. Luke's gospel tells us that the women rested on the sabbath day, according to the commandment, before they returned to the sepulchre. None of the gospel accounts tell us exactly when during this period Jesus was resurrected. In the Apostles' Creed, we affirm that Jesus "descended into hell." How then should we spend this sabbath day?

Traditionally, Holy Saturday does not receive much attention in the Presbyterian or western protestant liturgical calendar. I regret this. I propose that we disciples who yet live the life incarnate--we survivors--spend some sabbath time with the interstitial text between the canonical Mark 15 and Mark 16, reading it dialectically with the narratives of our own lives, and with the help of the paraclete Spirit explore the territory of this middle day.

Why? Because God in God's wisdom ordained this middle day for us--a day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. One whole, precious day--between cross and resurrection. A middle time. A middle space. A mixed place. Where sorrow and hope are intermingled. Where bewilderment and faith, disappointment and trust, anger and reassurance, and all of our mixed thoughts, feelings, and emotions coexist. Where resolution is not yet, and there may be a realization it may not come. An opened tomb--and open wound. Where God is--and isn't. Where God isn't--and IS.

Theologians from Walter Brueggemann, to Alan Lewis, to Shelly Rambo, to Cornell West have cautioned against the traditional, hurried, linear reading of the gospel narrative from cross to resurrection in which life (resurrection) is quickly and neatly victorious over death. Brueggemann, reading the gospel and Holocaust narratives dialectically, concluded, "the second day looms larger, deeper, and more seriously than we had noticed in the drama we Christians regularly confess and claim. The rush to the third day must be profoundly slowed." West, reading the gospel and African American narratives dialectically, also resists hasty triumphalist reading. He has described Holy Saturday as the day most American Christian churches want to ignore. "Why? Because it's not about just winning. It's about testifying and bearing witness." "The centrality of Good Friday--and especially Holy Saturday," he concluded, "for me now prevents me from embracing Easter too quickly." Rambo, reading studies and narratives of trauma and its aftermath dialectically with the gospel narratives, concludes that while it can "provide a sense of promise and hope, the linear reading of life over-and-against death runs certain dangers. It can gloss over difficulty...;" "gloss over and negate the difficult experience of life in the aftermath of death;" and fail to "speak to the realities of traumatic suffering." "Traumatic experience, insofar as it reconfigures the relationship between death and life, challenges familiar interpretations of redemption." "Trauma is not what is integrated in time.... Trauma is an open wound. For those who survive trauma, the experience of trauma can be likened to death, but the reality is that death has not ended; instead it persists." She describes this "middle" where death and life are no longer clearly bounded as a "perplexing space of survival," "a largely untheologized site, because the middle is overshadowed by the other two events." This middle challenges survivors directly, and those around them indirectly.

Dear Lord, We give You thanks for this day, as for every day, but especially for this "middle day." For the opportunity to remain. For the invitation to plumb the depths of and admit to difficult places for ourselves and others incarnate. We thank you, precious Lord, for taking our hand, and journeying with us on this way. Amen.

Karen Mills

“Named”

April 5, 2012 [Easter]

John 20: 1-18

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned to him and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” John 20: 11-18 (RSV)

Is there anything more wonderful than a loved one calling you by name? *Jesus said to her, “Mary.”*

Have you ever marveled that we can hear a friend or loved one say a single word over the phone – perhaps even after years of silence – and we can detect – from accent, inflection, volume, timbre, who knows – exactly who it is? *She turned to him and said, “Rabboni!”*

So the crucifixion and resurrection are not just concepts. No, they are specific events that occurred at a specific time and place – and the first witness, Mary, is called by our Lord by name. And so you, too, my fellow witnesses, are named by Christ, in all your specificity and individuality, with all your frailties and idiosyncrasies, in all your shadows and light. That’s what baptism is all about.

There is an old gospel hymn, much loved and much maligned, “In the Garden”. In its own sentimental way, it recounts the story of Mary in the garden, and, among other things, it says, “And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own.” Isn’t that what each of us desperately needs and wants to know, that we are named and known and, in the words of St. Paul, “bought with a price”?

Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned to him and said, “Rabboni!” Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Prayer: *O Lord, with Your eyes you have searched me, And, while smiling, have called out my name, Now my boat’s left on the shoreline behind me, Now with you I will seek other seas. Alleluia. Amen*

Paul B. Dornan