

Lent 2013

The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.

www.nyapc.com

2013 Lenten Calendar
(Sunday Services at 8:45 and 11:00)

Wednesday, February 13

Ash Wednesday Service, 7:00 pm,
Sanctuary, Supper-PMH, 6-6:45 pm

Sunday, February 17

First Sunday in Lent

Saturday, February 23

Solitude Retreat at NYAPC, 8:30am-
12:30pm (meditation, labyrinth)

Sunday, February 24

Second Sunday in Lent

Tuesday, February 26

Discussion of Ch. 2 of The Cross and
the Lynching Tree, NYA 6:30-8:30p

Sunday, March 3

Third Sunday in Lent, Communion

Sunday, March 10

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Meeting of
Congregation to elect Associate
Pastor Nominating Committee,
Sanctuary, 12:15pm

Sunday, March 17

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Saturday, March 23

Discussion of Ch. 3 of The Cross and
the Lynching Tree, Mt. Lebanon
Baptist Church, 10:00-12:00 noon

Sunday, March 24

Palm Sunday

Thursday, March 28

Maundy Thursday Service 7 pm,
Sanctuary (Communion), light
Supper, 6 pm, PMH

Friday, March 29

Good Friday Service, 12 noon,
Sanctuary

Sunday, March 31

Easter Sunday

7:15 am Sunrise Service

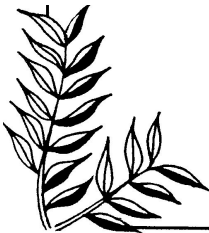
7:45 am Breakfast (\$7)

8:45 am Worship Service

9:45 am Breakfast (\$7)

10:40 am Special Music

11:00 am Worship Service



From Catastrophe to Grace

February 13

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17a

Matthew 6:1-6, 16

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

The season of Lent is upon us and we begin our journey, our forty day preparation, toward Easter. Easter is such a joyful time, filled with fond memories. And yet, Lent poses many challenges—our preparation for celebration is not easy.

Today's scripture passages are also a journey. Instead of focusing on one or two common themes, the scripture begins by warning us of a coming catastrophe, then urges repentance, encourages faithfulness, and finally calls us to accept God's grace.

Joel 2:1b-2a tells us: "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!" It is a strong warning, meant to incite fear or anxiety.

Joel later explains how the calamity is averted: through repentance. "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." (Joel 2:13b) God's mercy is clear in this passage. It provides a welcome contrast to the beginning of Joel 2.

The scripture from Matthew urges us to engage sincerely with God. We are encouraged to interact with God out of gratitude, true belief and respect, not for how we may appear to others. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." (Matthew 6:1) This section of Matthew provides readers with a guide to Christian living: genuine piety should not be ostentatious. Only several verses after today's scripture reading, Matthew describes prayer, including telling us to pray with the Lord's Prayer.

In the final scripture lesson for today, 2 Corinthians addresses God's grace. Paul urges the Corinthians to respond faithfully to God's grace, even when that is difficult to do. The scripture today has led us on a journey from warnings of a catastrophe to repentance and faithfulness and finally assurances of God's grace. In many ways, this outlines the Lenten journey that we will make as we prepare for Easter.

Prayer: Loving God, be with us as we begin our Lenten journey. Be with us each day as we repent and strive to live faithfully. Cleanse us as we begin our preparations for the coming of your Son. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

--Melissa Jane Taylor

Judges 7 1-18
Hebrews 12 1-8
John 17 1-8

Thursday, February 14

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which does so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set above us. Hebrews 12 v 1

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

When pastors spoke of “cloud of witnesses,” I used to look around the sanctuary and visualize friends who are no longer with us, their pews empty or reoccupied. Yet the whole church is filled with witnesses—dear, funny, serious, quiet, exuberant. . .many more than I will mention.

There in the Peter Marshall Hall, Steve and choir members rock the rafters with the joy of Gilbert and Sullivan. Another time in that same space Bob brings food and game to Seven to Nine

Sunday School classes take place all over the church. Miss Niemeyer shows children the seeds of flowers and of caring. While some of the little ones grow up to be teachers themselves, others join the cloud of witnesses too young, and we'll never forget them. Gil teaches and lives the gospel, visiting the sick, caring for his poetic wife and making his signature brownies again and again.

Deaconesses, how many now gone, have a lovely meal prepared in the church kitchen and organize carefully so that the ill and bereaved are not forgotten and the traditional silver is respectfully polished and carefully stored.

In Scottish brogue or a soft southern drawl, preachers touch members with poetic sermons and the call for social outreach.

“Let us Gather by the River” pours forth from the Radcliffe Room. Bruce leads with typical enthusiasm, while Billie, with her gentle grace joins in song. Mike, an off-and-on visitor takes over the piano pounding out the throbbing beat of “There is a Bright Light Somewhere.”

“There is a bright light somewhere. There is a bright light somewhere.
Don't rest until you find it. There is a bright light somewhere.
When your way seems dark and dread, don't have to worry,
'Cause God is near.
If in your heart there is no song,
Just keep the faith and keep holding on.”

In memory of the friends mentioned and many others equally close to our hearts, we will remember, keep the faith and keep holding on.

Helen Williams

Friday, February 15

Judges 7:19-8:12

John 17:9-19

Hebrews 12:9-17

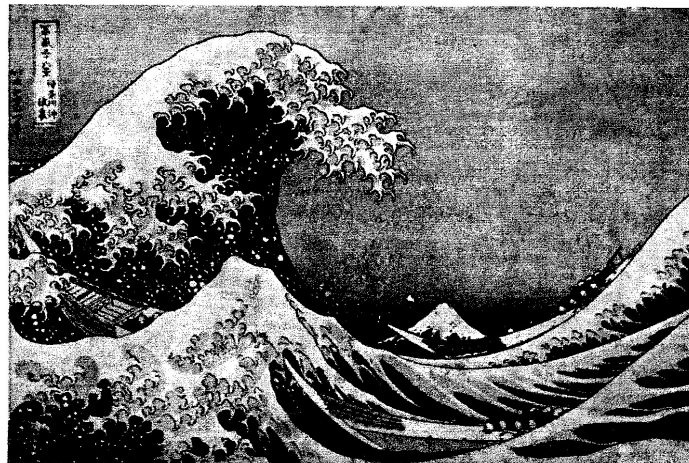
Life is a journey, not a destination. I could find some manifestation of this maxim anywhere I turn. Advertising, music, film. Stories that remind me to focus on the present, to enjoy the simple things in life; the rest will work itself out.

Usually we only think of the journey when things get hectic—when we don't have what we think we need. Time, money, experience. Sometimes I catch myself enjoying the journey. Preparing dinner, learning a language, or drawing. For a moment I notice the color of the vegetables, the fluidity of a foreign phrase, and the weight of a line across the page.

Why is it so difficult to live the journey? How do we know which journey is right for us? These questions come to mind as I read the passages. In Hebrews, we find a reassuring answer—our journey is the destination. Like a discipline, it is through our daily actions and our interactions with others that we grow closer to God. Gideon's triumph shows that our journey is driven by faith and often met with resistance. In John, we also see that God is with us every step of the way.

As we enter Lent, it's comforting to know that we have God's grace. It shifts my thinking from outcome to process, and helps me focus more on being open to God. When our own notions of immediacy and necessity are put into perspective, we can live more abundantly through God.

Matt Ford



Saturday, February 16, 2013

Judges 8:22-35

John 17:20-26

Hebrews 12:25-29

I gave up my car a year and a half ago. Now, each Sunday, I exit a Red Line train at Metro Center and walk up the escalators on the 12th Street side. Most weeks in the fall, and many in winter, the platform is full of people wearing jerseys for the Redskins or the Caps. They stagger around in groups, clutching tickets, or kids, looking for the transfer line or hopping on my train to move on to Gallery Place.

Sports, after all, is the one true religion of the US, with high priests, special garb, ritual, hefty tithing, passionate eschatological debate. I subscribe myself, following along the Nationals through seven painful years and triumphant playoff berth in 2012. My friends tell me to lighten up, that this is better than the gladiator alternative from Roman times. (I get it. I really do. Sometimes I find myself misty at sports games, so thankful that we live in a place where we can peacefully gather.)

Lately, however, it appears only marginally better. Between Lance's painful (if long overdue) admission, Azarenka's dubious "injuries" during the Australian Open semi-final, the RGIII knee surgery, A-Rod's denials and the rampant head injuries "under study" by the NFL, sports magnifies our human foibles.

And there is something about the way we follow – with such devotion – that reminds me of the Israelites in the first passage. I don't blame any of us. It's impossible to resist the barrage of television, social media, culture that demands we pay attention. That, and it's fun. We feel great when our teams win, love the stories, share with neighbors.

The Israelites, truly thankful for Gideon's leadership, offer the spoils of their battles, and their devotion for a time. It lasts for a generation or two. But soon enough, when Gideon dies, when the magnetism of the leader is gone, the Israelites' loyalty is no deeper than convenience, and they chase the gods of Baal. "The Israelites did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side."

I wonder if my devotion is no deeper than convenience. I'm easily distracted, and often disloyal. I make this decision week by week, as I choose where to spend my time.

I give thanks to the Lord, with my whole heart. – Psalm 9

Rebecca Davis

February 17, 2013

Luke 4: 1-13

Universal Temptations of the Soul

A number of years ago I read a little book on Christian leadership by Henri Nouwen who is a Roman Catholic priest and who had been a professor of pastoral theology at Harvard, Yale, Notre Dame, but at the time of writing this book had moved from the academic community to the L'Arche Community for the mentally handicapped. The book entitled *In the Name of Jesus* had a profound effect on my own understanding of servant leadership. Uniquely Nouwen's model for this leadership came from the temptations of Jesus, our scripture for today!

Nouwen realized how much his own thinking about what is important in life was influenced by the desire to be **relevant** – “*turn this stone into bread,*” the desire to be **powerful**, “*I will give you glory and authority if you fall down and worship me.,*” and the desire to be **popular**, “*throw yourself down*” (from the pinnacle of the temple). Are not Jesus' temptations universal – our temptations for today? Think with me --

Are we not tempted to do something that gives notoriety; we want to be recognized, we want to do something noteworthy; we want to make a name for ourself and our families?

Are we not tempted to have as much power and control as possible? We are often seeking power over another – economic power, intellectual power, political power, moral power. We want to exercise our minority power over others – feminist power, black power, gay power.

Are we not tempted to seek applause, to do something spectacular – be a super- hero? We want to do something to be seen by all. We want stardom and individual heroism!

YET we follow One who did not cling to divine power, but emptied himself and became a servant of love. After his time in the wilderness, Jesus went to his hometown and into the familiar synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news for the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...*”(Lk. 4:18) After wrestling with the demons of the desert, Jesus discerned his true calling – a servant of love. Is this not the true calling of every Christian?

In the Benedictine Rule it says “only what turns to love in your life will last” Amen!

PRAYER: O God of the counter-intuitive and the paradox, give us hearts to understand your way – that in surrender to your will is our strength and power. Save us from the temptations of our self-centered ways. Lead us through our Lenten wilderness of lost purpose, sickness, technology overload, broken relationships, difficult children, estranged relatives, spiritual deserts to the resurrection light of new life. We pray in the name of Jesus, who died that we might live! Amen.

Rev. Beth Braxton

Monday, February 18

Judges 9: 1-21

Hebrew 2: 11-18

Mark 1: 1-13

In the passage from Mark we find the story of Jesus' 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness—perhaps the most well-known story of temptation in the Bible and the basis for our own 40 days and 40 nights of Lent. It connects us to Jesus in a very human manner as Hebrews 2:18 points out “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” We find ourselves tempted every day and in many ways and the thought that Jesus found himself with that same sensation warrants consideration.

But in re-reading these scriptures, what struck me most was the dissidence between temptation and trust. “Trust in God.” We hear these simple words all the time and yet how often do we find ourselves distrusting? We think we know better—so we find ourselves tempted to take the path of least resistance rather than challenging ourselves to strive towards greater communion with God. But God calls us to bigger and better things.

The question of trusting in God's purpose for us versus allowing one to be swayed towards the common, easier way is not new. The Parable of the Trees found in Judges 9: 8-15 illustrates the peace that comes when we strive towards our purpose through God. And in doing so, we find communion with Him.

So where do we start when we are surrounded by the cacophony and busyness of Washington, D.C. life? Perhaps we should reference “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” (Mark 1: 3) We simply need to prepare and to be still with the questions and the temptations inside our own hearts. Lent offers us a season—40 days and 40 nights—to prepare the way for the Lord. We don't need to have all of the answers or fix every crack in our own path. We just need to prepare the way.

As I write this, I can't help but hear “Prepare Ye The Way of The Lord,” the opening number from the musical *Godspell*. If you aren't familiar with it, the song is simple. Those are the only words—Prepare Ye The Way of The Lord—and they repeat over and over starting out a cappella and then with growing accompaniment. A counter melody is introduced on the same words before everyone comes together in harmony at the end.

The song reminds me to start simply and listen for God's call. What's more—and what's so brilliantly illustrated in this song, as one voice becomes many—God provides us with a faith community that loves and supports us as we prepare the way.

“For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” (Hebrews 2: 11-12)

May this period of Lent be a chance for all of us to stop, listen, and prepare.

Be blessed,
Whitney McColley

Tuesday, February 19

Judges 9:22-25, 50-57

Mark 1:14-28

Hebrews 3:1-11

Following God's Call, Not the World's

In Judges 9, we see the appalling life and death of Abimelech, one of Gideon's sons. God had called Gideon to save the Israelites from the Midianites, but after Gideon's death the people again turned to follow the ways of their Canaanite neighbors and their gods. Abimelech is the paradigm case and the consequence of this infidelity. After assassinating his 70 half-brothers(!), using money contributed to idols, he establishes himself as "King" (long before God begrudgingly allows the Israelites to establish a monarchy). Unlike his father, who followed God's call and found victory in divinely inspired strategies that contradicted conventional wisdom, Abimelech's schemes to seize power reflect all too familiar unprincipled human ambition. This could not end well. After a turbulent three-year reign, he slaughters the people of Shechem (his relatives who assisted his earlier fratricide), and then meets his own end during a similar effort to incinerate men and women who have taken refuge in another town's fortress. A woman drops a millstone from the tower that cracks Abimelech's skull, and the "shameful" nature of his death (at the hands of a woman) is recorded in the world's most-read history, despite his efforts to disguise it by ordering one of his own soldiers to skewer him with a sword.

In contrast to this sordid tale, Mark 1 records the paradigm case of following God's call. Jesus calls four of his disciples – Simon, Andrew, James, and John – who all drop their fishing nets without hesitation and obediently follow Jesus. James and John even leave their own father sitting in the fishing boat. They go with Jesus to Capernaum, where they witness an extraordinary exorcism. A man possessed by an evil spirit cries out, "What do you want with us, Jesus? I know who you are: You are God's Holy One!" They all watch in amazement as the evil spirit dramatically departs in response to Jesus' command. Although following God's call ultimately leads to martyrs' deaths for at least three of these disciples, they accept their fate with joy, not shame, and history recognizes them as heroes of the faith.

In Hebrews 3, the author addresses first-century Jewish Christians, discouraged and under pressure to renounce their faith in Jesus. The scripture admonishes these Christians – and warns us today – to follow the example of the disciples in Mark, and not the examples of Abimelech and their own ancestors, who succumbed to the temptation to follow the values and priorities of the world around them rather than the calling of God.

Lord, help us to hear your voice and to follow your call. Teach us to let go of our selfish desire to take things into our own hands, when we stubbornly rebel against your will. Forgive us, and inspire us instead to leave our past lives behind, and to surrender our future to you.

Jim Bird & Betsy Merritt

Encouraging Faith Through Pain

Judges 11:1-11
Mark 1:29-45
Hebrews 3:12-19

February 20, 2013

In the passage from Judges, we meet Jephthah, who, though a “mighty warrior,” is driven away by his family and people because his mother was a prostitute. Cast out, he holds company with a “gang of scoundrels.” Despite this rejection and Jephthah’s questionable company, God does not reject Jephthah. And, ultimately, Jephthah does not reject God. When the elders of Gilead ask for Jephthah’s help in fighting the Ammonites, he acknowledges that any victory will come from God (“the Lord gives them [the Ammonites] to me”). Jephthah, once scorned and rejected, becomes the “head and commander over them.”

In the passage from Mark, Jesus heals many people - Simon’s mother-in-law, the demon-possessed, a leper. He heals them without regard to whether they “deserve” sickness or healing. Simon’s mother-in-law immediately shows her gratitude by serving him, but the leper immediately disobeys Jesus’ command not to tell anyone.

The passage from Hebrews warns us not to have an “unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.” It exhorts us to “encourage one another daily” so that no one will be “hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

These passages tell us a bit about pain, faith and encouragement. When we experience pain or difficulty, it is tempting to explain the inexplicable with two fallacies: (1) God clearly doesn’t care about me because God did this to me, or (2) I deserve this bad thing because of something bad about me / something bad I did.

But these are fallacies. God loved and blessed Jephthah no matter his parentage, no matter his rejection by his family, no matter his decision to take up with bad company. And Jesus loved and healed the sick no matter the nature of their illness, no matter how they got sick, no matter what they would do upon being healed.

In our pain, we can find strength in faith in God’s love for us. Sometimes, as we believe, the immediate source of pain will go away (Jephthah was welcomed home as the head of his tribe; illness was miraculously healed). But sometimes it won’t. That doesn’t make God’s love any less real, but the pain can feel insurmountable. That’s why the passage from Hebrews tells us to believe and to encourage one another in our belief. Faith isn’t easy. We need community with God and with other believers to meet pain with faith.

Prayer: God, thank you for your unchanging love. Please help me to believe even when I feel rejected, disappointed, or afflicted. Thank you for the encouragement of my church family. Please help me to remember to encourage others in their faith.

Elisa Jillson

Scriptures:

Thursday, February 21, 2013

- **Judges 11:29-40**
- **Mark 2:1-12**
- **Hebrews 4:1-10**

The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter—perhaps literally, but more likely to a life of celibacy in service to the Lord—fulfills her father's vow promising to offer up a burnt offering if God gave Jephthah victory over his enemies, the Ammonites.

Jesus forgives the sins and heals the paralyzed man in Capernaum despite accusations by the attending scribes that he has committed blasphemy, because "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

The writer of Hebrews exhorts Jewish converts to Christianity who are tempted to revert to Judaism not to abandon their belief, but rather to remain faithful and enter the spiritual rest God promises.

These are the scriptures for this day in Lent; in each case, faith and sacrifice are intertwined and point to the rewards God promises us for doing God's will.

For Jephthah the Gileadite and a Judge of the Israelites, the sacrifice is the loss of future generations. His daughter is his only child. But he has made a promise to God, and his daughter honors it, giving up the traditional roles of wife and mother: "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth..." She asks for two months to "wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity" and is given this time, returning so that her father can complete his vow to God and confirm his faith through this sacrifice.

For Jesus, the time has come to make it clear that he is God's son with God's power on earth, even though doing so sets him firmly on the path to crucifixion. Seeing the faith of the friends who risk lowering the paralyzed man to Jesus through the roof of the house where he is speaking, Jesus says to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Jesus then perceives that the scribes are questioning his actions in their hearts and among themselves and calling them blasphemy. He asks the scribes, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?" Jesus continues, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?' But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And the man is paralyzed no more. Jesus makes tangible his spiritual power to forgive sins by healing the man's body.

For the weary community of early Christians to whom doing God's will has become a burden that they are sorely tempted to throw off, the sacrifice is perseverance in the face of persecution and the promise, "a Sabbath rest" that "still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his." Offering an historical perspective that reinterprets events in the Old Testament and reminds his readers that Jesus is greater than Moses, superior to the angels, and altogether sufficient as the revealer and mediator of God's grace, the author of Hebrews urges continued faithfulness. Of this intellectually demanding book, professor and scholar Rev. Frances Taylor Gench says in her work *Hebrews and James*, "Hebrews speaks a word of grace to all who find themselves in need of encouragement and renewed commitment to the faith."

A prayer: *Dear God, in this Lenten season, help us to persevere in our belief individually and together, sacrificing as we are called to do and holding fast to your promise of forgiveness and grace embodied in your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

~ Edith Holmes Snyder

February 22, 2013

Judges 12: 1-7

Mark 2: 13-22

Hebrews 4: 11-16

In studying the three Bible passages above, several important lessons came to light that are so pertinent today. In the verses from Judges, Jephthah led Israel's forces in a victory over the enemy, the Ammonites. Shortly after this he was involved in war with the tribe of Ephraim over a misunderstanding. The men of Ephraim were upset that they were not included in the battle against the Ammonites, but Jephthah said he had called them to help. This misunderstanding led to the deaths of thousands. Communication is such a key issue in relationships. So many unfortunate things can happen if we don't communicate and try to "hear" what someone is saying.

The passage from Mark cites some events in the life of Jesus that help reveal who he really is. The actions of Jesus speak much louder than any words. In those days tax collectors were hated by the Jews because of their reputation for cheating and their support of Rome. The Pharisees were upset when they saw Jesus dining with many tax collectors and sinners. Are we guilty of avoiding certain people because of generalizations? In the end of this passage Jesus tells us not to put new wine in old wineskins. In other words, be flexible and open to accepting Jesus' message that will change our lives.

In Hebrews, we are reminded that the "word of God is living and active" and "before him no creature is hidden" .. He knows us so well, but loves us still. We should take comfort in the fact that when Jesus was on Earth he experienced many temptations, so he can sympathize with us when we make mistakes.

The following prayer is from an unknown author.

Prayer: Lord, I am called to kindness each day, but there are days that this call seems beyond my abilities or my discipline. And there are days when I simply don't want to be kind – not to him or to her. Or, I simply want to be witty and humorous – even if it is at the expense of another. I want to be smart and incisive, even at the cost of someone's feelings. Help me to remember that my call is to be kind, as you were kind. Help me to practice the discipline of kindness – of putting others first and thinking of how I can offer your love to them. May your kindness touch those I meet, through my words and deeds. Amen

Helen Joseph

February 23, 2013

Judges 13:1-14

Mark 2:23-3:6

Hebrews 5:1-10

Excerpts from the Judges text: *The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. There was a certain man...whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, "Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean...No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines."*

Then the woman came and told her husband "A man of God came to me and his appearance was like that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring; I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name; but he said to me, "You shall conceive and bear a son."

What people of faith Manoah and his wife were. Sadly, we do not know her name (and that is a whole different topic of discussion), but we know that God chose to bless her with a son – Samson. The Israelites had been captives of the Philistines for 40 years, but God had not abandoned them. Now if I were this woman – who was not free and who hadn't been able to bear a child her whole life – I might have laughed out loud if an angel approached me and said "you will conceive and bear a son." Her response wasn't "Huh?" or "What are you talking about?" She didn't even ask him who he was. She had no question or disbelief at all – that is some amazing faith!!

During Lent and other times in our lives when we are feeling low and forgotten by God, we should remember the amazing faith of Manoah and his wife. It was because of their total trust in God and obedience to his instruction that Samson grew strong and powerful and was able to follow through on God's plan.

Even Jesus was required to show his faith in God's plan on the way to becoming our Savior. The Hebrews passage teaches that *"Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."*

Dear Lord, Help us to trust you and have faith in your plan for us, even when we feel alone and when the way forward is hard.

Leigh Hildebrand

Without a Psalm

**Gen. 5:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27;
Luke 13: 31-35, Phil. 3:17-4: 1**

Sunday, February 24

Today's passages did not hold a great deal of inspiration for me. The Genesis selection is a genealogy, one male after another living 800 years each. In Luke, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' warning that Herod seeks to kill Him, telling them that "I must go on my way ... for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem." Paul reminds the Philippians "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ." And that leaves the Psalm.

I am always grateful for a Psalm, and I do not know what I would do without them, in fear, or sorrow, and especially in joy and praise. I never feel that I am able to praise and thank God adequately. As I walk daily up my long driveway from the mailbox, flanked by ancient trees towering above me, surrounded by woods and wildlife, I am awed by the setting in which God allows me to live, but WOW! is a meager and unsatisfying expression of wonder at His works and gratitude for His gifts.. I simply cannot find the right words to express my sense of blessing. And when the curse of depression threatens to overcome me, again words fail me, it is so hard to ask *why*, or beg help.

Thank God for the Psalms. Where would I be without a Psalm? As I contemplated that question, an old song came into mind, "Without a Song," by George Benson: *I'll never know what makes the rain to fall; I'll never know what makes the grass so tall; I only know there ain't no love at all; Without a song!!* And even emptier, without a Psalm.

At weddings, at funerals, in joy or pain or fear or gratitude, we turn to the Psalms. What we cannot express from the depths of *our* souls, they do for us. Today's Psalm 27 covers a gamut of emotions, as David expresses, first, unconditional trust and joy, then a longing to "behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple, ". God is "light", "salvation" and "strength". But in the second half, verses 7-14, despair and fear set in. Trust continues however. David is not afraid to reveal his heart and mind to God.

Sometimes, familiarity may make us miss the depths that we find in the center of our Bibles. These are not Hallmark sentiments. They are real, they are emotional, they are *human*, and they are a gift. They remind us that God is not some distant being out in the stars, but, for the Psalmists, Someone to praise, to worship, yes, but also to wrestle with, sometimes to accuse or harangue, or question, but always trust.

Lord God, thank you for the gift of Psalms, that express for us our deepest feelings, of love, of trust, of awe and wonder, of fear and anger and despair, all of those too-human needs that we cannot find the words to express or comprehend. Amen

Mary Krug

Follow-Through

Judges 13:15-24

Mark 3: 7-19a

Philippians 4: 8-13

Monday, February 25, 2013

Modern management theory has a lot to say about giving people missions to accomplish and giving them authority and responsibility to figure out how to achieve the mission. In today's readings, God comes across to me as a very modern sort of manager.

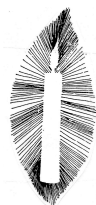
The folks in today's Lectionary readings have all had close and dramatic encounters with God and have been given a mission to perform in the world. What next? God does not seem inclined to give specific instructions on next steps. In Judges, Manoah and his wife see an angel who tells them that their son, Sampson, "...will begin to rescue Israel from the power of the Philistines." In Mark, Jesus appoints the apostles, "...to be sent out to preach, with the power to cast out devils." Paul is in Phillipi continuing his mission to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles. There is no script beyond the basic mission statement. How do they figure out what to do next – the next hour, the next day, the next month?

It seems to me that the question of what next – the follow-through – is a timeless question that afflicts us all. I believe that God is involved in the details of our lives but I am not sure how that works on a day-to-day or hour-to-hour basis. I think God leaves room for our own decision-making – to a great degree we get to chart our own course. But of course that often means that there are obstacles to overcome, problems to solve, courage to be found.

I think Paul is instructive on this point. The folks in Phillipi are concerned about his welfare. He tells them, "I have learned to manage on whatever I have. I know how to be poor and I know how to be rich too. I have been through my initiation and now I am ready for anything anywhere....There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength." It seems that we are to move forward by learning from our experiences and relying on God to help us through the rough spots. Seems like a good formula, if we can learn to follow it.

Prayer: Oh God, give me the strength and wisdom to do the right thing, everyday and every way.

Steve Dewhurst



February 26, 2013

Judges 14: 1 – 19

Mark 3: 19b – 35

2 Thessalonians 3: 6 – 13

I have to admit that today's scripture leaves me more puzzled than satisfied. One image stands out: the picture of Samson scooping honey out of the carcass of a young lion he killed. Samson, who has asked his parents to get him that Philistine woman he saw, is walking to claim her and, surprised to see the bees' nest in the lion's carcass, scoops out some honey first for himself and then some to take to his promised bride. Samson doesn't know why the lion was threatening him, or how he was able to tear it apart with his bare hands, nor does he know why the bees formed a nest in the carcass. He seems surprised, maybe because the carcass is still there; maybe because he'd forgotten he had killed the lion; and perhaps especially surprised to find sweetness in the center of death and decay, staring him in the face.

Throughout this passage, the writer of Judges tells us that the actors in the story are guided by God but they don't know it. Samson's parents don't know that "the Lord was at work in this [Samson's attraction to the Philistine woman], seeking an opportunity against the Philistines." Samson doesn't know that the Lord has put the lion there to threaten him and that his physical powers come from God; later, he doesn't know that the spirit "seized" him to kill 30 men to make good on his bet with the Philistines, when they answered his riddle correctly.

I'm bothered by the notion of God telling us to do something violent. I'm particularly disturbed by the notion that we might be unwittingly doing things that the Spirit has guided us to do, especially violent acts. Why would God have us kill? And why would God not let us know that we're doing what he wants us to do? Granted, Samson's violence ends in his losing his wife: after killing the 30 men for their clothes as the rewards he owes the Philistines, Samson angrily goes back home, resenting his loss of face. His father assumes Samson doesn't want his new wife and "gives" her to Samson's brother instead. Perhaps God's lesson to Samson was the lesson of humility.

Samson's back-story told here in Judges, above all, seems like a growing-up story, just like the story in Mark's gospel of Jesus healing and teaching, without his parents, is a story of a young man asserting his independence.

Growing up, becoming mature, breaking away from your parents, not knowing when God's speaking to you, not knowing that you're doing God's will or why God is making you do something; aspiring to something beyond your station in life; seeming to act on impulse when in fact it's God's plan: I can't make sense of the lesson in the passages in Judges and Mark. What bothers with me are the thirty dead men in another town, slain for their clothes to pay for a lost bet. What lures me to find meaning in this text is all that golden honey in the lion's carcass. There must be something good, that honey seems to be saying. I can't tell if it represents temptation or reward, but in the midst of striving and uncertainty and death and decay, it's the only bright spot. I will not forget the picture of a surprised, puzzled Samson, scooping honey out of the lion he forgot he killed, taking some to his bride. Maybe the lesson is there.

Amy Garrou

ON-THE- JOB TRAINING

Judges 14:20 – 15:20

February 27, Wednesday

Mark 4:1-20

Philippians 1:19b - 26

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Philippians 1:21

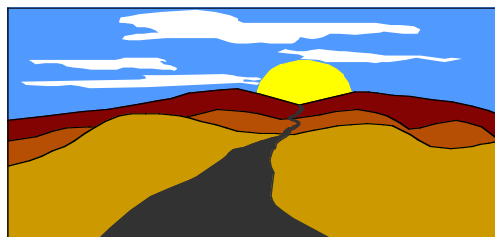
I am stunned by Paul’s faith in God’s love. Paul was living in joy with no fear of death even though he endured beatings, shipwrecks, and jail. As I’ve ruminated about his life, I have come to some conclusions. It took some time for Paul to get to this stage. After being called by God and blinded, he was taken “under the wing” for several years by a man known as a dedicated teacher. Surely there were others to support him. Then there was his missionary travel with its many adventures, also good learning tools.

Where am I going with this? I believe we are all on a journey of learning and experience that brings us to different faith places. It is important to remember that wherever we are in our journey, God loves us and wants us to live in joy and without fear. So I say, “We are all rookies here.” We are all valued and loved, and have something to contribute to help each other learn and grow. No matter our backgrounds, age, and situations. It also means that things take time, so we have to be patient with ourselves as well as others on our journey. And, we must not compare ourselves to others or put ourselves down because we don’t see ourselves as accomplished as others. That is not the point. Paul would have a fit if he thought we were demeaning ourselves because we weren’t shipwrecked, beaten up, or didn’t know Greek!

So let us say to each other as Paul did: “... I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,.. “

Prayer: Thank you Lord for being with us always, no matter where we are or what is going on in our lives. Give us the courage to accept your love and share it with others as our on-the-job training continues. Amen

Jenean McKay



Thursday, February 28, 2013

Judges 16:1-22

Mark 4:21-34

Philippians 1:27-2:2

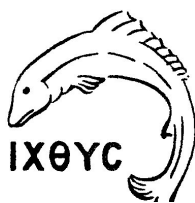
In the Judges passage, we find the familiar story of Samson and Delilah, the story of the downfall of a man because of his refusal to learn from his mistakes. Samson, already at odds with the Philistines after the loss of his wife, falls in love with a woman named Delilah. The lords of the Philistines ask Delilah to find out the secret to his strength for a large sum of money and she sets out to do so. Delilah asks Samson his weakness, he tells her, she binds him up in the manner in which he described and tells the Philistines to come after him. Since Samson lied, he manages to get away unscathed. The part of the story that is difficult to understand is why he stays with Delilah. She asks him the secret to his strength three more times, with a repetition the same sequence of events until the fourth time when he has finally conceded the truth. At what point should Samson have learned his lesson and decided Delilah may not have been the woman for him? I would say after the first time, but isn't it human nature to act obtusely and refuse to learn from our mistakes?

In Mark we find three parables. The first is about revealing that which is hidden and the second two about the kingdom of God. These three parables are followed by a short passage stating that Jesus only spoke to the people in parables, but explained the parables when he was alone with the disciples. Jesus knew the parables were difficult to understand and yet he saved the explanation for his closest followers. Are you part of the people, just interested in the story? Or do you desire a deeper understanding of the truth that is only available for Jesus' closest followers?

The Philippians passage is part of a letter from Paul and Timothy to the church in Philippi. They advise the church to conduct themselves in a manner that is worthy of the gospel, standing firm together in faith and against those who oppose them. They point out that the struggles the church in Philippi is facing are the same that they have faced. Since all believers face similar struggles, sticking together in support and love can help to keep us all on track.

Prayer: God, help us to be wise and learn from our mistakes. Exhort us to grow closer to Jesus to understand the difficult teachings. Guide our path and give us the strength to stand firm in our faith together.

Shanna Wood



Like a Timid Deer

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, writes that “[b]efore this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (verses 23-25).

The new life that God offers in this passage makes me feel both incredibly thankful and incredibly scared. On the one hand, what a blessing to be freed from the oppressive, impossible nature of the strict Judean law! In a busy life in which I already struggle to clean the bathroom regularly, get my students’ work graded in a timely fashion, and call my mom as often as she’d like, I can’t imagine a world in which I could also find time to bring the right fowl to the Temple at all the right times! With Paul’s message of freedom from the law, I feel like a teenager on the first day of getting her driver’s license, the world an open road in front of me. It is only because of the grace and forgiveness God offers that this faith is even attainable to me at all.

And yet sometimes the freedom from the law feels like an intimidating unknown. In being released from strict adherence to God’s good law, I feel like a shy small child encouraged to try out the big ball pit at a fast food restaurant for the first time, quietly resisting the prodding to just jump in. I feel like a timid deer on the edge of a wide meadow, wondering which way is safe. Like a young adult looking for a new job with a generic degree, who has no idea where to begin to search. Although freedom offers much forgiveness and relief, it offers minimal direction. A world of opportunities opens up, and yet you don’t know which one is best, or even good.

It reminds me of Derek Webb, a musician whom some of you may remember from the 1990s contemporary Christian band Caedman’s Call, and of his song, “A New Law.” In it, I think he plays with this theme when he sings, rather sarcastically,

Don't teach me about politics and government: just tell me who to vote for.

Don't teach me about truth and beauty: just label my music.

Don't teach me how to live like a free man: just give me a new law.

I don't wanna know if the answers aren't easy, so just bring it down from the mountain to me.

I want a new law

I want a new law

Gimme that new law

This song has always resonated with me in a world in which so many options and so much freedom are available to us. Sometimes it seems that, if we could just go back to a world where we were governed by a strict law, and all we had to do was obey it perfectly to do right, then that would be easier. Somehow, that seems comforting. Almost.

And then I am reminded what a sinner I am, even with a simplified law, and I am again ever so thankful. I realize the beauty of God’s design of freedom and forgiveness, and how God opens the world to everyone, literally everyone, with this gracious acceptance (Galatians 3:26-29). And I pray that God will simply guide my feet towards the good path and teach me to live like a free man—not give me a new law.

Prayer: Dear God, please teach us to have child-like faith in You, and not lean on a faith that tries simply to follow the rules. Allow us to feel your forgiveness and grace running over us and your Holy Spirit guiding us across the open meadows. Molly Lauer

God's Grace for Gerasenes

Judges 17: 1-3 - 1 Peter 2:1-10 - Mark 5: 1-20

Saturday, March 2, 2013

Jesus completed teaching from aboard a boat to people gathered on one shore of the Sea of Galilee, then crossed to the other side, where he called unclean spirits out of a terribly tortured man who lived in the region of the Gerasenes (or Gadarenes or Gergasenes). Gerasa and Gadara were two in a group ten cities--the Decapolis--southeast of the Sea of Galilee (now modern Jordan). These cities were deeply Greek-influenced, in contrast to the Jewish areas on the other side of the Sea. After Jesus called the demons out of the man, he asked his name. "My name is Legion, for we are many," he answered. Jesus called all the unclean spirits out of him. After that, Legion begged Jesus not to send him away from Him. But Jesus told him to go home to his friends and tell them how the Lord had compassion for him and had done great things for him, and they marveled.

Collectively or individually, sometimes we may be on the shore among the faithful, bathed in the sunshine and the word of the Lord, listening with rapt attention to the Lord's teaching. At other times, we may be holed up in caves, on the margins of things, tortured by demons, and far away from God. Even there, God comes to us, calls us by name, and offers compassion, cleansing, a fresh start, and new direction. What good news! Much as we may rejoice in that and want to simply bask in the safety and comfort that God provides, God calls and empowers us to go forth and share the good news with others, that they too, might know God.

We Presbyterians don't talk much about demons generally, or our own demons. Gerald May, M.D., served on the The Shalem Institute's staff for many years as Senior Fellow for Contemplative Theology and Psychology. In his book Care of Mind/Care of Spirit, May wrote that evil takes many forms. "It can occur as the theological *demonic*, in which something other than God becomes our ultimate concern. And, especially in the course of intentional spiritual searching, evil can surface in the form of real spiritual forces (spirits) that seek to divert and sabotage our journey towards deeper realization of God's truth and will.... Whatever its specific manifestations may be, it seems to me that evil always functions to subvert one's surrender to God, seeking to turn it into a capitulation to darkness and willfulness. Theologically, one might see that evil forces are ultimately of or at least permitted by God, but from the standpoint of human experience they clearly work to turn one's attention and intention away from God." "[D]iscernment involves distinguishing among inclinations that may be of God, of the evil spirit, or of oneself." "In the natural course of spiritual growth, one goes through many ups and downs." "One may proceed a way along the spiritual path, experiencing a variety of more superficial ups and downs without being fully aware of the inner changes taking place.... At some point an awareness of this underlying process begins to take place without understanding and without bearings. ...One may feel quite literally at sea, and utterly dependent upon and abandoned to the unknown and unknowable essence of God at the helm.... It is only through grace, I feel, that we are blessed with our blindness to the totality of this process and our ignorance as to its ultimate implications. Were it otherwise, I suspect none of us would have the courage to embark upon the journey in the first place."

As I write this meditation, our church embarks upon a reading with Emory United Methodist and Mt. Lebanon Baptist churches of James Cone's painful book, The Cross and the Lynching Tree. In it, Cone calls the Christian gospel "God's message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world." "[H]umanity's salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst." "[T]he church's most vexing problem today is how to define itself by the gospel of Jesus' cross. Where is the gospel of Jesus revealed today? ... One can lynch a person without a rope or a tree." Where, indeed....

God, help us to acknowledge and identify the demons that torture us, especially those of our own making, and bring them to You. Even when we do not seek You, find us in the painful places, and draw us close to You--the only place where we may find liberation, relief, and redirection. By Your grace, may we escape the bondage of our demons, and live as Your redeemed people and a light to all people and nations. Amen.

Karen Mills

Isaiah 55:1-9; psalm 63:1-8; Luke 13:1-9; and 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
March 3, 2013

Food! Glorious Food! Our scripture passages today are stuffed full of food imagery. Isaiah encourages us to delight in rich food and eat what is good (v. 2). The Psalmist speaks of being satisfied with a rich feast (v.5). Luke writes of a fruitless fig tree (v. 6) and Corinthians makes reference to spiritual food and drink (vs. 3-4). It would seem that all of our passages illustrate God's abundance and richness through food imagery. For ancient farmers and early agrarians, an abundant harvest was a sign of God's favor. A good harvest was an occasion to give thanks to God. A fruitful fig tree, rich food, and an abundant feast are all indicators of God's goodness and are signs of the gifts that God gives.

From our passage it is clear that food was a central part of life. Humans have always had to eat; and so food is one element that connects us to our brothers and sisters of ancient times. For them, and for us, food and breaking bread together is an opportunity to give thanks, to delight in God's goodness, and to reflect on God's blessings. Just like the ancient audience that first heard these passages, we are also familiar with what a drought in life feels like. We know what it is to thirst, to labor for that which does not satisfy, to spend money on that which does not give life, to feel like a fruitless fig tree.

But we are also a people who believe in restoration, in forgiveness, second chances, and abundance. We are invited to consider the gift of another Lenten season, another harvest, another year of life as an act of God's mercy. We are challenged to live each day as a gift from God and to live into gratitude for the abundant feast that God provides.

We will celebrate communion today in worship. This holy feast that we celebrate is a sign and seal of eating and drinking in communion with Christ. In this meal the Church celebrates the joyful feast of the people of God, and anticipates the great banquet of God's Kingdom. We also have ample opportunities during Lent at New York Avenue to gather around tables together and celebrate God's abundance in our community. Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday Soup Suppers and Easter morning breakfast are occasions during Lent when we will delight in rich food, eat what is good, drink in spiritual goodness together.

I would invite you today to reflect on those times when you felt like a withering fig tree, and yet God's abundance was still steadfast in your life. Thanks be to God for bread and drink, and an ever-ready table.

Reverend Katie Cashwell

Judges 18:1-15
Mark 5:21-43
Romans 13:8-14

Monday, March 4, 2013

**“IF I COULD JUST TOUCH THE HEM OF HIS GARMENT
THEN I’D BE MADE WHOLE RIGHT NOW”**

Before Sam Cooke started recording pop songs in the late 1950s, he was a member of the legendary gospel group, “The Soul Stirrers.” One of my favorite songs during Cooke’s years with the Soul Stirrers is based on a story out of today’s passage from Mark. It is about a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages without any relief for many years. She had heard about Jesus, and when she saw him with a crowd, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. “For she said ‘If I but touch his clothes I will be made well.’ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.” *See Mark 5: 27-29.*

Cooke’s song is all about the woman’s longing. With a soulful soaring voice that would become his pop trademark, Cooke makes you feel the woman’s deep desire to touch Jesus’ garment so that she could be “made whole.” The song’s refrain is all about her yearning: “She cried, ‘Oh oh Lord, Oh oh Lord, and Oh oh Lord, Oh oh Lord !!’ Said, ‘if I could just touch the hem of his garment then I’d be made whole right now!’” (To appreciate it, you really have to hear him sing it; you can find it on iTunes ☺) The song begins and ends with the woman’s plea; her healing doesn’t even make the final verse!

This made me think: Aren’t we all yearning to “touch” Jesus to be “made whole”? Our life on earth necessarily includes struggles, suffering, death and injustice. These experiences often leave us feeling forlorn, longing for meaning. Like the woman in the story, we want to be “made whole.”

Knowing the human condition, Jesus invites us to be made whole through him. We need only “touch the hem of his garment,” through faith, prayer and love. In his letter to the Romans, Paul talks about the importance of love: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” *Romans 13:8.* Paul says we should focus on loving others rather than on satisfying our own selfish desires; that is how we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” *Romans 13:14.*

As we reflect on our lives during Lent, we can think about ways in which we can “touch the garment” of Jesus through acts of love for others. In so doing, we actually “put on” our Lord Jesus Christ. Such acts of love can make us whole and give meaning to our lives.

Prayer: Dear God, As my spirit longs to be made whole, let love be my daily guide in serving the needs of others rather than my own selfish desires. Amen.

Adam Bain

Scripture Readings:

Judges 18:16-31: The story of the slaughter of the peace-loving people of Laish by the idol-worshipping tribe of Dan.

Mark 6:1-13: Jesus is rejected in his ministry at Nazareth, and he empowers his disciples.

Romans 14:1-12: Paul admonishes Christians not to judge or criticize others.

Romans 14:10-12: We are reminded that people have different diets and attitudes, but that doesn't matter, because whatever our practices, or whether we live or die, we all belong to God.

These readings remind us that we tend to follow our own impulses and desires, rather than trying to discern God's will for our lives and remain faithful to that in our daily activities. In Judges, the Danites, one of the 12 tribes of Israel, ignored God's prohibition on stealing, idol-worship and murder, breaking their covenant with God.

In Mark, the Jews of Nazareth reject Jesus and his message, prompting Jesus to express the sentiment that has become a modern cliché, *"Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown."* After that, Jesus left Nazareth and with his disciples went elsewhere to spread the good news.

The passage in Romans admonishes us to focus on our own relationship with God and the judgment he will pass on our life, rather than pointing the finger at others.

Romans 14:10-12: *"Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?...For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God...Each of us will be accountable to God."*

God calls us to obey his commandments and do his will. This obedience to God's will brings us into deeper relationship with God and into deeper fellowship with other human beings of all kinds. Ridicule, criticism and gossip isolate us from others, as surely as the violence of the Danites, and weaken the bond of fellowship that God wishes for all his people.

Prayer: *God, help me to be faithful to your will today and to refrain from judging or criticizing others. Help me remember that I am in fellowship with every other human being, because we all belong to You.*



Dying with Christ ... Living with Christ

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11
Mark 6:13-29
2 Timothy 2:8-17

Wednesday, March 6th, 2013

In many parts of the Middle East and Central Asia, the New Year has historically commenced on March 21st, the first day of Spring. I have often found something comforting and logical about this; for this is a time when the daffodils, crocuses, and – in Washington, DC – cherry blossoms begin to bloom, when baby lambs frolic in idyllic pastures and robins chirp in the warmth of the day, and when the snow of a long and often bleak winter melts off the hillsides of mountains and the lawns of towns. Spring is a time of rebirth, a time of renewal, a time when the old has passed and everything has become new once again. Indeed, in Persian, the name for New Year's is *Nowruz*, or literally “new day”.

And yet, to get to this day, we must often experience darkness and despair, death and dreariness. We must go through the season of winter where when growing up, at least in my hometown in upstate NY, gray appeared to be the color of prominence. It was seemingly the rule rather than the exception ... skies of dark gray, roads frequently lined with battleship gray ash, and long-standing snow often the color of gray soot. It is no coincidence that seasonal affective disorder is so common in the depths of a long drawn-out winter.

Perhaps it is also no coincidence that the season of Lent ... the season that ultimately takes us to Easter resurrection comes at this time of year. For it is during Lent that we take the time to deeply examine our relationship to God. Individually, we may ask ourselves, “Am I moving towards or away from God? Have I let my pride get the better of me? Have I denied my true and authentic self due to fear or the need for power; as a result of hubris or the temptation for extreme material or economic success?”

It is not easy going through the season of Lent ... the season of introspective reflection and self-awareness. Yet, we need not do this alone. We can walk with Jesus ... knowing that he will be tempted, that he will be denied and betrayed, and that he will be heinously crucified but ultimately resurrected. We can walk with Jesus knowing that the deaths of winter will bring the life of spring ... and that the long Lenten journey will lead the new Easter creation.

The reading in Ecclesiastes today may seem quite disturbing. To many, it reads like life is meaningless and that in the scheme of things, we really do not matter. But perhaps it is a cautious reminder that the seasons will continue and the generations will come and go long after we have passed from this earth. Perhaps it is a reminder for us to humble ourselves, especially in a world that too often seems to favor strong egos and rampant individualistic tendencies. *How often have we tried to be the center of attention, to act as if the world centered solely around us?*

And then in Mark, we find King Herod beheading John the Baptist out of a sense of honor and pride. Herod knows that he has betrayed his true self. He grieves because he could not resist his daughter's wish to see John's head on a banquet platter. *How often have we led masked lives because of how we felt we “ought” to be seen or did things out of vanity or fear?*

And yet in Second Timothy, we are reminded that when we die with Christ, we live with Christ. When we die with Christ, we rid ourselves of that falseness and this leads us to truly be the children of God that we are. And when we live with Christ, we endure and we help bring in that new dawn, that new creation here and today.

Loving God ... let us during this season of Lent take the time to truly examine who we are and who we have become. May we be comforted by you as we trudge through the depths of winter to realize the heights of spring, through the dark days of Lent to the shining dawn of Easter. May our false inauthentic selves vanish so that our true authentic selves may live. Amen. Mark A. Zaineddin

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18;
Mark 6:30-46;
Romans 6:2-11.

Thursday, 07th March 2013

Ignorance is (sometimes) bliss

For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 1: 18

"Every positive value has its price in negative terms... the genius of Einstein leads to Hiroshima" said the famous Spanish painter Pablo Picasso. Nowadays, in our 24/7 news cycle era global village world, the incommensurable knowledge accumulated by Humanity throughout the ages is only one click away, readily available at the tip of our fingers. Yet, we are still confronted with the similar perplexing dilemma Adam and Eve had to cope with in the Garden of Eden: to eat or not to eat from the Tree of the knowledge of the good and evil. Seduced by the serpent, and spurred by their curiosity, they both opened the Pandora's box that led to the downfall of mankind. Truthfully, I would not trade my contemporary lifestyle with my primitive predecessors' who live, in sync with Mother Nature so to speak, scantily clad with modesty aprons, in wigwams, huts or any troglodytic dwelling; when most life pleasures were the privilege of a happy few; when people used smoke signals to communicate long distance and rudimentary tools to perform tedious work for a low-yield in productivity; when a menu consisted of the leftovers that had escaped the blacklist of their subjective dietary restrictions; when religious beliefs were expressed by human sacrifice rituals to manmade gods; when people's fate resided in the wild imaginings and the incantations of a shaman; when medical knowledge hung on a so called magical powder or the superstitious fumbling and blathering of a charlatan.

Indeed, Humankind has come a long way. We have made tremendous and astounding progress in better understanding ourselves and our environment, uncharted territories are conquered, we have quite deciphered the mysteries of our world and the intricacies of ourselves have almost been replicated. What seemed to be the fanciful mental illusions of the previous generations have now become mere and banal reality. We have quite literally mirrored God in whose image we were created by trying to replicate His handiwork and taming Nature. We strive to make life easier, funnier and merrier. However, as we navigate through the maze of life, as we untangle the enigma of our surrounding and ourselves, every advance comes with new challenges. Every step forward brings us to new crossroads, and we become more aware as to the repercussions of the progress we have made. Today, process automation has alleviated ourselves from wearisome duties but, on the flip side, has also considerably shrunk the labor market. We do no longer settle our differences with tomahawks and catapults, but now with a single push on a button we can wipe an entire population off the face of the Earth. We can cure many diseases, yet we have also become more addicted to drugs. We have implemented new ways to have more time yet our daily routine is a stressful race against the clock. President W. H Taft once said "Substantial progress toward better things can rarely be taken without developing new evils requiring new remedies". Every rose has its thorns. That is the inconvenient truth and paradoxical dichotomy of life.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, Omniscient God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who knows the end from the beginning. As we wander through the labyrinth of the Universe You have created, and as we move forward unraveling the mysteries of our personal lives and our environment; give us the courage to handle the challenges that come with every knowledge you bestow upon us, and the discernment to understand it is always a blessing that comes from You and You add no sorrow to it. In Jesus Christ name. Amen

Youssoupha NYAM

Lent: A Time to Ponder Conundrums?

The readings for today left me with a sense of bewilderment, but with the assurance that I was joining with others in the centuries old Christian community in pondering these mysteries. It brought back two familiar adages to mind: that the more I learn, the less I know; and, as Lucy in *Peanuts* told Charlie Brown, "Stand up for your right to be wishy washy!" (in what I think I know).

It begins with the Book of Ecclesiastes, attributed to King Solomon, but more likely written long after Solomon's time by a "Teacher" to focus upon the limits and contradictions of life in order to teach wisdom. The author describes the life of a "king" who masters everything in his environment only to conclude that "all is vanity". *Ecclesiastes 16: ...For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools?*

Even in Mark and the relatively familiar story of Jesus walking on the storm-tossed water to join the disciples in a boat, I found new puzzles. As Jesus walked out on the sea, he saw the disciples and ...He *intended to pass them by*. *Mark 6:48* He joined them only when seeing how terrified they were of him (a ghost?) and the storm. My commentary suggests this may allude to God's veiled self-disclosure to Moses. *Exodus 33:23 ...and you shall see my back but my face shall not be seen*. The story continues to say that the disciples were ...*utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves* (the miracle of the loaves and fishes of the previous day), ...*but their hearts were hardened* *Mark 6:52*. The disciples themselves were confused, not knowing what to believe, though Mark goes on to describe the local inhabitants of the region then rushing about to bring all the sick to Jesus to be healed by touching Jesus' garment. For them, there seemed to be no confusion.

In the final reading for today, the entire book of Colossians, which purports to be a letter from Paul to a gentile congregation in Colossae in present day Turkey, turns out to be probably written by someone else. Biblical scholars doubt that Paul wrote it, based both upon some of its theological content (contrary to much of what Paul wrote in more authenticated letters) and its literary style. The author of this letter seems to be making a case that what had been accomplished in Christ gave believers access to God and wisdom. Others felt that access to God was gained only through visions and special relationships with angels. He also describes Christ: *He is the image of the invisible God (v. 15)*. Think about it, the image of the invisible. Is that not a conundrum?

All of these scriptures leave me feeling a bit befuddled and confused. I join with the old testament "king" and with the disciples in pondering the conundrum which is everyday life. When you think of it, the very basis of our New Testament belief system is full of such seeming contradictions. You must lose your life in order to save it. The last shall be first. Perhaps Lent is a good time to sit still and just "be" with these seeming contradictions in our experiences in life and in our beliefs. We are, after all, preparing for the greatest event and conundrum of all, the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Almighty God, hear us in our confusion as we live in our daily contradictions. Guide us, calm us and help us find the faith of those who touched the hem of Jesus' garment. Amen

Spencer Gibbins

Saturday, March 9

Ecclesiastes 2:16-26

Mark 7:1-23

Colossians 3:1-11

Wash Your Hands?

Washing your hands seems like a pretty good practice; I've read we don't do nearly enough of it. So when the Pharisees criticize Jesus' disciples for skipping this very basic hygiene rule, I can sympathize. While it's unlikely I would point it out to the disciples, or to Jesus, I might judge them, the way I judge that driver who cuts in front of me. I might shake my head (or my fist). Don't these people know the right thing to do?

But that is exactly the point of today's scriptures: We don't know the right thing to do. We work awfully hard at figuring it out, and we're very good at telling others how to live as well. It's not that the rules we come up with are bad; it's that we cling to them. As Mark's Jesus says, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." We rely on the rules as if they are what's important, the answer to life's questions. If we can only follow the rules, do the right thing, and work hard, then we, and everyone we love, will be OK.

Ah – but it's not like that – says the author of Ecclesiastes. That's not how life works. It doesn't matter how hard we work, or how successful we are, he says, "there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools." Anything we build can be inherited by "fools," and we will have no control. Ecclesiastes hits right at our fears of mortality. His constant mantra "all is vanity" is depressing. And scary.

I do (more than?) my share of worrying and looking for guidelines, rules that will answer my questions. What should I do? Will I make the right decision? What will happen? And as the questions swirl, my shoulders tense and my fists clench in the search for the right answer, a "wash-your-hands," right-thing-to-do answer.

And if there isn't one right answer? If it's all vanity? I'm realizing that this can be freeing. My shoulders relax and my focus softens. I'm no longer looking to worship the idol of the right answer. Instead, I notice the people around me with more compassion, and I'm once again open to God. "You have stripped off the old self with its practices," writes Paul in Colossians. "And have clothed yourselves with a new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator."

Paul has his own set of rules for this new self: no anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language. But he wraps the rules in a bigger picture, with a focus on Christ and not on the latest diet or exercise plan. "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth," he writes. And even Ecclesiastes finds a silver lining in this world of vanity:

*"There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.
This ... also is from the hand of God."*

Dear God – Help me see when I have made my rules and my search for answers into idols, and help me to let them go, so that I can focus on you and the gifts you have given. Amen.

Meg Hanna House

Our Prodigal Father

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Sunday, March 10

One son is easily tempted, lazy and brash. He has the chutzpa to ask for his inheritance while his father is alive. In Jewish culture, this was the sin of wishing one's father dead. "Give me all of my inheritance" translates "I don't need or want you, you have lived too long and I demand ½ of your farm and flocks." Such a demand would cripple most Middle East farms. Half the pasture, the water supply, flocks, buildings would have to be divided and sold off. On most farms, the wealth is not in gold, but is invested in the future and is difficult to sell.

In spite of this insult and threat of ruin, the father grants the son his outrageous demand. The son is set free to do exactly what he wishes; he has free will. Rather quickly he wastes his gold, plunges into poverty and is near starvation, with no one to blame but himself. Desperate, he decides to return home and confess all of his sins. He feels so guilty that he is ashamed to be called his father's son. He is ready to be treated as a servant, unworthy of the family. Harsh justice for him.

Then the father behaves just as outrageously as his son, but in the direction of forgiveness, prodigal gifts and grace. All the son has to do is return and confess his sins. The father forgives everything. The lost son is welcomed with open arms and blessings, comfort and celebrations. The amazing father proclaims, "This is my son who was lost but now he is found! He was dead and is alive again (LUKE 15:24)." Or as Paul says, "In Christ's (God's) spirit... see, everything old has passed away; behold, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:17)."

If the wastrel, callous, younger son can be forgiven, then we all can, Jesus affirms. Confess, and your sins will be washed away and then you may celebrate with your eternal Father. Surprisingly, the story goes on. The older son angrily resents his younger brother as well as his father's generous forgiveness. He, like the Pharisees, stands apart and would restrict the movement of the Holy Spirit. To him, only the outwardly kosher and strict rule followers deserve to be saved. Jesus seems to be saying, "Beware, Pharisees and self-righteous church-goers, don't be the gatekeepers who block the free movement of the Holy Spirit. You may be outwardly perfect, but God knows what sins lurk in your hearts. Are you really as pure as you seem? Confess and then you can return to God's good graces."

Psalm 32 echoes this parable: confess and you will be welcomed by God and find peace in your life. You will be met with forgiveness, steadfast love and the joy of salvation.

**Oh Lord, how little we see—
All that we call empty space
Is filled with your grace.
We race around to keep up
With the world's endless spin,
But God is still and eternal.
We need inner peace and calm,
Then the Holy can come in.**

Tom Dunlap

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-15
Mark 7: 24-37
Colossians 3: 12-17

Monday, March 11, 2013

There are some Scriptural passages that I do not understand, but I have not given up on them. At times, my husband Dave asks his spiritual director what she thinks about a passage that's difficult. She says, "I don't understand it *yet*." (implying that she will understand it later)

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens..." (Ecclesiastes 3: 3, NIV)

I do not find much meaning in this passage; doesn't it state the obvious? Of course there are times for laughing and crying, living and dying, loving and hating! The second part is even more challenging: the author is rambling about disappointments, mysteries, happiness, etc.—I guess proving that there *is* a time for everything...

"'First let the children eat all they want,' He told her, 'for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'
'Lord,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'"
(Mark 7: 27-28, NIV)

This passage from Mark is perhaps my least favorite Scripture story. Jesus is rude to a Greek Gentile woman, calling her a dog. I have not found a commentator that gives Jesus a break for his behavior in this story. But, luckily, the story turns around: the woman has a quick retort for Jesus, telling him that even the dogs (non-Jews) can eat the crumbs (Jesus' teachings) that the children (Jews) have dropped under the table. The woman changed Jesus' mind; in turn, he honored her faith, healed her daughter, and enlarged his ministry to the Gentiles. I struggled with this passage for years until I had the revelation that the woman changed Jesus' mind.

In the Colossians passage, I like the image of putting on Christ as we would put on a piece of clothing. When we are "covered" with Christ, we can live a life full of love, forgiveness, thankfulness, song, and so much more. I would like to add study of the Scriptures to the list, as a way of clothing ourselves more fully with Christ. And as we further study the Scriptures, let us be reminded that there indeed *is* a time for everything, especially change and growth.

Prayer: Loving God, help us to persevere in our love for you and for others. Help us to put on your Son Jesus in our everyday life.

Ella Cleveland

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3
Mark 8:1-10
Hebrews 9:11-15

Conscious Gratitude

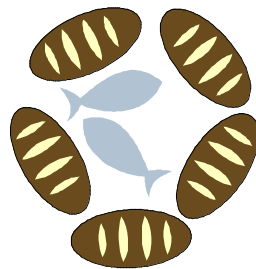
I heard a psychologist say that for an activity to have a true positive effect in one's brain, a person needs to be *mindful* while doing it. Whether eating, exercising, or listening to music, a fulsome experience is not absorbed by my brain if I am not fully aware of what I'm doing and the context for doing it.

A similar principle seems to be at work in Mark 8, at the feeding of 4,000 people with the few loaves and fishes. What strikes me in the story this time are two details: Jesus said he felt *compassion* for the hunger of the gathered crowd, and he explicitly blessed and *gave thanks* for the loaves and fishes before they were distributed. It was Jesus' openness to empathy with the crowd, and giving thanks to God for the food, that opened the door to the amazing multiplication effect. (Perhaps the miracle was abetted by the faith of the crowd in following the invitation to sit down to eat, while not seeing any food on the horizon.)

The combination of openness and explicit gratitude to God could have a multiplier effect for me, too. As the psychologist said, the mindful approach is key to really experiencing fully, and I'd add, to accomplishing all one can. Rather than being a doubting disciple ("How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert," Mark 8:4), if I give thanks to God for what I have and go forth with it, I could achieve surprising results.

Prayer: God, help me to be more mindful in my life's activities, and to be consciously grateful for the gifts you have given. Help me be open to the oft-challenging needs of others in this world. In so doing, let me achieve your purposes beyond my imagination, even while using only my meager stock of loaves and fishes.

Martha Davis



WHO WROTE ECCLESIASTES? [AND DOES IT MATTER?]

Lectionary Passages: Ecclesiastes 4: 4-16
Mark 8: 11-26
Hebrews 10: 19-25

Wednesday, March 13, 2013

In researching background material on Ecclesiastes, I was surprised to find that despite the statement by the author introducing himself as "*son of David, king in Jerusalem,*" an obvious reference to King Solomon, many biblical scholars disagree. They cite among other things the fact that the source material for the book of Ecclesiastes dates much later than Solomon's realm. I thought to myself "what difference does it make who was the author?" The book is Solomon-like in its wisdom and has good advice for modern-day Christians about how to live a full and rewarding life. The material is short and is well worth reading. American novelist Thomas Wolfe was so impressed with these writings he had this to say:

"Of all I have ever seen or learned, that book seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man's life upon this earth."

Most Christians are probably familiar with the story of Jesus feeding the multitude by the Sea of Galilee. The second lectionary, Mark 8: 11-26, contains several accounts that may be less familiar. The first involves the Pharisees who followed Jesus around, hoping to catch him in some shortcoming or infraction of the complex Jewish religious laws. They ask him for a *sign* from heaven, hopefully something that would illustrate that Jesus was really endowed with a heavenly connection, such as the *burning bush* that was not consumed. Throughout the Holy Land, there were many magicians and sorcerers that could perform tricks that would impress a crowd; these tricks would lead to a call for donations or an offer to sell trinkets. Jesus refused to show a sign as it would put him in the same class as the itinerant carnival acts. He said: "*Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.*" He and the disciples got back in the boat and went to the other side of the water where the Pharisees could not easily follow.

When they got there, they discovered that once again, they had not brought any food. Fearing perhaps that the disciples would try to buy food from the locals, Jesus warns them: "*Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.*" Possibly Jesus was simply trying to ensure that they would not be adversely influenced by the Pharisees and Herod's minions. Seeing that the disciples had no inkling as to how to get food, Jesus chides them that they do not recall how he had fed the other crowds. Citing their lack of faith, Jesus launches a full scale criticism of their value as his followers. The second lectionary passage concludes with the story of Jesus restoring the sight of a blind man.

The third and final lectionary passage is a letter, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, one of the books in the New Testament. Its author is not known, although Christian tradition holds it to be the Apostle Paul or perhaps one of his assistants.

The primary purpose of the letter is to exhort Christians to persevere in the face of persecution. The central thought of the entire Epistle is the doctrine of the Person of Christ and his role as mediator between God and humanity. The most compelling directive in the letter is that believers are to consider how they can be of service to each other, especially stirring up each other to the more vigorous and abundant exercise of love, and the practice of good works. As the young church was entering a time of persecution, more and more Christians were reportedly "shrinking away" from collective worship. The letter specifically urges Christians to band together in communal worship, supporting each other in Christian love.

Prayer: Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Amen
Bruce Whitener

Lenten Season 2013

Thursday, March 14

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7; Mark 8:27-9:1; Ephesians 4:17-24

I'm living with a sort of spiritual paranoia. Call it more accurately crisis of faith. I see evil all around, surrounding and *including* me. I feel ardently that I have done nothing to prove myself worthy of life when so many I've loved have not survived. I selfishly rush to prayer of supplication, asking God for *more blessings than have already been bestowed*.

I dream often. Rarely do I remember the specifics of the dream but what lingers at awakening are feelings. Feelings hard to describe but generally of frustration and doom. These feelings linger long and affect my experience of life. I wrestle with that. In Ecclesiastes it says, "With dreams come vanities and a multitude of words." I feel foolishly driven to find the right things to say so that others will see me as wise and good. I feel inclined to emulate people whose perceived aura of holiness and rectitude will rub off and make me look and feel good. "How's that working for ya?" you may ask.

Not very well.

When Jesus told his disciples of the nastiness that was to befall him, rejection, humiliation and even death, Peter was embarrassed for him and took him aside and reproved him for being so openly negative because people looked to him for wisdom and power. Jesus' response to him was to pull away and say brutally, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter was missing the point. Then Jesus, sensing that this misapprehension was probably not unique to Peter, gathered everyone together and said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

A time later he was traveling with the disciples to Caesarea and he questioned them about how others saw him and who they thought he was. Their limited answers pointed to a wider misapprehension of the Christ nature in him and although Peter correctly identified him as the Messiah he warned them not to go around blabbing about who this was of whom they were disciples. Was he fearful for himself? I think not. He sensed their continuing human need to be merely *associated* with the Christ.

The apostle Paul speaks to this in Ephesians when he says, "That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts (incompleteness), and to be *renewed in the spirit of your minds* and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created *according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*."

Lord help me to accept that I am God's likeness and worthy to emulate the Christ that you embodied and taught by example. Help me to continually grow to accept and express the Christ nature you gave your human life to instill in me.

With gratitude for Grace, Nathan Moon

Ecclesiastes 5: 8-20
Mark 9: 2-13
Romans 1:16-23

March 15, 2013

You Can't Take It with You.....Dust to Dust...

I love the lyrical reality of Ecclesiastes. In simple yet compelling words, the writer hits you with life's truths, the reality of human nature that we all recognize but often choose to ignore. Verse 8 starts with, "If you witness...the oppression of the poor and the denial of right and justice, do not be surprised at what goes on...." Well, yes, all around us! The question is not do we witness it (much less be surprised), but do we think about why it happens and whether we should "pass on by" or do something about it. Frankly, I am always filled with admiration for people who tirelessly work on behalf of the poor, seeking justice through fair and affordable housing, food pantries, equal education, children's safety, labor and employment fairness. Seeking justice in God's world should be Job One, but so often we are so busy, so distracted, so disinterested....

Then Ecclesiastes gets to the heart of so many problems—money, wealth—the constant desire for it that creates the gotta-have-it society and rampant consumerism. True, the writer does get into Economics 101 with the Multiplier Effect ("When riches multiply, so do those who live off them."), but that is not the central point. The central truth on the possible effects of wealth and riches are no matter how much you have, it is never enough. Worrying about money and riches brings stress and emptiness, says the writer. "Gnawing anxiety and great vexation are his lot." He sees a "singular evil"—"a man hoards wealth to his own hurt, and then that wealth is lost through an unlucky venture." Stock market, gambling? Wealth can be gained and used for good or evil. The chase for wealth can bring a whole society down—witness the financial crisis and Great Recession caused by banks and investment houses, mortgage companies, new tools for creating paper wealth, derivatives, tranches, junk bonds. And yet, and yet...was the gain by the few worth it to them? "You can't take it with you" is the saying. And Ecclesiastes says, "he came from the womb of mother earth, so must he return, naked as he came." Dust to dust....

This should make us re-evaluate our lives and what is important, what brings happiness, peace, and contentment. Ecclesiastes describes the laborer whose "sleep is sweet" – no guilty conscience there! Think of the hospitality and warmth of those whose material wealth is so little, who welcome others and count their blessings despite daily struggles to survive. We must learn to appreciate our lives, count our blessings, and work to do right in the world "throughout the brief span of life that God has allotted." If we do this, says Ecclesiastes, "[we] will not dwell overmuch upon the passing years; for God fills [our] time with joy of heart."

Prayer: God, fill our hearts with joy and give us the wisdom to work for right and justice, to appreciate the gifts you have given us, and to share these gifts with others.

Marilyn J. Seiber

Faith

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12
Mark 9:14-29
Romans 3:21-26

Saturday, March 16

I like Lent because it allows me, encourages me, demands of me that I refocus for 40 days on my relationship with God. Of course, we reaffirm our relationship with God every time we pray but Lent, with its specific drumbeat of daily observance leading up to the Cross and Easter, brings a greater focus and time for reflection.

The three passages for today juxtapose the limits of human attainment with the limitless power of faith. In Ecclesiastes, the author makes clear that wealth, possessions, honor and long-life are all part of a vain life that ultimately does not satisfy a person's appetite for spiritual sustenance. In Mark, the Apostles are unable to heal a boy who has been seized by a spirit because, as Jesus says, they are "faithless". By contrast, Jesus makes clear that, for those who believe, like the boy's father, all things can be done. It is the faith that makes the difference. In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, Paul makes clear that we are all sinners, whose sins Jesus has atoned for and whose atonement we share through our faith.

As Martin Luther and the other reformers made clear 400 years ago, the forgiveness of God is immediately available to all Christians by our faith, not because of works of penance during Lent or any other time of year. If so, than what does the Lord require of me other than faith? Nothing. God gives His grace freely. What an awe-inspiring gift! And what can we give in return? What does one give, beyond our faith, to the God who has everything? Nothing.

The famous passage in Micah 6:8 on what the Lord requires of us, is often quoted alone for its wonderful directness and simplicity: Do justice, Love kindness, and Walk humbly with God. During Lent, it is important to recall the preceding verses, Micah 6:6-7, in which the prophet makes clear that God does NOT want gifts of sacrifice. The prophet is juxtaposing sacrificial gifts in 6:6-7 with principles in 6:8 for living a life—every day--in accordance with God's Will.

We don't need Lent to get back into God's good graces through acts of contrition or sacrifice. We need Lent to remind ourselves that there is nothing we can or need to do to attain God's freely-given Grace. A gift of grace that we can never reciprocate, a gift that we can only acknowledging by taking it into the world through doing concrete acts of Justice each day, manifesting our love for others through our kindness and faithfulness, and walking our pilgrimage through life with God.

Paul RS Gebhard

Return to Jerusalem, Anointing Jesus, Pressing Toward the Goal

Isaiah 43:16-21

Sunday, March 17, 2013

Psalms 126

John 12:1-8

Philippians 3:4b-14

The two opening passages address the return from Babylon to Jerusalem. The Isaiah passage opens with a reference by the Lord to the watery exodus from Egypt, followed by the proclamation that the Lord will lead a new exodus from Babylon through the wilderness that will be even more glorious. "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise." Psalm 126 is one of a series of short "Songs of Ascent" seeking help, possibly sung on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and in this case touching on the return from Babylon: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'"

In the passage from John, Jesus has arrived in Bethany the day before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and spends the night at the home of Lazarus, whom he has recently raised from the dead. Dinner is served by Martha and Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with costly perfume and wipes them with her hair. The house is filled with fragrance and Judas Iscariot asks why the perfume was not sold and the money given to the poor. Following a parenthetical note that Judas' real interest was adding money to the common purse that he kept for the disciples and frequently stole from, the passage closes with Jesus' response that Mary brought the perfume to keep for the day of his burial. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Finally, in a letter written from a prison, possibly in Rome, to the church in Philippi, the first he founded in Europe and one facing problems impacting its unity, Paul states what he is seeking to do: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Prayer: Creator God, keep us mindful of the perseverance and messages of those who preceded us in our faith history. We especially thank Thee for those close to our lives who have loved us, trusted us, had hopes and dreams for us, and continued to love us even when we could not fulfill those dreams.

Robert L. Doan

Wisdom and Hope

Ecclesiastes 7: 1-14
Mark 9: 30-41
Philippians 3 12 - 4:1

Monday
March 18, 2013

All of us are searching for answers to life's perplexing questions. The disciples were too, so none of us is alone in struggling with our doubts and questions.

The Teacher in the Ecclesiastes account offers a way to start our inquiry. Seek wisdom. Apply age-old truths to the circumstances of daily life. But this search leads to more questions: "Consider God's works! Who can straighten what God has made crooked? When times are good, enjoy the good; when times are bad, consider: God hath made the former as well as the latter so that people can't discover anything that will come to be after them." (Ecclesiastes 7: 13-14 CEB) In other words, wisdom alone, even faithfully following the rules of life, always being reasonable, does not satisfy our quest for a solid foundation on which to build a life. Indeed, our understanding of the world changes frequently, which prevents us from facing the world with meaningful certainty.

In Mark's account today, we learn three important lessons about resolving doubts and getting answers to our questions. First, the disciples acknowledge that they don't understand a lesson Jesus is teaching, but they were afraid to ask for an explanation. Group discussion is approved; directly asking the teacher for help may be called for. Implicitly, we are instructed not to be afraid to seek an explanation of what we don't understand. Next the disciples are reported to be debating with each other about who was the greatest among them. We are not told what standards were at issue, but we do learn that Jesus quickly establishes the only applicable standard: personal greatness is directly related to servant hood, particularly to "the least of these." In other words, another way to learn is to pay attention to the teacher. Some lessons are not hard to understand. A third way of getting information is to observe *effectiveness* in other people. Formulas and techniques are not critical, Jesus says: "Whoever isn't against us is for us. I assure you that whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will certainly be rewarded." (Mark 9: 40-41 CEB)

Paul understands that our faith journey takes a lifetime to complete. He also dramatically reminds us that no matter what our "assets" are, that is, how smart or wise we are, or how faithfully we follow the rules, we will still fall short of the perfection or certainty we strive for. "It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I have reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus. So, all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her. *Only let's live in a way that is consistent with whatever level we have reached.*" (Philippians 3: 12-16 CEB)

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, grab hold of me and teach me your ways. Help me to trust your steadfast love for me and all else that You have created. Empower all of us to figure out how to live in harmony with Your creation. Amen.

-- Matt Sarraf is a second-semester sophomore at Cornell University, majoring in Industrial and Labor Relations. Despite the nature of his major, Matt has become primarily interested in philosophy and theology, and hopes to pursue a doctorate in philosophy after graduating from Cornell. He is currently studying thinkers and ideas relating to Continental philosophy, ethics, and theodicy.

--John H. Quinn, Jr. has been practicing law for almost 52 years and has been an avid student of philosophy and theology for most of his life.

Mark 9:42-50
1 Corinthians 9:19-27
Ecclesiastes 8:14-9:10

Tuesday, March 19

Ecclesiastes

" 16When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, 17then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

9All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them 2is vanity,* since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil,* to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. "

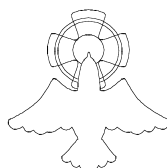
It is an easy thing, declaring the great questions of God's ways - of God himself - as unknowable. To simply desert the field altogether. So many of my friends have turned away from church and from Christ, tired of the unsolvable mysteries. They have looked around and found the search fruitless because there is no final answer or solution. We're in a world of distractions and short attention spans and even three thousand years ago King Solomon knew simple answers to God's ways could not be had.

I do not come to this time of Lent seeking simple answers. I pray about my abilities and responsibilities. I sit in silence, and find Glory. I see suffering, and open my heart to it. All of this I lay to heart, and seek not answers to how or why, but a conversation; not for reasons, but a relationship. A closer walk with Thee.

Prayer:

Lord, we know there are no simple answers to your ways. We come to you with open hearts and willing souls, eager to be closer to You. Amen.

Michele Holland



March 20, 2013

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

Mark 10: 1-16

1 Corinthians 15:20-26

The Ecclesiastes passage spoke the most to me. It begins with a reminder that read to me, a bit like “you win some, you lose some” and that there are no guarantees that winners will always win and losers will always lose. This can be somewhat encouraging when feeling like the hand you’re dealt is always a bust. Going further into the passage, I could hardly read it without thinking of the current political situation in Washington, DC: “The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good.” This is a very good reminder that we all need to stop shouting and do more listening. Nonetheless, sometimes I wish the wise would raise their voices just a little bit; then again, probably I am shouting too loudly to hear them.

The other passages acted more to remind me that we are a church reformed and always reforming and that the Bible is a living, breathing document, continually reinterpreted, and not always taken literally. Further, these varying stories all remind us that we must not discount the weak and innocent, and that sometimes it is these very people – those we are all too likely to ignore or even despise – who can lead us in the right direction.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, we are so grateful to you for sending your son, Jesus Christ, who has made it possible for all to have eternal life. Help us to embrace his message, his love, and each other in order to discern wisdom. Help us to use Lent as a time to stop shouting and start listening. Amen

Stacey Gagosian



DO IT NOW

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10
Mark 10:17-31
2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Thursday, March 21, 2013

The gospel lesson for today is the familiar story of the rich young ruler (though only Matthew calls him young and only Luke calls him a ruler) who asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life.

Jesus answers that he must observe the commandments. But he does not list all of them. He omits the first four, which concern our relation with God, and lists the following five, four of which tell us what not to do to our fellow humans. The one positive commandment – honor your father and mother – he puts last rather than the first of this list. He omits the commandment against coveting. Is this because he thought the man was too rich to covet anymore? And he adds to the ten commandments one about not defrauding people. Is this because he knew the man got rich that way?

When the man claims he has followed all these commandments since his youth, Jesus adds another new one. Sell all his many possessions and give the proceeds to the poor.

That the man is unwilling to do. Like most of us, his possessions make him comfortable. Like most of us, he will make a will, and dispose of his possessions after he dies.

The call to us to “Do it now!” is too hard for us to follow.

The Teacher in today’s chapter of Ecclesiastes was full of “Do it now!” In verse 1, he tells us to send our bread (that is, give our money) upon the waters (that is, send it out even if we are not sure where it will end up). In verse 2, he tells us to send what we have to as many needy as we can, now, because disaster may prevent us in the future. In verse 3, we should be like the clouds that are full; let our goodness fall as the rain falls. In verse 4, he criticizes those who want to wait for perfect weather before sowing or reaping. If we always wait for the perfect time to do something, we will never do anything.

There is work for one and all
Do it now, do it now.
Hear the Master to thee call.
Do it now, do it now.

. . .
Can you help an erring one?
Do it now, do it now.
Stay not for “tomorrows sun,”
Do it now, do it now.

M. M. Lightcap

Phil Hanna

1) Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:14

Friday, March 22, 2013

As I've gotten older, I appreciate more and more how good it feels to do service. At first it may seem like a gift to the receiver, or impossible to find time to squeeze it in amongst the daily chores...but once you see your world open up in a whole new way, you can't go back to your older perhaps once comfortable way of living. Now, I think of the previous way of living as a life lived in isolation. When reading this scripture the first thing that came up was a kind of soft version of an apocalyptic world to come...a warning against a living a life that could be seen in hindsight as wasted. But I also see a message that asks us not to lean on comfortable things because that is based upon our perception. And our perception is self-serving by nature. Be mindful of God's commandments—do His service. Isolating, living in our own world, focusing solely on our own needs and comforts will lead us to emptiness or perhaps regret. But we aren't truly empty—we have the opportunity to hear God's word, lean on our church community and learn from them and become part of the world. Once you see that world, a world that renews itself by doing for others and being a channel for God's love you can't really turn back.

2) Mark 10: 32-45

While it's true that what we ask for in our prayers to God is a reflection of our times, the one thing we probably have in common is that we humans tend to go big! But this scripture tells me that simply being human is what makes us pray in egotistical and selfish ways. We tend to want great things. Even if we are trying to live a holy and Christian lifestyle, as the disciples presumably were, we ask for things that are way out of proportion. Jesus is teaching us that he came to heal, to feed, to clothe—not many of us would pray for the ability to do only those things. We want glory, power, love, success, money. Jesus' teaching educates the disciples, and by extension us, and asks us to be reflective...think about what we are praying for. This can be applied to our everyday life too. When we see someone who has a car we like, or got a promotion we wanted at work we may desire the same thing, or even have prayed for it. But we don't know what God's plan is, we have to have faith that God hears our prayers and answers them in his way. One way I've been taught to pray is to first pray for all of your ancestors and those who have gone before you, then pray for your family closest to you, then pray for the earth, the animals, the birds, the ocean and things that live in the ocean and then finally for yourself. Usually when I get to the end of that line, my own needs are put into more perspective!

3) 2 Corinthians 4: 1-12

This passage is very complex, and could generate discussion on many topics. The first thing that comes up when I read it is the mystery of God's grace. Its simplicity is almost too easy to see, like that old saying "you can't see the forest through the tree". But in the first line: "therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not" we see an incredible example of God's grace. Effortlessly, with no work on our part, we have received God's mercy. Through no effort on our part, we are given a purpose and a role in God's plans. We can choose to see it and accept or not. We can use our understanding of grace within our everyday lives. By choosing how we think of ourselves and how we treat others we can be persecuted, cast down and troubled but we can chose to see that his grace saves us from others and ourselves. We can walk through our lives in knowledge of our frailty and live a frail life, or we can walk through life with knowledge of our strength in spite of the frailty.

Jill Norwood

March 23, 2013

Zechariah 9:9-12; Mark 10:46-52; 2 Corinthians 4:13-18

It is no wonder that we celebrate Easter in the spring, after a sometimes tediously dreary, cold, gray, icy, low-lit winter. As we move through Lent, things begin to change. The days grow longer, bit by bit. The weather surprises us with warm days. And sometimes, we even are blossoming and blooming by the time Easter arrives. But in the meantime, it may seem that we are truly, as Zechariah 9:12 calls us, “prisoners of hope.”

What a rich phrase: prisoners of hope. Aren't we all prisoners of hope in some way? At the moment, my husband and I are expecting our first child. There are a lot of hopes tied up in this little child. Before my husband and I met, we both individually hoped to be parents someday. After we met, and before this little girl became a probability, we hoped it would be possible for us to have her, to welcome her. And now that she's developing, we hope many things for her – that she will be strong, curious, thoughtful, kind. We hope that whoever she is, we will be able to love and support her, and encourage her to be who she was created to be.

But in the meantime, we wait. We don't know who she will be: sunny, feisty, proud, shy. We don't know what she will look like. We don't know how it will feel to be parents. We don't know if she will like sleeping, or if she'll fight and rail against it with all her tiny being has. Even when she arrives, there will be much waiting, much learning, much growing for us all to do.

The readings today tell a story of hope: hope promised and deferred, fulfilled, and hope required, rooted in past promises fulfilled. We start in Zechariah as expectant, faithful hopefuls for a messiah. The Gospel reading is an account of Jesus meeting a blind man in his moment of true faith and fulfilling his hopes of healing, and faith in Jesus' ability to heal him. But the picture in the final passage in 2 Corinthians is where we most often live and where we may find ourselves today, as my husband and I are as we wait for our little girl: *“¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away (or belly expanding ever greater with child), yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”* This earthly life is a life of waiting, of hope deferred, whether for a child, or an unmet desire; a change in the way our world treats those around us who are different, or a change in our own attitudes. This passage is a charge to remember the challenges that face us today are momentary, like a bleak winter, and that spring (physically, spiritually, eternally) is coming.

Kate Hays Olson

Prayer: Today, please help me have hope that my current circumstances are not the full picture or the end of the story. Just as the winter gives way to spring, sometimes quickly, and sometimes more slowly, give me wisdom and grace to see how you are transforming my life, moment by moment, and hope in the world to come.

Palm Sunday
March 24 2013

Luke 19:28-40

Unbidden Recognition

There are moments in life when some people know without a doubt that God is present. Jesus' approach into Jerusalem may have been a moment when some people knew ----if not that God was present, that something powerfully close to God was. Others of us may not recognize God's presence until later, in looking back. Still others may never fully recognize it or may always wonder, questioning what really happened.

On this Palm Sunday the passage from Luke does not mention a single waving palm, not a single leafy branch, not a branch from a tree at all. Instead Luke tells us that as Jesus rode toward Jerusalem on a borrowed young donkey, a colt, the people spread their cloaks along the road before him ---a seemingly spontaneous and humble gesture of bowing and bending to spread out their cloaks before majesty.

Further down the road the multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully in loud voices until finally some of the Pharisees told Jesus to order his disciples to stop. Jesus responded that if the people were silent, the stones themselves would shout out.

We easily forget who these people were who recognized Jesus from the beginning, who lay down their cloaks for him and shouted out in joyous praise. These were not the people wearing the finest garments or the latest fashions. These were not the people who would go home and toast him later that evening with fine wines over sumptuous meals. These were not the ones who would make important deals in the synagogue or on Capitol Hill the next day.

These people who lay down their cloaks that day lay down old and worn, dirty and tattered garments because that is what they had. These people were the beggars, the oppressed, the homeless, the powerless, not the people like you and me.

On this Palm Sunday morning, may we stand with them as he did and lay down our cloaks before him. And may we sing loud and joyous praises to him because we know his kingdom includes even people like you and me.

---Bonnie Davis



The Woman Who Anoints

March 25, 2013

John 12:1-11; Philippians 3:1-14; Isaiah 42:1-9.

In all four Gospels, we encounter the story of a woman who anoints Jesus' feet with a jar of very expensive oil. In three of these Gospels, the woman has no name; only does John identify her as Mary, sister of Martha. Her actions stir up a universal reaction of negativity by the onlookers, all Jewish men. They decry the waste of the oil, saying that it should be sold to feed the poor. Yet Jesus applauds the woman's actions and chastises those who condemn her. Clearly this pericope has central importance to Jesus' ministry, but interpretation of the story varies widely among theologians. Many contend that Jesus acted as a liberator, freeing women from a repressive, patriarchal culture, while others posit that Jewish women did not need rescuing and to do so insults women's roles in Judaism.

However, unmarried Jewish women, including prostitutes, were on the fringe, invisible and judged, and may have sought a spiritual connection in a religious culture that had heretofore not been inclusive. Many Jewish women may have been content in their roles within the culture, but some needed a leader who could encourage them to step out of cultural bounds. And while the onlookers had some justification for their condemnation of the woman's actions, more importantly they judged her for who she was and what she represented -- a departure from the ideal woman. At the same time, I don't believe that Jesus, who himself was Jewish, intended to reject all Jewish law and culture outright.

Scholar Elizabeth Ford says that "we know nothing of [the woman's] identity or motivation, whether she is married or unmarried, Jew or Gentile. She is merely a silhouette, a woman with no features on her face." Dr. Mary-Anne Getty-Sullivan concurs that "the woman herself is not even named. She has no name, no face." That the anointing woman has no discernible background signals one of two things: either Jewish women had no role in public religious rituals and practiced their religion at home, or the Gospel writers themselves had an inherent bias against women. Evidence from several scholars supports the former conclusion. But one could also counter-argue that the Gospel writers attempted to include women but felt hampered by social convention. Unarguably, John thinks that this woman is Mary, sister of Lazarus.

Whoever the woman is, this Midrashic tale presents a working model of discipleship. A woman, most likely a prostitute, arrives at a dinner party with a jar of ointment with the intent to approach Jesus. She probably already knows that she will not be welcomed by the Pharisee for the very fact that she is a single woman. However, she needs to anoint Jesus' feet because she has had a powerful spiritual experience when she has heard him speak. She comes into the party, crying and kissing Jesus' feet. The onlookers also react strongly. They're uncomfortable; they know at some level that Jesus has evoked strong feelings in the woman, but they cannot be sure how to react. They channel their discomfort into anger at the audacity of a woman to walk into this dinner and make such a display, to waste such a precious amount of ointment, and to flaunt social and religious customs. As Ford maintains, "all they can do is protest. On one level they are right. Yet Jesus defends her." Jesus *fiercely* takes her side. The woman's devotion touches him; he sees that she has a prophetic vision that he has not been able to communicate to his disciples or fellow Jews. So he too reacts emotionally, lashing out at Judas, the Disciples, and the Pharisee in sharp tones. "*Leave her alone,*" Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial." (John 12:7)

Elizabeth Ross Young

Become Children of the Light

Isaiah 49:1-7

March 26, 2013

John 12:20-36

I Corinthians 1:18-31

“What do you suppose this means?”, I asked a friend as we walked our dogs together through the woods at Battery Kemble Park. I explained to her the quote from John 12 that I found puzzling. *Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* My friend suggested comparing the metaphor in the quote (a single grain sprouting) to a different metaphor – throwing a rock into a still pool. A rock in your hand is just a rock, but when you throw it into a pool, the rock will cause ripples to form on the surface of the water. In each case, my friend and I decided, the metaphor is intended to explain how a good deed could bring about widespread positive results. I liked both metaphors – they are appropriate to the spirit of Lent, a time to reflect, repent, and pray as a way of preparing one’s heart for Easter.

All of the passages assigned for this are studded with language devices such as metaphors and similes, parallel language, patterns of three, contrast, and rhetorical questions. For instance, the prophet Isaiah says of himself – using a metaphor – *he (God) made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.* In his first letter to the Corinthians, we hear Paul ask – rhetorically – *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?* While this language is confusing and challenging on the surface; it rewards the reader who takes time to consider each passage and decipher its meaning(s).

Further down in Paul’s letter, we learn what Jesus said sometime shortly before the Last Supper. *The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you ... While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.* In this passage, replace “light” with Jesus’ name and the metaphor transforms. I find this idea beautiful – Jesus is like daylight – and this idea is set forth using such beautiful language. This is my reward for my struggle for understanding! Pondering and meditating on these three passages, as well as on the other Biblical passages assigned to this Lenten period, will provide me with the opportunity to consider God and our place in God’s world.

Gracious God,
Please be with each of us
during these 40 days as we
read and
re-read the words of the
prophets who came before
us. Help us to understand
and appreciate the many
ways they translated their
understanding of Jesus and



Gwenn HS Gebhard

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

Wednesday, March 27, 2013

"Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear..." – Isaiah 50: 4

"Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him..." – John 13: 27-28

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." – Hebrews 12: 1

Struggling to find the path I know God has set before me resurfaces day in and day out in my prayers. So when I read the Isaiah passage for today, I was struck by the way the writer tells us that he has been taught to listen, to know how to hear God's call and find God's path. This sureness gives him the comfort to "give [his] back to those who strike [him]," to "not hide [his] face from insult and spitting." It's hard for me not to envy that fine-tuned sense of hearing God, which is surely a source of comfort and confidence in the midst of stress and anxiety, or even humiliation, pain, and suffering.

In each of today's readings, I sensed a theme of speaking and hearing, calling and listening. In the passage from the Gospel of John, I immediately realized that I'm not alone in my sense of inability to decipher or "tune into God." On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus spoke to Judas—who was to betray him—at the table with the other disciples. When Jesus said, "do quickly what you are going to do," the others were confused about Jesus' meaning, even speculating about what he might have meant. Of course the disciples will learn what is to come, but even they are at a loss to hear and comprehend the words of Jesus.

And though it wasn't one of the Scripture passages before me, I immediately thought too of Samuel first hearing the voice of God but not recognizing it. While Samuel didn't know the voice belonged to God, he went to his teacher, Eli, who realized that God was at work and instructed Samuel on how to respond. Perhaps with a little guidance, we can all be better attuned to the word of God for us, illuminating the path God has set before us?

Even as I struggle to find my footing on that path and strain to hear God's voice, I take comfort in the fact that we are surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses." Not just a cloud of witnesses, but a *great cloud*, a community of brothers and sisters in faith who can help us find that path. After all, when you start a race, the path is quite clear—there's a starting line and a finish line, runners on either side of you and cheering supporters on the sidelines, volunteers providing water and snacks and urging you along. I'm not even a runner and it strikes me a beautifully resonant image of what church is and can be! Together, we can run the race that is set before us, helping one another to not "grow weary or lose heart" and listening for God's voice in the midst of it all.

Kristin Ford

Maundy Thursday

March 28, 2013

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 89

Luke 22:7-20

Hebrews 10:16-25

Littered landscape
Tent home
Grieving mother
Lost child

Heart, write it on my

Worried earth
Hungry tenant
Furious father
Lonely babe

Heart, write it on

Defenseless greens
Overturned shelters
Cold caretakers
In between brothers

Heart, write it
Heart, write
Heart,

And they shall be my people!

Nowhere but in the full and final forgiveness could I hope to understand:
“This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God...

we are made

New.

Kathryn Sparks

The Missing Station

John 18:1-19:42
Hebrews 4:14-16

Friday, March 29, 2013

¹⁴ "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,^[a] Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrew 4:14-16)

Growing up in the Philippines, Good Friday always meant Via Dolorosa or Via Crucis – the Stations of the Cross. My strict Anglo-Catholic aunts always made sure that we did not forget that. To avoid being called *irihis* (heretics), my siblings and I would piously accompany them to church. There they would join other women fervently praying while kneeling on the bare floor before each of the 14 stations.

I never fully understood the value of their ritual or what those images meant. All I knew was that they prayed the Lord's Prayer, the full rosary, and the Hail Mary in each of the 14 stations. I have flashes of those images: Jesus bearing a cross; Jesus with his mother, Mary; Jesus crucified; and Jesus taken down from the cross. After the first station, we would be fidgeting on our sore knees – and grumbling that it was cutting into the time that we could have spent playing.

It was only when I matured as a Christian that I understood the meaning of Via Dolorosa. It is simply a recreation of Christ's passion. It is Jesus' ancient journey walked today. The practice of Via Crucis originated in early pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

Franciscan monks were said to have first started erecting chapels depicting scenes from Jesus' last days. For a long time, only Franciscans – who were given control over the holy sites in Jerusalem -- were allowed to build such stations. The chapels eventually evolved into sculptures, plaques, or paintings housed inside the sanctuary -- as it was in my aunts' church.

Originally, there was no set number of stations but by 1731 the norm was set at 14 stations. Of this, only 8 have direct biblical references. The others are considered embellishments -- Jesus falling three times; Jesus taken down from the cross and laid on his mother's arms.

But whether based entirely on scripture or not, Via Dolorosa has become one of the most popular devotions for Catholics. Prayed in the spirit of atonement, it helps devotees go through their own Lenten pilgrimage by meditating on the scenes of Christ's suffering and death.

To this day, I still have to find a good explanation of why the Roman Catholic Church settled on 14 stations in the early 1700s. But in the end, mathematical exactitude does not really matter. It is our faith that matters. Whether we experience this ancient devotion today or read Jesus' passion in the Bible, it is worth remembering that without Jesus suffering and dying on the cross, we would never have been saved.

Three days later, Jesus' journey will end. Then we can celebrate the 15th – and missing – station: Easter and His resurrection.

"God as we walk through this day may we remember: Beyond sin there is love inexhaustible; beyond death there is life unimaginable; beyond brokenness there is forgiveness incomprehensible; beyond betrayal there is grace poured out eternally. May we remember and give thanks for the wonder of your love. Amen."
(Christine Sine, Mustard Seed Associates)

Adlai J. Amor

The Circus and Holy Saturday

Romans 6: 3-11

March 30, 2013

When we drove to Buffalo early in January for my beloved sister's memorial service, we found that Jean's sons had set aside a room of her apartment with her toys, masks, artwork, all for distribution among her five brothers. For many, many years Jean and I had given each other gifts for Christmas, and, since we both liked toys, I had given her many of the remembrances in that room. I claimed many of those gifts for my inheritance and brought them home. And, since both she and I had selected gifts for each other that we ourselves might otherwise have bought for ourselves – we were that close - - Jean's wind-up toys and mine meshed seamlessly into one collection. Now we have displayed in our living room a circus scene, half of toys that I had given Jean and half of toys that she had given me. Her ferris wheel and my merry-go-round, her clown on a scooter, my elephant with a ball.

It seems to me that most Protestant churches more or less forget Holy Saturday. Even those believers who commemorate Maundy Thursday and Good Friday spend the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter dying eggs and hiding them, baking, preparing for Easter dinner. But, as Alan Lewis reminds us in his book, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, the glory of Easter is completely lost unless we first concentrate on the horror of the Cross and the terrible certainty of the grave. If we more or less arrive at the stark beauty of the empty tomb without first encountering the cross and grave, then the glory is pallid and cheap. Moreover, we avoid the connection between the hope of the resurrection and the sufferings and death which is our own sure fate. James Cone, in the book many of us have read this Lent, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, makes a similar argument when he claims that 21st century Americans can't begin to feel the triumph of Easter unless they sense the terror, unpredictability and humiliation of the closest thing to crucifixion in American experience, the lynching tree. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "You cannot have forgotten that all of us, when we were baptized into Christ Jesus, were baptized into his death. So by our baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life."

I can't begin to claim that I know what happens after death. It is the great unknowing. But I do sense that there is and yearn for a drawing together of all the loose threads of love and affection with which we have already been blessed – a completion of that great divine act of crucifixion, death and resurrection – a circus of grace.

"Why look among the dead for someone who is alive? He is not here; he has risen." Luke 24: 5b

Paul B. Dornan

It's All True

In John's account of the first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb first and when she sees that the stone has been rolled away, she runs to Peter and John and says to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him!" Peter and John run to the tomb, enter and see the empty burial cloths, and go home.

But Mary stands outside the tomb, crying. When she looks into the tomb, she sees two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been. The angels ask Mary why she is crying. She says, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him." As Mary turns away, she sees Jesus, whom she mistakes for the gardener, and again voices her over-riding concern. "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." We can all identify with Mary. We have all experienced a time when love mingled with grief or anxiety resulted in a single-mindedness that blotted out everything else. Did Mary even realize she was speaking to angels? And why did she see them when Peter and John did not?

"Mary." That moment of recognition must always come as a shock. Mary can only say, "Rabboni!" And later, to the disciples, presumably now gathered to discuss what Peter and John had seen, "I have seen the Lord." These are the moments when the world changed. God had done something so big, so powerful, so real that those experiencing it could only wonder, and witness.

True story. Many years ago, an Episcopal priest, rector of a church in Darien, CT., learned from a young couple in his congregation that the husband had cancer. The cancer went into remission and some time later the couple moved to Lyon, France. A few years later, shortly before Christmas, the priest received a call from the wife, letting him know that the cancer had returned and her husband was dying. As he hung up the phone, the priest had a strong feeling that he should visit this man, but he was rector and it was Christmas and his daughters would be home from school for the holidays. He did check with the airlines for the cost of three round trip tickets to Paris. He told no one. A day or two later, the priest received a check from a parishoner for the precise amount of the plane tickets, to the penny, with a note that he was to use the money for himself and not for the church. So the day after Christmas, the priest and his daughters boarded a flight for Paris. Near the end of the flight a problem occurred in Paris that caused the plane to be diverted to Lyon. The priest and his daughters were able to deplane in Lyon and they went immediately to the man's house. The priest had not told the couple that he was coming and so when the wife opened the door, she was shocked. All day her husband had been telling her that the priest was coming, but she had thought he was delirious. When the priest walked into the man's bedroom, the man looked up at him, smiled and said, "Now I know that it's all true ... and I am so happy!"

"I have seen the Lord!" says Mary. "Now I know that it's all true," says a man near death. Most of us have not had experiences as powerful as these, but thanks to these witnesses, we, too, can believe. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Happy Easter!

Prayer: Lord God, today and everyday, help us to remember that it's all true. Amen
Miriam Dewhurst