

Bring Palm Branches



Lent 2014

The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.
www.nyapc.com

2014 Lenten Calendar
(Sunday Services at 8:45 and 11:00)

Wednesday, March 5	Ash Wednesday Service, 7:00 pm, Sanctuary, Supper-PMH, 6-6:45 pm
Sunday, March 9	First Sunday in Lent, Bell Choir
Saturday, March 15	First Lenten discussion – The King Years 10:00am-12:00 noon, Luther Place Memorial Church
Sunday, March 16	Second Sunday in Lent
Wednesday, March 19	Taize service, 6:30pm, Lincoln Chapel
Saturday, March 22	Second Lenten discussion – The King Years 10:00am -12:00 noon, Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church
Sunday, March 23	Third Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 30	Fourth Sunday in Lent
Saturday, April 5	Third Lenten discussion – The King Years 10:00am-12:00 noon, Emory United Methodist Church
Sunday, April 6	Fifth Sunday in Lent, Communion Chilcott Requiem, 11:00am
Saturday, April 12	Solitude Retreat at NYAPC, 8:30am- 12:30pm (meditation, labyrinth)
Sunday, April 13	Palm Sunday , Choral Celebration, 3:00-5:00, NYA Sanctuary
Thursday, April 17	Maundy Thursday Service 7 pm, Sanctuary (Communion), light Supper, 6 pm, PMH
Friday, April 18	Good Friday Service, 12 noon, Sanctuary
Sunday, April 20	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



Reconciliation and Practices of the Community

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17a
2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10
Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2014

The Joel passage opens with the forecast of an invasion by a great and powerful army like nothing seen before, described as accompanied by a roaring noise typical of a horde of locusts. But the army has the Lord, YHWH, as its head and the people are invited to return to a Lord who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and who relents from punishing. It is to be a glorious time with all gathered together, aged and infants, the bridegroom and the bride.

In Second Corinthians, Paul presents God as reconciling the people to himself through Christ and the ministry of reconciliation. In that ministry, no obstacle is being put in anyone's way and the servants of God have commended themselves in every way, through great endurance and hardships but also with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness and love. The passage closes with a series of contrasts, describing those performing that ministry as being treated as unknown, yet well known, as dying, yet alive, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, and as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

In the closing passage, Matthew, after his presentation of the Beatitudes and his interpretation and expansion of a number of basic teachings, follows with a series of instructions on practices of the community, specifically almsgiving, fasting and the acquisitions of treasures. Almsgiving should not be done in the presence of others and accompanied by trumpets so that the giver may be praised, as the hypocrites do, but should be done in secret, and God who observes in secret will reward. Similarly, fasting should not be accompanied by disfigurement that calls attention to the event but by oiled head and washed face so that the fasting will be noted only by God in secret and rewarded in secret. Finally, Matthew cautions Christians not to store up for themselves (and for public display) treasures on earth where moth and rust corrupt and thieves break in and steal but to store treasures in heaven where such actions do not occur, closing with the observation that where one's treasure is stored there also will be one's heart.

Prayer: Creator God, keep us mindful of the history, trials and perseverance of those who preceded us in earlier faith communities before and after the time Jesus spent on earth as we look forward to the celebration of his resurrection. Amen

Robert L. Doan

Believe What You Heard

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

Thursday, March 6, 2014

“Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” (Gal. 3:5)

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus heals a leper and the servant of a Roman centurion. In each story, someone comes to Jesus to ask for healing. The leper and the centurion both have heard about Jesus. They believe that Jesus can heal. Each time Jesus healed someone, there were more eyewitnesses to his power to heal and the word continued to spread.

We are about two thousand and forty years away from Paul and the church in Galatia that so exasperated the apostle. We don't know the miracles that God did in their midst. We can safely assume that there were manifestations of the Spirit within the community, such as prophecy and tongues, because in Acts and the Epistles, (and Pentecostal and charismatic congregations today) manifesting such a gift is a sign that one has received the Spirit. In any case, the Spirit and miracles are assumed by Paul and the Galatians, and Paul's message is pretty clear: You Galatians believed what you heard. That is sufficient and God is working among you.

I'm not going to address the law/works righteousness problem that Paul was addressing in his epistle. Melissa Jane Taylor does that well in a few days. Instead I will tell you about an answer to prayer – perhaps not a miracle by anyone's definition, though it felt like one, but definitely an answer to prayer.

My nephew, Will, is a wonderful young man and he has bi-polar disorder. During a major episode last fall, when his father and I were in Chicago, visiting our father, Will talked a BMW dealership in Maryland into selling him an X3 automobile. He then decided to drive to New York to talk to a graphics designer about a logo for a company he believed he owned. Will is inclined to drive fast, and when he is in one of these episodes he texts non-stop. My brother was despairing that he would ever be able to find Will in New York, and listening to the ping-ping-ping of incoming texts was equally terrifying, so I took a walk around the block, praying as hard as I know how for Will's safety and that of the other people on the road. Will was pulled over by a state trooper. He had been going 83 mph in a 55 mph zone. It was then that Will discovered that he had left his driver's license at the house where he was staying. He turned around and went back and his father was later able to dissuade him from going to New York. That was the first of many answers to prayer that week and in the weeks that followed. Will is currently on his meds and doing okay though we know that life with bi-polar disorder is often fraught with uncertainty.

If hearing is a prerequisite for believing, where are we most likely to hear God's good news? Where are we mostly likely to hear one another's stories about God working among us, about answers to prayer? My prayer in this Lenten season is that as we worship together, we will all be able to hear and believe. See you in church.

Miriam Dewhurst

“Let the dead bury their dead. Follow me.”

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

Friday
March 7, 2014

Opening prayer: Gracious God, let the meditations of my brain and all the words and thoughts as they unfold as I ponder Your Word be acceptable in your sight. *Amen.*

Upon first reading, the Scriptures for today are an embarrassment. The Leviticus passage tells us that God blesses those who faithfully follow the Holiness Code and punishes those who fail to do so. I dare say that all of us intentionally fail to do so at least in certain particulars. The Matthew passage reports Jesus telling us that he has no place to lay his head, yet we are instantly to abandon even our most sacred duties (to bury one’s father) and to follow him – to unknown places, without even the security of a home. Paul confusingly tells us in the Galatians passage that the Law (that we read about in Leviticus) is a curse and implies that it need not be obeyed.

What are we to make of these passages, especially in the short space available for this meditation?

I suggest that Paul leads us out of this apparent wilderness. He emphatically asserts that all of us, yes all of us, are known and loved by God and that those of us who know and trust God are and have been redeemed. The mandate to follow the rules, to obey the Law, literally, religiously, has been abrogated. That is a hard message for most of us to accept or believe. We grow up being trained by parents, teachers, employers, preachers and practically everybody else to follow the rules and thus be “good.” Those who disobey the rules are “bad.”

I don’t think redemption that Paul describes entails simply getting away with either intentional or inadvertent violations of God’s laws. Rather, redemption entails fearless and guilt-free living with gratitude and conviction that God loves us and each and every one else too. It requires each of us to accept God’s profound graciousness and to live and behave in the light of that acceptance. It requires us to place our fundamental security in God’s love and graciousness. Following rules has obvious societal benefits, and Paul acknowledges that such is the case. His central point, I believe, is that faithful adherence to even The Law is not a condition that either can or must be met before we are accepted and loved by God.

How then are we to respond to this amazing graciousness? Each of us has the freedom and responsibility to answer that question. How will you answer it today?

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

--John H. Quinn, Jr.

March 8, 2014

- Leviticus 26:27-42
- Matthew 8:23-24
- Galatians 3:15-20

When my children were young, I had an epiphany about my relationship with God, and his with me. Previously, I had understood our “Father-Daughter” relationship pretty well, because I was experienced at being a daughter, and he had given me a loving and lovely Dad. But when I became a mother, I saw—at least just a little bit—through those parental eyes. I once even delivered a talk on that epiphany, as applied to adults, which I entitled “The Toddler Commandments”:

1. Ask nicely.
2. Say, “Thank you.”
3. Stop whining!

Now having successfully migrated the teenage years (my youngest is 20), I have a new epiphany, which I think I’ll call “The Teenage Gospel”:

1. Life is hard.
2. You can make choices that will make it harder.
3. Jesus will be there and love you anyway.

The selection from Leviticus is very clear on the “life is hard” and specific about the things you can do to make it harder. It’s very graphic and violent. Imagine this in a movie:

²⁸ then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over. ²⁹ You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters. ³⁰ I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense altars and pile your dead bodies^(b) on the lifeless forms of your idols, and I will abhor you.

What rating would you give it? “R”? It’s so easy to attribute this to a vindictive God. But consider it from a parental viewpoint. Isn’t he just giving us the score? Isn’t that what we tell our kids (or what our parents told us)? Don’t we paint the most graphic picture possible, with the most dire consequences, for the things which are most dangerous to our children? That makes me think of the instructions and warnings in Leviticus a little differently.

It is my experience that a mother can only be as happy as her least happy child. I want my kids to be happy! And that is what God wants for us—our safety, our security, our happiness, our joy—just as we want for our children. So he instructs us through his teachings how to make the rough edges smooth, but he also sends us Jesus.

He sends us Jesus to calm the storms of our lives, and reminds us of that in the beautiful passage from Matthew: “Lord, save us!” And he awakens and calms the storm and our fears. Praise God!

Laura Asiala

March 9, 2014

Psalm 25

When God led Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, he gave them knowledge of good and evil, temptation and sin, so they could make choices to follow his path. He made them ashamed, and told them to pray **“O my God, I trust in thee, let me not be ashamed ... let none that wait on thee be ashamed: let them be ashamed which transgress without cause. Shew me thy ways, O Lord, teach me thy paths.” Psalm 25: 2-4,**

I was raised in Faith. And, I have been blessed, my mother Marie Burns Powell and my uncle William Reece Burns have been my greatest moral and Christian influences. I have always loved and admired Jesus but I must say my Christian life in service has been very weak compared with my mother and my uncle.

Uncle Reece was the oldest of eight children, my mother the youngest, and by the time Reece was 16, and my mother six, they had lost both parents. The Burns family was full of Methodist ministers: all the siblings were parceled out to aunts and uncles and raised in parsonages.

Reece became a minister at 21, right out of college, and eventually acquired a doctorate in theology from Duke University. At age 21, in 1936, in the midst of the Great Depression, he gathered up his younger brothers and sisters, united as a family again in his first parsonage. They had little money and my mother remembered that as he officiated his first marriage, Uncle Reece was shaking harder than the young groom. He became superintendent of the southern district of WV for the Methodist Conference, and spent years driving winding mountain roads in the coal fields, sustaining tiny churches tucked into steep hillsides, which were in life or death competition with local honky-tonks for their congregations. His life of service to his people and to West Virginia was tireless, even after he suffered a massive heart attack before age 60. Two months after he retired at 65, he died of another coronary. At his funeral his close friend, another Methodist minister eulogized “There has never been a perfect man since Jesus but Reece Burns came the closest to anyone I have ever known in my life.”

“Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he will he teach sinners in the way. The meek will guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way.” Psalm 25:8-9 My Uncle Reece was not meek, he had been a three-sport athlete in high school, a boxer in college. I always felt Uncle Reece had better judgment than anyone I ever knew, because in any situation he knew to put everyone ahead of himself. He made himself meek to guide others in judgment and teach the way to the path of God. Reece’s daughter told me one of his great inspirations and a model for his ministry was the rough and ready ministry of another preacher of Scots heritage - Peter Marshall of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church!

Every Memorial Day in the tiny Methodist church built on the Burns farm on top of Green Hill, near Ireland, WV, my mother gave the keynote speech. She taught in Sunday school, “How do you find joy in life? J-O-Y: Jesus first, Others second, Yourself last. And you will find JOY.” In old age, as a loving matriarch for her church, her town, and her lake community where she lived in her log cabin home for 59 years, everyone felt her irrepressible, overflowing joy and optimism. People brought her embroidery, pictures and knick-knacks which said JOY and she put them all over her house. She passed away, age 90, on Uncle Reece’s birthday July 20, 2013. At her funeral a close family friend eulogized, “Marie was not perfect, she would be mad at me for saying she was, but Marie was an unusually unselfish person, unusually unselfish!” Afterward, another friend said, “She was an instinctive Christian, she did not have to think about it, she just acted quickly to put others first, unlike so many other Christians.” God and Jesus were more like my Mother’s two best everyday friends than any Lord far away in Heaven.

The point I am trying to make is that Mom and Uncle Reece were not perfect, but they found the path. They did not put others first, they put Jesus Christ first, others second, and that is where they both found the Joy that overflowed to everyone they met. David Powell

The Faithful Community

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

March 10

The three passages for today focus on faith. In the first, Jeremiah's oracle describes the artistry and extravagance of idols, but their inability to do anything other than look pretty. Alternatively, the Lord possesses power and majesty. He is a living God, whose might should be feared. The message is clear: idolatry will ruin a community; the living and the faithful should follow God.

The passage in Matthew is an incredible story. Jesus heals a paralytic man because of a crowd's faith. Not knowing who Jesus is, some scribes in the crowd accuse Jesus of blasphemy. Jesus reveals that he is the Son of God, and forgives the paralytic man's sins, commanding him to "stand up and walk." The man left, healed, and the crowd rejoiced in what they had seen. In Matthew 9:9, Matthew, sitting at a tax booth, is instructed by Jesus to follow him, and he does. Thus, Matthew's calling to discipleship leaves little room for ambiguity. Today's Matthew scripture reading is comprised of three short paragraphs, and yet tells two really important faith stories. Their brevity may convey simplicity, but these are not simple stories. These stories illustrate the strength of faith, the humanity of Jesus, and the power of forgiveness. These images are foundational to the Christian church. Just as the crowd was awed with what it had seen, we as readers should be awed by the power of these stories and the messages they convey.

The passage in Galatians is also rooted in faith. In Paul's letter to Galatia, he focused on distinguishing between the importance of faith and the importance of law. Paul is reminding the church in Galatia to be faithful Christians, relying on their faith in Christ for salvation, as opposed to relying on their observance of Jewish law. Paul writes that before Christ, the law was important, but the church should cease to rely on the law for salvation and should be confident in relying on their faith. The passage ends with the often quoted verse: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:29)

These passages remind us of the importance of faith, both for our community and our personal well-being. These passages indicate just how true that was centuries ago. As we live our lives in the twenty-first century, we understand how important faith remains.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, be with us on our faith journeys, as we aspire to be more faithful. Open our hearts and our minds to your grace and to witnessing the faith of others. Be with our community as we work in faith together. Amen.

----Melissa Jane Taylor

4 My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; ² but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. ³ So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits^[a] of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our^[b] hearts, crying, “Abba!^[c] Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.^[d]

I had always wanted to be on the associate pastor nominating committee. Since my dad is a pastor, I had seen one side of being called to church, but I had yet to experience the other side of calling the pastor.

Being called is different than being hired. It is so much more of a step in faith to call a pastor. That the church can see its vision, and a pastor can see theirs, with God in the center inviting them both to walk together towards their visions as the two roads converge into one; this is a calling. Trusting in God, trusting in the church’s vision, and trusting in this new partner/pastor’s vision as they come together. That we cannot see beyond God’s light, where we turn it over to Him to lead us together.

We are called by God. He calls us by name. Galatians tells us that Jesus Christ was sent for us, so that we may be children of God. How exhilarating! It is a special feeling to be called. To be known by name.

We were called to Michigan when I was 10. My parents had gone on a “trip” for the weekend while we three stayed with friends in California, where we lived at the time. Some weeks after that trip, they revealed that they had travelled to Michigan for an interview by a group of people who wanted us to come help them start a new church development in Macomb, MI. There are many things to be told about this time in our family’s life, but one of the best things was going to Michigan to be greeted by this small group of people. They called me, Scott, Andrew, my mom and my dad, by name. They knew us, hugged us, fed us, and encouraged us; they loved us. Many of these members would pick me up after school and take me home to our temporary apartment. They would hug me on Sunday morning every week. They sent me birthday cards, always writing my name. It was a secure feeling that I cannot quite shake; a feeling that will last me all of my days. It happened again when our family was called to Virginia where my dad is currently a pastor. In many ways it is why I associate church with home.

This is how I want to call our new associate pastor. I want us to know them by name. To love them and respect their own sense of self, to bring that together with our sense of New York Avenue and together meet God in where He will lead us. I want to break bread together and drink from the cup. I want to know their joys and sorrows, to share mine, and together to celebrate those joys and comfort those sorrows. To welcome their family, too.

We are the church. We are heirs of God, through Christ, and nothing can take us away from that. In that same spirit may we call our new associate pastor. May we call them by name, so that they may know the love of God through us and with us. That we may all be called children of God, and heirs to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Karen Milam

Where God Guides God Provides

Deuteronomy 8:1-10
Matthew 9:18 -26
Galatians 4:8 -14

March 16th 2014

- Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart
... Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you... .. When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. (Deuteronomy 8:2, 4, 10)
- Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? (Galatians 4:8 – 9)

I started to have a committed relationship with God 10 years ago. It took me three years to accept God's invitation to become his intimate best friend. For the first three years, I was not quite sure about my religion.

Living as a Christian, growing as a Christian, I see all those wonderful things that God has done, all the needs that he has provided me more clearly. All the arrangement he has already made for me, while I was asking for something else. God's best is the best, always.

When I left my previous job last year, I did not ask if I should do this, but decided to make this transition myself. All the circumstances and best of my judgment, leaving my job, was the best choice for me, and my employer at that time. And I had a wonderful plan for my new career path at a financial institution. I thought I had done enough research, altered my resume and myself to fit into the qualification that financial industry employers would value. I thought I had everything that I would need to make this jump myself. But I was wrong.

At the end, after I have gone through all the procedures, I came to a conclusion, that the career path was not right for me. I set a wrong direction for myself. But God kindly and patiently guided me out of the wrong path.

I still do not have a clear vision about my career. Not knowing what lies ahead, gives unlimited possibilities. Sometimes it excites me, sometimes it worries me and scares me.

Prayer: Thank you God for all the promises that you have given us. Thank you for all the needs that you have provided me when I needed them. Help me not living my life in a fear or doubt, but glorify you and enjoy walking with you each day of my life.

ShuXian McKenna

Fired Up

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

Thursday, March 13, 2014

The words that linger in my mind from today's readings are Paul's plaintive question to the Galatians: "What has become of the enthusiasm you had?" The word enthusiasm comes from my Jerusalem translation of the Bible. That word is "good will" in the Revised Standard translation and "joy" in the New International version. Whatever the translation, it is clear that the believers in Galatia have lost something important and Paul wants them to get it back.

We know from our experience that human enthusiasm is a fragile thing. The realities of life intervene. There are troubles and distractions of every kind and they have a tendency to overwhelm our thought processes and our hearts.

The problem in Galatians seems to be false and divisive teaching, which is robbing the community of its focus and vitality. False teachers are separating the community from Paul and treating Paul as an "enemy". The good news of the Gospel is being diluted with demands that people return to the old ways of doing things. Paul wonders if the community doesn't have to start "all over again".

In Deuteronomy, God is warning the Israelites of another sort of problem – pride. Earthly success may cause the Israelites to forget about God and the miracles God performed on their behalf. The fervor of their faith will disappear. Their amnesia will be their undoing.

In Matthew, Jesus is preaching and performing miracles. Crowds are gathering. People are talking. Enthusiasm is building. But the reality of the cross lies in the future and enthusiasm will wane.

For me, Lent can be a somber time. We are called to consider how we live and the reality of our own mortality. Yet, as a Christian I believe I am called to remember the risen Christ. My enthusiasm may flicker during difficult times, but it must not die.

Prayer: Dear God, help me to remember even during troubled times that I worship a risen savior. Help me to always reflect my faith with enthusiasm, joy, and good will.

Steve Dewhurst

Hajar in the Wilderness

Deuteronomy 9:4-12; Matthew 10:1-15; and Galatians 4:21-31

March 14, 2014

For the past three years I have been studying Islam and Middle East geography at GWU. Several factors entered into this decision, but I felt primarily that I did not hold a holistic view of Islam. So much of the violence in the world during the past few years has been the result of extremists in the Islamic world, forming for me a dark and treacherous view of Muslims. Not only have the very fine professors disabused me of that notion, but courses have induced me to view familiar texts, such as the ones about Sarah and Hagar, from an Islamist perspective. Hajar (in Arabic) emerges as a heroine in Islam, rather than Galatians' dejected figure. Yes, Sarah did cast Hagar out of her home when she bore Ishmael by her husband, Abraham. Sarah was within her rights to do so; Hagar had only slave status. In Genesis, we learn of Hagar's fate: ***Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.***

Galatians 4:31 passage reads: ***"Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."*** Admittedly, this passage sounds unfeeling and prejudiced, although a metaphorical exegesis might take the sting out of it. But I'd like to focus on what happened to Hajar out there in the desert. The Qur'an does not mention Hajar overtly, but much of Islamic studies involve studying the Hadith. The Hadith reported the deeds and sayings of Muhammad, though Hadith literature does not qualify as "primary source" material. Ibn Abbas' Hadith tells us much more about what happened to Hajar (paraphrased due to limited space):

She became thirsty and [Ishmael] became thirsty. She left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found the mountain of Safa. She stood on it so that she might see somebody, but she could not. Then she descended from Safa and when she reached the valley, she reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not. She repeated that (running between Safa and Marwa) seven times. Finally an angel helped her and told her that God had heard Ishmael's crying. At that point, God caused a spring to burst forth from the ground; the well was subsequently named Zamzam, and become a holy source of water. (The word hajj, the Muslim journey to Mecca, comes from Hajar.)

Desert life involves extreme hardship. Ibn Khaldun, who wrote the famous *Muqaddimah*, went and lived among the Bedouins in the 1300's to better understand how tribes endured the climate's harshness. He discovered that Bedouins developed a strong group feeling that became intractable loyalty. So to think that Hajar, trudging through deep hot sand that would have burned her feet, panicking that her child would die of thirst (if she didn't first), seeing no-one to rescue her, managed to stay alive stuns us. How would any of us do if abandoned in the desert? Sara Maitland, a British author who wrote about solitude, takes many people on silent retreats in the Sinai during the year, and warns them that the silence and savagery of the desert can be daunting, not only physically but mentally, too. We live in a world full of noise, communication, bombardment of information. To retreat to the desert with Maitland already is virtuous; to be left there with a small child seems virtually inconceivable. Abraham and Sarah may have understood that they were carrying out part of a greater plan that I cannot fully understand,

Prayer: God, during this Lenten season, illumine us with the mystery of your will. Open our hearts to a fuller acceptance of the multivalent ways you have revealed yourself to the world, whether through Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad. Help us remove the shackles of emotional clutter and let us experience the vastness of desert life so that we might know you and feel the waters of Zamzam.

Elizabeth Young

Deuteronomy 9:13-21
Matthew 10:16-23
Galatians 5: 1-6

March 15, 2014

A Little Peace....

As I meditate and write on these passages during the tail-end of the snowstorm hitting Washington, DC and the East Coast, it occurs to me that we can take “events” that confront us with either anger at the inconvenience and “suffering,” or with calm, peace, and enjoyment of the beauty around us. Certainly in the Leviticus passage, Moses had anger issues! My goodness—burning, pounding, and grinding the golden calf to dust, then flinging it for good measure. He dreaded the Lord’s anger and wrath, so put on a show of his own. Is that the way we are to respond to bad behavior and injustice? Is Moses a role model here? Or are we to work for justice and peace in other ways?

Instead, the Matthew Gospel talks about peace, wishing a house peace as you enter, bringing peace with you. There is also a warning: “I send you out like sheep among wolves”; but there is also encouragement: don’t worry about what to say in dicey situations, “it will be the Spirit of the Father speaking in you.” Perhaps that is what peace is all about.

In late January, several Christian pastors and leaders from Syria, including a Presbyterian pastor from Homs, visited Washington, D.C. to bring their message of what is happening to people, churches, cities and towns in their country. Despite the horrific death and destruction, all of these Christian leaders remain in Syria to minister to the people and work for peace. They told stories of Christians being targeted and churches being burned or converted to headquarters for fighting rebels and government troops. They asked plaintively, “Where are all the Western churches in Europe and the U.S.?” What are we doing to support and help them? At the very least, they asked for our prayers.

As Galatians says, “...our hope of attaining that righteousness...is the work of the Spirit through faith....**the only thing that counts is faith active in love.**” We can and must act through faith to bring the gift of peace to our brothers and sisters in the Middle East, whether in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt. We can do this through prayer, faith, and financial support (e.g., PC(USA) Disaster Assistance). Mostly, we must remember the unthinkable suffering that is happening—the death, starvation, destruction, people fleeing from their homes. As Rev. Katie Cashwell read to the children in [A Little Peace](#), we must all work for peace. We must pray for peace. We must let our brothers and sisters who are suffering in Syria, Iraq, and the rest of the region know that we have not forgotten them. We must pray for them and pray for God’s peace.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to remember those who are suffering in the midst of wars and strife. Help us to pray for them and for your peace in this world. Amen.

Marilyn J. Seiber

Starting over humbly

Genesis 12:1-8; Psalm 105; John 3:1-21; Romans 4:1-17.

Sunday, March 16

Ever since I first heard this story in John's Gospel, I've wondered why Jesus came down so hard on Nicodemus. Clearly he respects Jesus and is a seeker trying to understand more. Instead of welcoming him, Jesus completely confuses and challenges him. Jesus says that if Nicodemus wants to see the kingdom of God, he must be "born anew" (John, 3:3). This is a difficult lesson and open to many interpretations.

What I suppose is that Jesus has fitted his words to what he sees in Nicodemus. This man is a Pharisee and on the powerful Jewish ruling council. They know all the Laws including the 200, detailed kosher ones. Their strict practice gives them great stature in the society of the day. In religious matters they rule Jerusalem. This is the self-righteousness that Jesus is trying to root out. Nicodemus has come to trust in all of his rules and to believe all the man-made laws. They are permanent barriers to being able to see God's kingdom. The solution is to start over, humbly. All of his learning, status and pride have separated him from God. Humility is what Nicodemus ("victor over the people") deeply needs. To see God in the present, he must be as open, vulnerable, ignorant as a newborn. Then he will be able to live simply on trust and faith in God. He will leave behind the self-serving rules and biases that blind him to God.

Starting over is also the interpretation that Paul suggests about Abram's story in Genesis 12. Abram is a rich, powerful man in Haran, in the old kingdom of Babylon. When he receives word from God, he simply follows. He leaves home, the land of his fathers, all of his local status, and at age 75 he, Sarai and Lot with their servants, journey "to a land I will show you" (Gen 12:1). There are no guarantees, no map, no final address given. (A Garmin GPS would be no help.) Look how humble Abram is. He listens, then follows. "Lech lecha" ("Follow, follow," in the Hebrew.)

Not only does Abram (and Sarai and Lot) believe and faithfully follow, but also he worships God along the way. His route south would have taken him through Aleppo and Damascus Syria, two famously dangerous cities now. Whenever Abram feels safe and hears the Spirit, he builds an altar, so that all can worship. He seems to be building a faith community on this faith journey. And he is not worshipping a local or roadside god, as was the custom. (There were thousands of such gods called 'genius loci' by the Greeks and Romans.) Instead, he is worshipping a single, universal God. This is the true beginning of monotheism – Abraham's practice of trusting in one God is the *genesis* of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Thus he is called "Father Abraham," the beginner, the wellspring of these three, diverse religions.

Paul looks at Abraham and argues that he had faith first and followed God in complete trust, and that's why he was judged to be "righteous" (Rom 4:3). He was blessed by God and was righteous before he was circumcised and before all the Laws were decreed. So for Paul and Jesus righteousness comes from faith. Trusting humbly in God comes first, not from a strict adherence to hundreds of laws nor from the old tradition of circumcision. This being "reborn from above" allows everyone, Jews and gentiles, to see God, to enter the Kingdom.

This sharing of God's blessings is open to all. Thus the prophecy in Genesis comes true: Abraham's faith in one loving God is available to all and should be a "blessing to all nations" (Gen 12:3). Not a basis for war, invasions and dangerous divisions.

Prayer:

I will make you a great nation

And I will bless you, ...

And all people on earth

Will be blessed through you. (Gen 12:2-3)

Amen

Tom Dunlap

Why Four Tablets – Not Two?

Lectionary: Deuteronomy 9: 23-10:5
Matthew 10: 24-33; 21-33
Galatians 5: 7-12

Monday March 17, 2014

A continual challenge (at least to me) in writing these devotions is finding the thread(s) connecting the Lectionary passage and the general devotion theme. Today's passage is no exception. One of the most hallowed, arguably THE most hallowed artifact was the pair of stone tablets inscribed with the [Ten Commandments](#) and given to [Moses](#) when he had ascended [Mount Sinai](#). According to the Bible, there were two sets. The first set, which had been inscribed by God, was smashed by Moses when he was enraged by the sight of the [Children of Israel](#) worshiping the [Golden Calf](#). The second set according to tradition, was preserved in the Ark by God as a sign of His forgiveness and reaffirmation of the Covenant. Some famous paintings depicting these tablets show the first few commandments on the left-most tablet and the remainder on the right-most. Modern historians now believe that both tablets contained the same information, similar to a carbon copy so that in a treaty, for example the two parties could have their own tablet, similar to modern business practice. The popular image of the Ten Commandments as rounded-off rectangles bears little relationship with religious traditions concerning their appearance. In this popular example shown above, the inscribed Commandments are represented in symbolic form used interchangeably with the numbers 1-10.



When I was a freshman in college, the weekly newspaper ran a cartoon that now reminds me of the message of the next Lectionary. The title of the cartoon was “Little Man on Campus” and concerned the travails of the main character in pursuing his academic studies. His main adversary was *Professor Snare*, who delighted in giving his students a hard time through unreasonable requirements and deadlines. I remember one episode where his class (a required subject) was filled to overflowing. He began by announcing a long list of textbooks and required reading, frequent tests, “pop” quizzes, etc. Afterwards, the class rushed *en masse* to the registrar to drop the class, thereby reducing the class size. We cannot tell whether or not we are meant to face challenges but we must be prepared to deal with the Prof. Snares of the world. When Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God he met opposition and hostility. He tells his disciples that they must expect the same treatment if they are to live and to proclaim the reign of God. Jesus’ statement wasn’t meant to reduce the size of his following, but to ensure that each one was fully aware of the perils they would face. Just as Jesus had to carry his cross, so the disciples must carry their cross and not try to evade it. To suffer for the faith is to share in the work of Christ.

Galatians 5: 7-12 reminds us that Christ will not be the Savior of any who will not own and rely upon him as their only Savior. Let us take heed to the **warnings** of Jesus to steadfastness in the gospel. It is clear from Jesus’ words as expressed in this letter that persecution of his followers will cause many to fall by the wayside

Prayer: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

Bruce Whitener

Circumcise My *What?*

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

Tuesday, March 18

God, through Moses, is leading His people through the wilderness to the Promised Land, and Moses is instructing them, explaining what the “deal” is, what the Lord requires of them, “to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord...Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.”

Two phrases from this passage stood out to me, the circumcision command, and “takes no bribe.” God cannot be bought or changed. He is what He is. But He expects our loyalty, gratitude, love and devotion, and demands that we keep His commandments, which leads us to the circumcision. My Wycliffe Commentary does not address this head-on, but, if I read it correctly, implies that a “circumcised heart” marks God’s people to the world by their behavior and devotion, just as removal of the foreskin identified them visibly. Jeremiah, chapter 4, uses the same admonition, “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your doings.”

Unsurprisingly, though Wycliffe may have been silent on the question, the internet is not. Rev. C.S. Roberts, a Methodist minister who blogs as Hoosier Pastor, says “If we are to have circumcised hearts, we must allow the Spirit to cut off the loose areas of hearts. In a boy’s circumcision the foreskin, the part that is cut off, is discarded. Upon coming to God, there are parts of heart that must be cut off and discarded. We have to get rid of our hate, violent-tendency, lust, greed, pride, malice, discontent, prejudice and so much more. We have to take all of that and throw it away.”

Self-surgery is not easy, and inevitably painful. Casting off a part of ourselves requires courage, determination, and persistence, but can be necessary for us to be fully alive as God wishes us to be.

Loving God, give us the courage to “circumcise” those parts of us that lead us away from You. Circumcise our hearts of those tendencies that interfere with the love that You lavish on us, and that we are bound to share with our brothers and sisters. Amen

Mary Krug

A Question and A Reply

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

Wednesday
March 19, 2014

The story told in Matthew 11:1-6 is short. John the Baptist, while in prison, sends a message to Jesus and receives a reply. Context and imagination are useful to bring fullness to the story.

In front of crowds of ordinary people, John the Baptist has been testifying that Jesus is the Messiah and preaching about the kingdom of God. King Herod had John arrested and put in prison. I imagine John is anxious and stressed in his prison cell. He's probably tired, unable to eat much, but hungry at the same time. John spent his life walking through the wilderness, preparing others for the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, and baptizing those he converted. Now, in prison and facing the possible end of his life, John sends a few of his disciples to Jesus to ask: *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

Matthew does not tell us what John thinks or why he asks this question. I suspect that John worries about his disciples' futures if he should die; and he wants to know that Jesus is well and truly established as the Messiah, bringing the word of God to the poor and outcast. And, at the most basic level, John wants assurance that his own life's work has meaning and has not been in vain. I think many of us share the same concern.

Jesus dispatches the disciples back to John and tells them to bear witness to his (Jesus') actions. *Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.* How much more reassuring can this be? The disciples will have seen the truth with their own eyes. Jesus provides concrete evidence in response to John's question.

During the 40 days of Lent, we prepare for the coming of Christ. Rituals and symbols help us prepare: Ash Wednesday, Lent, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. But will we, any of us, ever see in our own lifetime the actual coming of Christ? How do we really know that our lives truly have worth when we do not see the results of our hard work?

Jesus ends his message with the following words (Matthew 11:6): *And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.* The Barnes Commentary helped me interpret this cryptic phrase. "That is, happy is he who shall not take offence at my poverty and lowliness of life, so as to reject me and my doctrine. Happy is the one who can, notwithstanding that poverty and obscurity, see the evidence that I am the Messiah, and follow me." This sentence is the punchline, the final note of reassurance that Jesus is able to offer John. Jesus acknowledges that he appears to be an unlikely Messiah. By believing the evidence of God's work through Jesus and adhering to God's instruction to help the least fortunate people, a person will be blessed.



Gwenn and Paul Gebbard

Matthew 11:16-30
Isaiah 58:6-14
Galatians 6:1-6

Thursday, 20th March 2014

Plank-Eyed Saints

*Isn't this the fast that I have chosen: to release the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke **Isaiah 58.6***

*For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners **Matthew 11.18-19***

*Brothers, even if a man is caught in some fault, you who are spiritual must restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourself so that you also aren't tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if a man thinks himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself **Galatians 6.1-3***

While returning from a trip in Europe, Albert Einstein was once accosted by a reporter who bluntly asked him whether he believed in 'God', to which the famous scientist retorted unequivocally "Tell me what you mean by 'God', then I could tell you if I believe in 'it'". When I was pondering on the biblical verses assigned to me for this devotional, a myriad of anecdotes rushing flooded my mind, because all revolve around a topic that I could write an encyclopedia about. But, for obvious practical reasons, I will just give you a glimpse of my innermost thoughts by sharing a snippet of those stories hereafter.

A few years ago, I remember watching a guest, on a French TV show, voice her frustrations against religion. It was a middle-aged woman who had been wandering aimlessly through the streets and starving to death for weeks. Thankfully, she eventually wound up in a shelter run by some Christian denomination. But, when came meal time, she was urged and required to say grace prior to eating. I have witnessed firsthand many other similar ludicrous, histrionic and vapid displays of pharisaism. I once attended a church where a member of the pastoral staff, a charismatic and otherwise commendable character, was obsessed with homosexuality to such an extent that it became his leitmotiv. As such, whatever the theme of his sermon would be, he would veer off course at one point of his preaching, with a zest of demagoguery, as to pander to the demography of his audience (mostly from some ethnicity), and remind the congregation for the umpteenth time how homosexuality is a sin. Within the same church, another clergy member, actually the founder of the said church, who laudably refrained from drinking alcohol, asserted with an irrefragable tone during one of his sermons that, at the Wedding at Cana, water was not indeed turned into wine, but into some whatchamacallit alcohol-free potation; consequently, you could not find a drop of alcoholic beverages at any social event (marriage, baptism, funerals, graduation etc) thrown or hosted by any member of that church, lest (s)he be denounced to the church hierarchy or/and labeled 'unchurched'. And now, last but not least; as part of a delegation made up of the members of the same church and fellow citizens, we once went to pay a visit to a church sister whose mother had passed away. After we were done with the memorial prayer for the departed, that sister could not help but keep sobbing; then another member of the delegation, a former clergyman back in my native country, chipped in and said something in the like of 'as Christians we should be not lamenting the deceased', just to be immediately and rightly dismissed by another member.

Before proceeding further and being suspected of promoting my own cause, let me make, as a full disclosure, my 'coming out', so to speak: I am both a complete teetotaler, and as 'straight' as the shortest path joining two points in Euclidean geometry. However, I am always repelled by those self-appointed 'God's spokespersons, certified holier-than-thou, professional guilt-trippers, who build themselves up by tearing down anyone who sees the world somehow differently, then pat themselves in the back; those Bible-thumpers who want to impose their phantasmagoric, myopic and sectarian characterization of their male chauvinistic, homophobic, ostracizing, nitpicking, legalistic, 'us versus them' and bugaboo 'God' on everyone, and then wonder our houses of worship are getting emptier. Yuck!

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, God of Abraham, the father of many nations, God in Voltaire, God in Nietzsche, God in Christopher Hitchens, God in Darwin, God of the animist Aborigines and Pygmies, God of the polytheist Native Indians, Whoever, Wherever, Whatever You are, when I fumble to find You please set me free from the overzealous blind truth-twisters who pretend to have already found You, and want to sequester You. In the name of Your Beloved Son, the Son of (Wo)Man. Amen

Youssoupha NYAM

Friday, March 21

Ezekiel 28:1-10

John 6:1-15

Galatians 6:7-18

On the Hillside Again

In today's John passage, we are on the hillside again, eating the miracle of bread. Stories of feeding multitudes appear in all four gospels, twice in Matthew and Mark. It must have been a crucial story for early Christians. How is it important to us? What does it mean to be part of this crowd John tells us about, following Jesus because of his signs?

The crowd is eager, maybe too eager. Jesus has moved up the mountain at the beginning of the story, but the crowd follows. John also tells us it is near Passover. If we had been there, this bread would have seemed like manna from heaven, with Jesus on the mountain echoing Moses. John is telling us that Jesus is the new Exodus, the new law.

But we in the crowd don't understand. And by the end of the passage, Jesus has again moved up the mountain, this time to escape a crowd that wants to make him king, to make him into something they understand.

You don't find many good kings in the Bible, and today's Ezekiel passage tells of a particularly bad one. The king of Tyre is successful, even wise, but too proud. So proud he thinks of himself as a god. Really, is there a worse sin than this? "You shall die the death of the uncircumcised," writes Ezekiel.

Paul is terribly upset with the Galatians for requiring gentiles to become law-abiding, circumcised Jews before they could become Christian. Furious with them for straying from his teaching, for having such limited vision, he writes with passion: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!"

So what does this mean for us, here on the hillside again, munching our fill of bread? Yet again, God astonishes us with a new creation, with abundance, by breaking the boundaries of our limited ways of seeing the world, whether that be in thinking ourselves small gods or thinking too narrowly about our faith.

Still, I want answers. I want control. I want to know. To rely on following the rules.

But our faith isn't about circumcision litmus tests or about becoming so wise we are gods. It's about Jesus making 5000 out of five. Of God making a young boy's humble supplies abundant. Of God making the ordinary extraordinary. And about experiencing this in a group, in a community, not on our own as demigods. "Let us work for the good of all," writes Paul.

Someone once said that life lessons will be repeated until learned. And that must be why we keep coming back to this hillside to eat with the crowd, to break bread with one another, over and over again.

Meg Hanna House

March 22, 2014
Mike Smith

Ezekiel 28:11-19
John 6:16-27
2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Reflection

In January, Google bought Nest for \$3.2B. Nest makes thermostats and smoke detectors that connect to smartphones. In February, Facebook bought WhatsApp for \$19B. WhatsApp lets people use their smartphones to text chat. For perspective, \$19B is roughly the annual economic production of Afghanistan, the Congo, or Honduras; more than double Haiti.

I offer these observations not as a lesson in technology or economics, but to prompt reflection on what our society values: a thermostat that adjusts itself; a chat app.

Jesus said

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

John 6:27

He had a crowd of followers, in part, because he'd fed them from the loaves and fishes. Yet he rejected a prosperity gospel. He was not offering the food security that the crowd sought; today, we won't find Christ in coddling technology. His message was unsettling to the crowd; today, it can be unsettling to us. But Jesus provides no space for discomfort with his message, no concession for temporal compromise. Culture may push us to work for devices and apps; Jesus demands that we work for God, that we transform culture. Just as in Ezekiel, where God lamented that the prince sought temporal splendor, so too Jesus laments weakness of faith. Amid a terrifying storm, Jesus walked on water, asserted his sovereignty and demanded that his disciples focus on God, not the threatening sea.

“I am; do not be afraid.”

John 6:20

That focus is embodied in the Great Commandment: to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor. Paul recognized that was a challenge. A challenge that demands suffering and affliction; a challenge that does not promise temporal prosperity. But

He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again.

2 Corinthians 1:10

Prayer

*Sovereign God,
We displace you in our lives and seek material comfort,
We value things instead of loving neighbors,
Help us recognize that amid the storm of our lives at sea,
you are above the water, walking toward us.
Amid our lives, you are.
Amen*

Sunday, March 23: Going Deeper into the Well

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

Should we begin our personal prayers with *confession* or is it better to begin with *adoration and praise*? I remember debating that question years ago.* *Come on*, you might ask. *Does it really make any difference, just as long as we pray?—“Just do it!”*

Sometimes we may pose these kinds of religious questions to avoid seeing what God has already made clear. Perhaps we don't want to face our sin and disobedience, so we change the subject. Some interpreters think that's what the Samaritan woman was doing with Jesus at the well (*John 4*). Many read her encounter with Jesus as a simple salvation story, an illustration of what the Apostle Paul talks about in another of today's passages: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners ... we were reconciled to God ... saved by his life." (*Rom. 5:8-10*)

At the well, we also see Jesus abandoning the societal niceties of his day, even breaking religious taboos: first, he is talking to *a woman*, who would be viewed by some of his followers as intrinsically "beneath him" (v. 27); second, and worse, she is an *unclean Samaritan*; and, third, she seems to be a social pariah, or so commentators allege, based on her coming to the well alone at noon. So this passage can be read as assurance that, like Jesus with the woman, God knows the worst about us, stoops to listen to us, loves and accepts us, and rescues us from our sorry state.

Yes, all that is true about God, who surely does know the worst about us; in sacrificial love the Creator of the universe stooped to become one of us; that same God always listens to us, loves and accepts us, and rescues us from our sin and shame. But I sense unplumbed depths in this passage, which is the New Testament's longest conversation between Jesus and anyone, and perhaps theologically the richest. There is time to go deeper, for me at least, as I preach March 23 on this very text! Personally, I love wrestling with Scripture, pondering a passage over time, asking questions of the text and of the Spirit who brings the text to life, reading the insights and research of varied commentators. Frances Taylor Gench provides a treasure trove of material on this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (*John 4*) in her book, *Back to the Well*.

Now, returning to my first question, is there a proper way, a preferred order in which we should pray? And does it matter *where* we pray, as the Samaritan woman seemed to think? Of course not. God hears our prayers wherever we are and whether we organize them according to some custom or if they randomly tumble out of our hearts and mouths, like the seemingly disjointed words of the woman at the well. The Psalms, which Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the prayer book of the Bible," model every imaginable kind of prayer for us. Take today's 95th Psalm, which begins with praise and adoration. For me, beginning with praise like this re-orders my mind and my heart, reminding me of God's faithfulness; my spirit softens. When I read, "Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah..." (*Ps 95:8*), I'm directed back to the passage in Exodus (*17:1-7*), where God quenched the thirst of the quarreling people. I pray for an open heart, a seeking heart, that I may question without quarreling. I pray that NYAPC will be a place where those who thirst find refreshment and living water, as together we seek to plumb the depths of God's love.

**This "debate" about prayer rests on two acronyms, mnemonic devices for devotional prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (ACTS), which grounds prayers in the goodness and greatness of God vs. beginning with Confession, a way of "cleaning the slate," followed by Adoration, Thanksgiving, Supplication (CATS). Both are good, but so is pouring our hearts out to God helter-skelter, as in many of the Psalms. God hears all our prayers, "for he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture." (Ps 95.7)*

Rev. Linda LeSourd Lader

Monday, March 24, 2014

Ezekiel 30:1-9
John 6:27-40
2 Corinthians 1:12-22

Scripture, to me, is often dense and unwieldy. I tend to get bogged down in the details, sometimes missing the point. And perhaps this is why I find the passage from John so interesting. It begins with Jesus speaking:

27 "But don't be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you. For God the Father has given me the seal of his approval."

28 They replied, "We want to perform God's works, too. What should we do?"

29 Jesus told them, "This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent."

30 They answered, "Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What can you do?"

The crowd that Jesus is speaking to is inspired. They want to perform God's works and be part of this amazing story – just like we do. But, also like us, they need guidance. They ask Jesus, "What should we do?"

And that's the first part of this passage that resonates with me. I want to be a good Christian, and I might have some ideas about how to go about that, but a direct answer from Jesus would go a long way in helping me to understand *exactly* what I'm supposed to do. I like the details. I like the guidance.

So Jesus keeps it (relatively) simple: "Believe in the one he has sent."

He's not asking the crowd to convert a certain number of people, start up their own churches, or answer theological questions to prove that they get it. They just have to believe in Jesus.

But instead of accepting Jesus' answer, the crowd essentially says, "Okay, but prove it." They ask him what tricks he can do to prove he's the Son of God. And that is an idea that I, and many people I know, have struggled with.

We want to believe. We want to be all in, but sometimes it's so hard to accept that pure belief is the answer. We live in a science- and logic-based world, and therefore we demand proof. "Show us a miraculous sign," to prove you are who you say you are. We demand deliverables – "what can you do?"

And that is not what belief is about. That is not the work that God is asking from us. That belief – that pure belief, not blind belief – is the basis from which everything else stems. Believing without demanding proof is the essence of our faith and the foundation of the work we do for God. So when we think it should be more complicated, and when we think of asking God to "prove it," I would encourage all of us to remember Jesus' response to the crowd:

"This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent."

It may not always be simple, but it's not nearly as complicated as we try to make it.

Elizabeth Sciupac

I AM...

Ezekiel 31: 1-11
John 6: 41-51
2 Corinthians 1: 23-2:17

March 25, 2014

I was particularly taken with the reading from John, and that inspired me to do a search of the gospel for images of Jesus. Who did Jesus say that He was; what images did He use? Also, who was He addressing at the time?

Jesus said that He was the

	<u>To</u>	<u>In the Gospel of John</u>
▪ Son of the Father	the Jews	5: 19
▪ Bread of Life	the Jews	6: 41
▪ Good Shepherd	the Jews	9: 11
▪ Gate for the sheep	the Pharisees	10: 7
▪ Resurrection & the Life	Martha	11: 25
▪ Way, Truth, & Life	the disciples	14: 6
▪ Vine	the disciples	15: 5

Jesus was called the

	<u>By</u>	<u>Gospel of John</u>
▪ Lamb of God	John the Baptist	1: 29
▪ Christ, Messiah	some of the Jews	7: 41

The images that Jesus used are quite diverse. To the Jews and Pharisees, He used everyday images such as bread, gate, and shepherd. We now know that these representations were meant to be powerful metaphors for who Jesus was, or hoped to be. Looking back, we know that they were interpreted in positive—and negative—ways.

To Martha and the other disciples he used more sophisticated or complicated ideas such as “the resurrection and the life” or the “way, truth, and the life.” Finally, Jesus was called the Lamb of God by John the Baptist, referring to the ancient practice of the sacrificial lamb; and the Christ or Messiah by some Jews that were in the temple. Jesus got Himself into plenty of trouble with these images.

More importantly, who is Jesus to you? What image is most clear to you? What does it say about your faith? Do you need to develop another image for your spiritual growth? Perhaps you may, during this Lenten season.

Ella Cleveland

Ezekiel 33:1-11

Wednesday, March 26, 2014

John 6:52-59

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendations to you or from you?”

I love this question from Paul in 2 Corinthians, because it reminds me of a situation that occurs sometimes when I'm in a business establishment and the person I'm working with asks me to write their boss to tell them what a good job they have done. What a bummer, when they were essentially doing their job. And I think Paul felt the same thing. Here were his ambassadors of the faith needing written thanks for their good works or for a special status with Paul. Does that sound familiar? Aren't we saying that our good works will earn us a special status or a place in Heaven? And Paul then continues, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, not written with ink but with the spirit of the living God...” Wow! What a rush! Our very bodies are representing Christ.

That is what we at NYA are called to do: to be the good news of God's redeeming love through Jesus Christ; to love the unlovable, and to care for those who need care. No letters of recommendations needed.

Prayer: Lord thank you for love and faith in us. Help us always to be grateful for our job as Christians.

Jenean McKay

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

Thursday, March 27, 2014

“It’s a *metaphor!*” declares one of the female characters, her hands in the air in exasperation, to her fellow Ugandan villagers in the final moments of the recent Broadway musical, “The Book of Mormon.” She’s talking about Salt Lake City, the Salt Lake City that one of the Mormon missionaries has highly embellished--just as he has the rest of the faith story--in order to relate to the villagers he’s been sent to convert. She reveals that she’s gotten the bigger message; she’s gotten past all the fabulous fairy-tale details spun by the reluctant missionary.

Jesus’ words in John 6:61-63 remind me of this scene in the musical. He’s annoyed, fed up, that the disciples aren’t getting it, the stuff about the spirit and the flesh; the words that are also spirit that are also life.

And I have to admit, I would be right there with the disciples, saying “Huh?” I feel that way after I read a lot of the Bible. It’s hard to understand the twists and turns of the legalistic reasoning in Ezekiel 33:12-20: *So, I’m thinking, does that mean it’s actually easier for the wicked to be saved than for the righteous? Wait a minute: the righteous are damned the minute they sin, but the wicked only have to do one good thing and suddenly they’re saved? Does he mean we are in a constant state of flux between righteousness and wickedness, and at what point does the flux stop—at death? At wherever our wheel of fortune stops? What’s the statute of limitations on righteousness and wickedness, Ezekiel?*

I think he’s talking about forgiveness; about being authentically righteous and genuinely able to recognize and turn from doing wrong. That’s not exactly a metaphor, what Ezekiel says, but it leaves me saying “What?”

And in both the New Testament passages, I get stuck on the fact that God is always veiled; at more than one remove. Why is Jesus the front for God? I don’t mind that, actually; I can understand the need for a messenger. It’s when Jesus is synonymous with God and the Holy Spirit that I get puzzled. Why does God need to be three-in-one? And why does God have to be so hard to talk about?

It’s beyond metaphor. I love the beauty of Paul’s language—the imagery of things being veiled—in 2 Corinthians. If the language of God throughout the Bible were that simple, I could get it. I can handle a metaphor. But the Trinity? Of the divine in Christianity needing to be not one, but three, abstractions *at the same time*? Jesus would be annoyed with me, too. My prayer is for understanding.

Amy Garrou

March 28, 2014

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

These passages are typical of the reflection we make during Lent and are a foreshadowing to the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus – particularly the denial of Jesus by those closest to him.

John 7:1-13: So [Jesus'] brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.' (For not even his brothers believed in him.) Jesus said to them, 'My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil... I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come.'...But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. The Jews were looking for him at the festival and saying, 'Where is he?' And there was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying 'He is a good man,' others were saying 'No, he is deceiving the crowd.' Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews.

Paul reminds us in his second letter to the Corinthians of the power of God made possible through the human sacrifice of Jesus. We cannot forget the gift we have been given, nor can we forget the responsibility we bear to give of ourselves and share God's love with others.

II Corinthians 4:7-15: But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies...But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with the scripture – 'I believed, and so I spoke' – we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

I offer as today's meditation the words of hymn 710 "We Lift Our Voices:"

We lift our voices, we lift our hands, we lift our lives up to you, we are an offering. Lord, use our voices; Lord, use our hands; Lord, use our lives; they are yours: we are an offering.

All that we have, all that we are, all that we hope to be, we give to you, we give to you. We lift our voices; we lift our hands; we lift our lives up to you: we are an offering, we are an offering.

Leigh Hildebrand

Saturday, March 29

Ezekiel 34:1-16

John 7:14-36

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5

¹⁶So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. -2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Here we are, in the midst of Lent—a time of preparation and waiting, of pondering and discernment. It is an opportunity to reflect on the innate brokenness in ourselves, in others, in the church and world around us. More importantly, it is a chance to repair those places.

How often we hear clichéd phrases about how “change is good.” And it is good—it’s often growth. But that does not make change easy. In fact, it’s often quite hard. In training recently to run a half-marathon, I was often reminded that physically stretching your body is painful. But oh, how beneficial it is, allowing your muscles to change and become stronger.

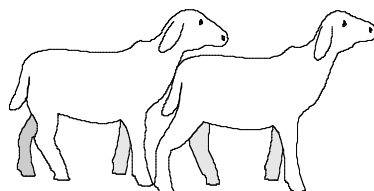
So it should not be revelatory that the same is true for one’s spirit. And yet, if you find yourself with an inclination to stow away the dark and disquieting moments in favor of peace and love, this is a different thought. To find God in the discomfort—in the nudge that is growth. This is echoed in Ezekiel, as God seeks out the Israelites:

¹¹For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. -Ezekiel 34: 11-12

By stretching our very selves, we allow room for God to enter and revitalize the spots that we may want to hide away. That is where we need God the very most.

Heavenly God, Help us to stretch and grow even when it is painful and feels like wasting away. Help us to trust that You will fill the broken places and renew us day-by-day. Amen

Whitney McColley



Sunday, March 30, 2014

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 34

John 9: 1-41

Ephesians 5: 8-14

Untitled

As winter folds its heavy arms around the hushed world again,
my heart is weary with worry, eyes shadowed by doubt.

This journey seems familiar somehow,
 though flavored and peopled differently.
Clouds and darkness find me, seem to know me: I lean in reluctantly.

Blindness does not suit me but I feel its heavy arms around my silent body.
What form will rebirth take this time, and what pain must be felt for the clouds to part?

If I breathe into my little faith, I know the Lord is looking on my heart:
 "Happy are those who take refuge in Him."
The Lord is close to broken hearts and spirits brought low.

But what shall I say, dear Lord; how shall I be? Please give me the words
to confess my brokenness and ease my necessary transformation.

For surely, any move from darkness to light will feel strange,
 like walking in new shoes or singing a new song.

I know I'm at my own edge now because our Faith promises
 that the man called Jesus will say to me one day soon:

"Wash, receive your sight...taste and see that the Lord is good."

And so my prayer becomes:

Lord, make me ready.

Make me ready to receive my sight.

Kathryn Sparks



Do Justice, Walk Humbly

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

Monday, March 31, 2014

On this 23rd day of the 40-day Lenten journey, the day's three readings all seem to center on the blessings that are in store for God's people, the meek and the obedient, who are held in contrast to the powerful and the proud.

First, in the excerpt from one of Ezekiel's prophecies, God promises to rescue Israel from exploitative leaders ("false shepherds") and other predators and bless her with peace and prosperity; but the wasteful (vv. 18-19) and the greedy (vv. 20-21) will not receive such blessings.

Next, in the gospel reading, Jesus apparently lays claim to being the Messiah, promising abundance ("rivers of living water") to those who believe in him, in fulfillment of scriptural prophecies (commentators in an online forum point out that the language in verse 38 evokes water imagery from Isaiah 58:11, Jeremiah 2:13, Jeremiah 17:13, and Psalm 63:1); but most of the religious leadership of the time mistake Jesus for a false prophet (which reminds me of the 'upside-down kingdom' language of 1 Corinthians 1:27 and Luke 1:53).

Finally, the 2 Corinthians passage portrays Paul as more or less 'crazy for God,' enthusiastically living for Christ rather than for himself, regardless of how he may look; this is in contrast to those who "boast in outward appearance and not in the heart."

These passages, especially the first two, showcase for me some of the powerful, revolutionary themes of the Christian faith, in counterpoint: hope for the needy on the one hand, rebuke for the greedy on the other (from the Ezekiel passage). Abundance for those who humbly thirst, but spiritual blindness for the proud (from John). The importance of real discipleship; the hollow futility of pretend piety (from 2 Corinthians).

Ezekiel calls us to be faithful stewards, while John calls us to be faithful seekers. Paul likewise calls us to be sincere followers. This is part of (as Roger so often says) "what we are called to be and do."

If we are beside ourselves, it is for God...for the love of Christ urges us on.

–2 Corinthians 5:13-14

Benno Lauer

The Gentlest Reproof

John 8: 1-11

April 1, 2014

“Jesus again straightened up and said, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she replied. ‘Neither do I condemn you,’ said Jesus. ‘Go away, and from this moment sin no more.’” John 8: 10-11.

On April 1, 1957, the British BBC perpetrated what was called the Swiss Spaghetti Harvest prank in which they broadcast a fake video of Swiss farmers picking freshly-grown spaghetti. The BBC was subsequently flooded with requests to purchase spaghetti plants. The next day, since they couldn't produce the plants, the network was forced to admit its prank on air. Often April Fools' tricks don't quite work out as expected. In fact, English folk practice at one time worked this turnabout into April Fools' Day; up to midday the one tricked was the "April Fool", but, if the trick was perpetrated after noon, the trickster him/herself became the "Fool".

Which brings us to John's account of "the adulterous woman" in John 8. It is a great story. The Pharisees bring along to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery. They cite the law of Moses that, under the circumstances, such a woman should be stoned, and ask Jesus, "What say ye?" Jesus chooses not to answer, bends down and writes in the dust with his finger. The Pharisees persist in their trickery; Jesus stands up and says, "Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her." He bends down again, writing in the dust, and so does not see the accusers leave one by one, leaving Jesus and the woman alone. It is not the usual confrontation that we witness between the religious leaders and Jesus. Rather, Jesus bows his head, and the leaders convict themselves with their silent withdrawals. It's a remarkably gentle and effective reproof. Did you ever wonder what Jesus wrote in the dust? Might it have been something like, "Father, forgive them...."?

My Aunt Ruth was born on April 1, 1900. I can just imagine the hope with which her parents witnessed her birth into the first season of a new century. Those hopes were not likely met. Ruth suffered from mental illness most of her life, and, when I as a child knew her in the 1950s, she would arrive after a sojourn in a mental hospital and stay at our house for weeks or a month. I can't say that I understood exactly what was happening, but I did sense the diminishment of Ruth's existence, the diminishment of capability, of dependence, of standing within her family. Somehow understanding that diminishment and how it fit into God's good creation became a source of direction in my life. An adulterous woman, my aunt, me, those self-convicted men – Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go away, and from this minute sin no more."

Prayer: Gracious God, in your all-embracing love hold us and keep us, Amen

Paul B. Dornan

Sustaining the Part

John 8: 12-20

April 2, 2014

"I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark, but will have the light of life." [verse 12].... "You do not know me, nor do you know my Father; if you did know me, you would know my Father as well." [verse 19b]

I suppose there are at least two different kinds of light. One is self-generating; I guess the sun would be an example. Another is reflective; it doesn't generate the light itself but reflects it. Let's use the moon as an example; the moon lights up the night sky but doesn't generate any light by itself; it reflects the sun's rays.

I had always thought of Jesus' claim to be the light of the world to be the self-generating kind, but cheek by jowl with that statement [in verse 12] is this claim to reflection [in verse 19]. That is, Jesus affirms that the power of his light is related to how near he is to the light of light, God the Father.

Which brings me to a bright little poem by Robert Frost entitled "Fireflies in the Garden":

Here come real stars to fill the upper skies,
And here on earth come emulating flies,
That though they never equal stars in size,
(And they were never really stars at heart)
Achieve at times a very star-like start.
Only, of course, they can't sustain the part.

Today, April 2, happens to be the birthday of two of the lights in my personal firmament, my mother and my son, Andrew, now gone. Mom lit up the lives of her children with her love, constancy and faithfulness. Andrew lit up the lives of his parents, siblings and others by his gentleness, quirky sense of humor, modesty, love. I can't be objective about either, but their lights seemed both self-generating and reflective, both the gifts of their respective individualities and a reflection of the love and acceptance I think they sensed. All in all, to me at least, they sustained the part.

How do we sustain the part? In the same passage as above, Jesus says, "... I know where I have come from and where I am going." His proximity to the Father allowed him to see both the way he had traveled and where he was heading. The reflected light of the Father allowed him to understand the past, welcome the present and accept the future. Jesus knew that he was accepted, and that was everything.

Prayer: Gracious God, we occasionally achieve a very star-like start, but we cannot sustain the part. Forgive our failures and in your infinite mercy accept us for who we are. Shine your light in all the dark places of our lives, and help us to accept your light-filled grace, Amen.

Paul Dornan

Thursday, April 3, 2014

Ezekiel 37: 21-28

John 8: 21-32

2 Corinthians 10: 1-6

This passage in John takes place on Jesus' last night with his 12 disciples. Though they were still not sure who he was, Jesus was trying to prepare them for what was to come.

John 8 (verse 31) Jesus said "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples (verse 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

I understand that in the lobby of the CIA Headquarters here in DC verse 32 is engraved in marble on the wall. I guess this is fitting since the mission of the CIA is to gather information on our enemies so we can all enjoy freedom, but when this verse is preceded by verse 31, the meaning is totally different.

According to the commentaries, these verses are said to be a description of true discipleship. To "abide in my word" begins with belief in all that Jesus says. It involves constant listening to the word of Jesus, constant learning from Jesus, constant delving into the meaning of Jesus' word and constant obeying of His word. The result of this discipline leads to the knowledge of the "truth" and this "truth will set you free" - freedom from fear, freedom from self, freedom from other people and freedom from sin.

Being a true disciple is not easy. Even Paul, one of the greatest disciples of Christ, has a hard time. In 2 Corinthians 10: 1-6, he is defending himself against criticism from the Church in Corinth. They were calling him weak because his letters to them were written very boldly, but when face to face he was timid. From Paul's point of view this is not hard to understand. He loved these people so when he was with them he didn't want to offend them. However, there were issues he needed to address and/or correct that were better done in writing. By having it in writing, it was there for the people to read over and over. I would think Paul put a lot of time and thought into his letter to avoid misinterpretation.

This makes me think of what is going on today with Facebook, Twitter and the like. Unlike Paul's letters, I'm afraid not much thought goes into a lot of "instant messaging". Fortunately, most emails, tweets, texts, etc. are not harmful or hurtful, but the occasional bad ones can be very destructive. The written word is permanent once it has been "sent". We must always be careful that what we write will not be misconstrued.

Helen Joseph

Leave it to the LORD

These are difficult passages. They are not about peace and love. They are about conflict, war, destruction, deception, struggle, murder, and rejection. These are the Good Friday passages, not the Resurrection Sunday ones.

In the first, from Ezekiel, God's messenger, "the Son of Man," is instructed to deliver a prophecy of doom to Gog, a prince from the North who has apparently dishonored the Lord's name by raiding and looting the Lord's people. Time for a reckoning, Gog. The images are of war, in its most brutal, physical form. And yet it is clearly the Lord that will bring about Gog's destruction, using whatever human and supernatural resources the Lord shall choose. The prophecy that the Lord's people will be able to burn weapons for fuel for seven years once the prophecy is fulfilled suggests the supernatural will supplement the natural in what is to come.

In the second passage, Jesus confronts those in the Jewish establishment who accuse him, and some of whom will eventually condemn him to death. Jesus does not mince words. He calls those who reject his message descendants of Satan, the Father of Lies, rather than descendants of Abraham. Abraham listened when God called. Abraham heard. Abraham obeyed, even though it required a radical departure--indeed several radical departures--from what was considered normal, established, and reasonable at the time. This is a theological argument, rather than the physical war in Ezekiel, but the consequences are all too physical, as Jesus makes clear: "If you were Abraham's children, then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham would not do such things." Indeed, their response is the opposite of Abraham's. It is the response of the world, the response of the Father of Lies--although at the time it may clothe itself in tradition and the worldly wisdom of not rocking the boat. And, like the earlier successes of Gog in looting Israel, the world's way will have its day before the Lord acts to establish the Lord's name in the end.

The third passage, from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, reflects controversy in the early church. (Isn't it a blessing that we've gotten beyond all of that!?) Rivalries and jealousies have apparently arisen among factions in the church, and Paul is anxious to remind his readers: "If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ as much as he." He cautions that "we do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves." Paul wants to inject some humility (not always easy for Paul) and refocus the debate: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."

Here are some threads that tie these three passages together: when it comes to conflict and struggles: We will have them. Truth will not always win in the short run. We should listen for the Lord's voice and not be overconfident that we know it based on what has happened before or which side has won earlier battles. The Lord is ultimately in control and will vindicate truth in the end.

Prayer: O Lord, help us to listen. Help us to be humble. Lead us in your truth. In the name of your son, Amen.

Jim Bird and Betsy Merritt

Saturday, April 5th 2014

Ezekiel 39:21-29

John 8:47-59

2 Corinthians 11:1-6

GLORIFY GOD

In this day and age it can be easier than it should be to forget about God, to place Him at the back of our minds. We are preoccupied as we run errands all over the city, sit in traffic, juggle more than one cell phone, and try to get the family around the dinner table at the same time.

But we also forget that being mindful of God's presence was a problem for the Israelites too. Throughout the Old Testament, including today's passage in Ezekiel, God reminds the Israelites that He is the one who will gather them together from their scattered exile, that He has not forgotten or forsaken them.

Even for those in Jesus' own time, it remained difficult to grasp God's truth. The Jews in John 8, in that moment forgetful of God's power, thought Jesus had a demon based on his rebuke of their attitude. Thinking that Jesus was glorifying himself in that he knew the word of God, they responded, questioning whether he was greater than even Abraham. Jesus had the perfect response, even though they would not truly understand.

"If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me..."

When someone asks me what I did today. Too often I respond, "I prepared such and such report." Or "I made such and such decision." Or "I went to such and such place" I. I glorify myself.

This is again what Paul reminds us as Christians in every day and age in 2nd Corinthians. Exasperated, he proffers "Just bear with me!" He recounts the promises he helped them make to God, which they have shunned based on the words of other false prophets. I this. I that. But the kicker is the last verse in our passage.

"I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you."

God was there. God did everything. God still is here, we just have to open our eyes and remember.

Today and everyday, look for God in those busy, preoccupied moments. Make the conscious effort. He'll be there.

Sarah Williamson

A New and Right Spirit

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

Sunday, April 6th, 2014

Every year as the snow begins to melt and as temperatures start to rise, as robins become aplenty and as daffodils sprout in freshly unfrozen flowerbeds, many of us undertake a ritual commonly known as “spring cleaning”. For some, this entails picking up fallen tree branches and sweeping salt-laden driveways; for others, it means swapping winter parkas and woolen sweaters for nylon windbreakers and cotton skirts; and, for others, yet, it is a chance to take a personal inventory of where one is and where one is going. Indeed, during this part of the year, many of us examine our new year’s resolutions and evaluate our progress on them. Many of us use this time to start anew.

Coinciding with this ritual is the liturgical season of Lent. Lent too is an opportunity for self-reflection and renewal. As we journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem and the cross, we can individually and corporately question our spiritual direction and reawaken our spirit. Perhaps we have only been going through the motions of living the Christian life; perhaps we have been doing too much talking and not enough walking; perhaps we have given up on prayer, on contemplation, or even yet on God. And perhaps we have not been our true authentic selves; that which God has called us to be. Maybe we have rebelled; maybe we have languished; maybe we just need a little tweaking, a little reminder.

All of this morning’s readings are just that, a reminder. And they also are a forceful charge to be new and right in spirit. In the psalm, the author pleads for God’s mercy and steadfast love. The psalmist calls upon God to restore and sustain him and to wash away his sins and transgressions. He also fervidly offers to show others the way of the Lord.

Have you recently examined your life? Have you been moving towards or away from God? Have you lately shared God’s love with others by word or by action?

In Ezekiel, God calls upon the priest and prophet to prophesy the word of the Lord to the valley of dry bones. In doing so, he reawakens the house of Israel. And God breathes life and a new spirit into them.

Where can we as individuals and the church be prophets? Where can we heed God’s call and awaken others who may be languishing or not living a just and authentic life? Where can we be that voice that calls for justice for all?

In the Gospel reading, first the disciples and then Martha and Mary question the intentions of Jesus. The disciples are concerned that Jesus is leading them into danger and Martha and then Mary are disappointed that Jesus did not arrive in time to save their graven brother, Lazarus. In both cases, Jesus offers words of assurance. Lazarus is raised from the dead – a new life begins – as Mary, Martha, and the others believe.

Do we often question God’s intentions simply because we feel we know what is best? Is our belief in God and in the words and ways of Jesus rock-steady or does it waver? If our doubts persist, how might we use this season to better sense God’s steadfast love?

Most compassionate and loving God, awaken us. Let us take the time to examine where we are as individuals, as communities, and as the church. Make us new and right in spirit, in thought, and in action. May our ways conform to your will. And may we help usher in the beloved kingdom, this day and beyond. Amen.

- Mark A. Zaineddin

APRIL 7, 2014
Ezekiel 43:1-12
John 9:1-17
2 Corinthians 11:7-15

The first two passages help us reflect on the nature of God in various ways. God's anger is evident in Ezekiel, as He punishes those who defile his sanctuary by putting a house of prostitution next to it. And in John 9:1-17, there is a contrast between the way God saw the man blind from birth and the way others, based on their own assumptions and superstitions, judged the blind man.

John 9:1-5:

As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind? Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents: but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work."

It is not surprising that in the time of Jesus, physical deformity was often attributed to a moral flaw, a sin. Medical knowledge was almost two millennia away from diagnosing, much less healing, blindness. Superstition was then and still is a common explanation for conditions people don't understand. The Old Testament also cites sin, including ancestral sin, as a reason for suffering, and this may well have been a popular way of thinking in first century Galilee. Other cultures have believed in reincarnation, or intense ancestor worship, again indicating a human tendency to link past lives and the present.

But this story in John shows repeatedly that Jesus saw things differently. Despite what the neighbors assumed, Jesus made it clear that sins of the man (presumably before he was born, since he was born without sight) or his parents were not the reason for his blindness. In fact, Jesus doesn't explain or assign blame for it. Instead, Jesus tells us that God is using the man and his condition to open everyone's eyes to God's nature and power, bringing light into the world through Jesus. The blind man is healed; so, too, can we be. However, our judgments and speculations can blind us to how God intends to use us, or others, or circumstances.

The lesson doesn't end there. Jesus also says, in effect, "*Carpe deum!*". In other words, none of us, even Jesus, has unlimited time here to do good, to try to fulfill God's will for us on earth. We can work only in the day; the night will come soon enough; go and be a light in the world while there is time.

Prayer: God, help me to see others as you see them, not judging them or speculating about them or the reasons they are as they are. I do not know what gifts you find in each of us. I pray to be able to see myself and others with the light that Jesus brought to the world, and that I can fulfill your will for me while it is still day. Amen.

- Jean P. Bordewich

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

April 8, 2014

Trust and Obey

Today's scripture reading reminds us that God's purpose supersedes our perceptions. In these verses, we are also discouraged from placing too much trust in our own intellectual prowess. Instead, we are encouraged to trust, obey and follow God no matter if we are required to go against the grain and/or encounter resistance along the way.

The scriptures in Ezekiel 47:1-12 reminds us that God can use our own structures and plans for reasons other than what we envision. By showing a stream running down and through the underbelly (of what appears to be a well constructed temple), God starts the process of shifting Ezekiel's perceptions away from what mankind had built and onto His purpose.

God then shifts his attention to the direction of the stream, which has now turned into a roaring river. The river has not only connected with a stagnant body of water, but is now bringing life and renewal to the local population. Instead of having a building that was limited to worship, it became a structure by which life-giving waters flowed towards the community.

The scriptures in John 9:18-41 remind us that God will often use the outrageous to usher in restoration for others. I suspect that Christ, having used mud to restore the blind man's sight, drove the Pharisees into a greater frenzy because he did not conform to their ideology. Instead of feeling gratitude and wonder for the miracle of meeting a (cured) blind man, the religious authority condemned the healer and the healed! This was another example by which God shows us that He does not have to conform to our expectations of how healing and grace become manifest.

This story reminds me that Nadia Boltz-Webber colorfully described grace as being offensive. God's Divine will often shocks the psyche and jolts our perceptions through unconventional means.

Finally, 2 Corinthians 9: 16-29 reinforces the importance of letting go of our opinions and beliefs when God calls us to serve. Paul seems to challenge us in this manner when he recounts the incredible dangers that he faced. He claims that his 'foolish' obedience allowed him to heroically carry out his mission despite impossible odds. His life story demonstrates the limitations of our belief systems.

Proverbs 3:5-7 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil."

Today's prayer should include petitions for belief, humility, hope, trust, and faith.

Steve Yu Suarez

Wednesday, April 9th

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

I recently helped plan a retreat aimed at 20- and 30-something Christians looking for meaningful spiritual community, connection to God, and a chance to get away for a weekend. As part of our planning conversations, we hit upon a theme that we thought fit our “millennial” generation: Finding God in our Time. Living in a turbulent moment in history, and feeling constantly short on time as busy students and professionals, we thought it would be a good topic for discussion and discernment. Ironically, it was hard to attract attendees, who were too busy or didn’t have the time available to attend the retreat.

I find that I, and many of my peers (and those from other generations, too) often talk about how busy we are; how much work we’re juggling; how full our plates are. We talk about it because it feels true, certainly, but also because it inflates our sense of importance and gives us purpose. We boast about our busyness, our overbooked schedules, and our frantic pace.

So when Paul instructs us to only boast of weakness, I can’t help but bristle at the admonition. It’s not just the boasting about busyness that gets to me, but the fixation on weakness and failure, like when people constantly talk about their inability to stick to a diet or return their library books on time or stay on top of their email inbox. When I hear “boasting of weakness,” I think of those tendencies.

But the deep brokenness that Paul alludes to when he says “weakness” is something far more embedded in our lives. That weakness is our defining human weakness. But God sent his only son to be our savior: Jesus came to be a shepherd to us, his flock of sheep, for whom he was—and is—willing to lay down his life.

I find the scripture passage from John so incredibly comforting. The cadence and repetition the writer deploys conveys a sense of peace, and the content of the statement (John 14b-16) is remarkable:

I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

We cannot be lost from God; Jesus is always calling us home.

When we were in Kenya visiting our partner church in the village of Njoro and meeting the orphans and vulnerable children who are part of the program we support, the differences in their daily lives were striking. The dirt roads just to get to school were full of huge potholes. Sheep and cows and other livestock roamed around, crossing the roads as they pleased and loose in public spaces. In addition to all our other impressions of a culture very different from our own, we wondered how owners kept track of their herds. Our hosts informed us that the animals knew their owner from the sound of his or her voice. Just as the Gospel of John tells us:

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. (John 10:2-5)

Prayer: God, we know that there is no greater peace than knowing that you sent your son to lay down his life for us, to call us home and open the gate for us. Help us to know that our weakness and brokenness cannot stand in the way of your redeeming power, love, and grace. Amen.

Kristin Ford

I grew up in a Southern Baptist environment. I had heard the word Lent. My mother was friends with the Catholic women at the used clothes charity where she volunteered. I remember the phrase, “giving up meat (or chocolate) for Lent” but I didn’t think much about it or what it had to do with Easter or me. It was a Catholic thing like “fish on Friday”. I was 9 years old. When I became a Presbyterian, there were events on the bulletin calendar I had never heard of. The first Easter time I was asked to sing in the choir for the Monday Thursday service, I wasn’t exactly sure what was said so I showed up on Monday. Someone had to explain about Maundy Thursday. By the next year I had moved to Seattle where I learned about Lent. . . I knew about Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) in New Orleans, but what I knew had a lot to do with excess and not much to do with religion or Ash Wednesday and the fasting traditions that were supposed to follow as I now know. It took a while to catch up on what I didn’t know about Lent.

My faith and life journey as an international nurse has taken me to many countries and cultures where fasting and praying are practiced in many ways. For example, fasting between sunset and sunrise for 40 days of Ramadan; prayer and fasting for Poya day in Sri Lanka which turned out to mean everyone took a day off, not just for this one “holiday” but (surprise) for Every full moon, meaning we had to factor in 12 new holidays in the workers schedules. My husband is Jewish and we have fasted for Yom Kippur during High Holy days, a day of remembrance and repentance. Jesus fasted for days in the wilderness to prepare himself for his ministry. As did Buddha and Mohammed. Gandhi fasted for peace.

But the days we are reflecting on for Lent are the days leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion, God’s sacrifice and the fulfillment of the covenant for all peoples. Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is to be reflected in our remembrance in each of these days leading up to Easter. It wasn’t easy for Jesus. As in the Ezekiel and John passages God has had to deal with our flinthead stubbornness in refusing to believe God and allow God to work in our lives. The Jews were determined not to believe the Messiah was standing in front of them in spite of the miracles He did and fulfilled prophesies. If I was God, I would’ve taken back “free will” ages ago.

I flunked every chemistry class I ever took—at least once each. I questioned the wisdom of God’s guidance leaning me toward a career in nursing. Perhaps I was hearing His voice wrong; maybe if I was supposed to be a nurse, chemistry would be easy. Then again, maybe it was like the thorn in flesh of Paul described in his letter to the Corinthians. He begged that this weakness, this thorn be taken away but God answered “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” In spite of my chemistry failures (and other flaws), I went on to do 38 missions in international nursing in war zones and refugee camps and many times facing down viral hemorrhagic fevers in the jungles of Africa. The first time I was sent to support the country efforts in Uganda for a cholera outbreak I found myself reading the WHO guide for Cholera on the plane on the way. Again, I questioned God. How would I be any help if I had never seen a single case? It was true then. I had to depend on God to show me the way to help. I had meetings with ministers of health. Who was I?...”I am a nobody” yet we worked day and night and the epidemic did end with many lessons learned. In fact, the following year Uganda saw an outbreak of Ebola, much worse than Cholera but treated with the same techniques. If it had not been for the lessons learned in Cholera, the ministers of health would not have been able to quickly respond to this terrible and frightening disease.

Like I was, you may be a beginner in learning about Lent... or one who has been walking this same path every year for many years, including this one. If we are to understand Easter, we must take the time to understand these days, this path, this journey to Jerusalem that is a metaphor for our lives and understanding of who Jesus was and who He is to each of us. Esther Moring

Lord, forgive our stubbornness. Open our hearts and minds to your grace. Your grace is sufficient to meet our every need, in spite of all our weaknesses and flaws- real and imagined- that keep us from You.

FAITH IN ADVERSITY

Jeremiah 31:16-25

Friday, April 11, 2014

John 11:1-27

2 Corinthians 12:12-21

The passages by Jeremiah and Paul today are addressed to peoples in different kinds of adversity. Jeremiah spoke to the Jews who had been conquered by the Babylonians, both those sent into exile and those marooned in the ruins of their holy land. Paul wrote to the new Christians in Corinth beset by conflicting views about who was best able to convey the meaning of Jesus the Christ.

Jeremiah's task was, perhaps, a bit easier than Paul's. His listeners had a solid faith in their God. He had brought them out of Egypt and sustained them through many adversities. In the immediately preceding years the Northern and Southern Jewish kingdoms in Palestine had been reunited. They had been left in peace as powers to their east struggled for supremacy. Now, however, the Babylonians had won, had reconquered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and removed the leaders to Babylon, where they mourned, "How can we worship our God in a strange land?"

Jeremiah told them that despite all this, God was still with them. His words must have rung in their ears:

"There is hope for your future, says the Lord, your children shall come back to their own country."

"Set up road markers for yourself, make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went. Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities."

Paul had to write to a congregation that had heard from those who not only preached a different message about Jesus, but also claimed that Paul in his message had tried to deceive them. They accused Paul of coming to Corinth only to get the food and lodging necessary for his survival.

Paul insists he will not be a burden. He is their parent.

"Children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will gladly spend and be spent for you."

"We are speaking in Christ before God. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up."

He fears, "When I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you find me not as you wish." Yet he has the courage to act on his faith and go.

Prayer "O Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief."

Phil Hanna

Jeremiah 31:27-37

Anticipation –

We want to know the Lord's presence in our lives, to truly feel that we are His people. We long to live a life worthy of Him – free of sin, and for His glory alone. Yet we wait in anticipation, knowing that "[t]he days are surely coming..." (Jer. 31:27) God has planted his seeds in us, and he has sowed and spread us among the earth to prosper and share what He has written on our hearts.

We do know the Lord, if we know love.

Knowing and loving the Lord, our iniquity is forgiven, our sin no longer remembered.

And, we are ever reminded of the light of the Lord. We see God's presence in that we are given sun for light by day, and the moon and stars for light by night. The Lord's light shining, never diminishes.

Vast; all encompassing light. Omnipotent.

John 11:28-44

God is with us –

"...The teacher is here, and is calling for you" (Jn 11:28)

"And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him." (Jn 11:29)

May our response to God's call always be met with the same attention. When our Teacher calls us, may we get up quickly and simply go to Him, even when heartbroken and grieving. Martha's brother has died. And, in this passage Jesus weeps.

Jesus feels our pain, shares in our suffering. May we know that Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit, and deeply moved by our mourning. When we suffer and cry, or feel loss, Jesus weeps with us. In his flesh and blood body, he shed tears in our pain.

Expect miracles –

"Did I not tell you if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (Jn 11:40) Therefore, we should ask God, in whom we steadfastly believe, for our suffering and pain to be alleviated. Lift up your concerns to Jesus! And, expect miracles.

May we all learn with humble, loving hearts to expect miracles from our God.

2 Corinthians 13:1-14

Christ's power in you -

Paul reminds us of God's presence in our lives. "...[Christ] is powerful in you." (2 Cor. 13:3) And, he implores us to examine ourselves and see if we are truly living in faith.

Test yourselves. Do what is right.

We cannot do anything against the truth that is our God, but only for the truth.

Let our hearts no longer wait in anticipation for the Lord our God, but may we heed Paul's concern, and put our lives in order, and live in peace. Let us know that God has planted seeds in us to be sown among the earth and that God watches over us. May we find peace knowing that God is with us – ever, eternally present in our lives. Even when we suffer, and our hearts' - which He has written upon - break, Jesus weeps with us.

Therefore, may we be a reminder to others that we ourselves are God's presence on earth, in being called to love. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (2 Cor. 13: 12) A physical, real, visceral reminder that we are to love those whose lives we touch.

Today, may we through pure, utter conviction of God's presence in our lives expect, and be God's miracles.

Susan V. Grooters

The King of Glory Arrives

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 24
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 21:1-11.

Sunday, April 13

One of the great strengths of Christianity is its fundamental acknowledgement of the realities of human life, with all of its ironies and contradictions. Palm Sunday is one day in which the rich complexity of life comes to the foreground. On one hand, today is a day of celebration: The arrival of the King of the Jews into his people's greatest city among multitudes of his followers. Jesus is at the height of his earthly popularity. He is fulfilling ancient prophecies about the coming of the "King of Glory (Ps. 24:7)."

On the other hand, we know that within five days Jesus will experience a horrible death. The same people who welcomed him into Jerusalem will cry out for his crucifixion. Even Peter, the rock upon which Jesus' church would be built, will deny him. Were it not for Jesus' resurrection, and the boundless grace of God represented therein, this would be the greatest tragedy in all of literature.

Palm Sunday is a day in which all of us play a role in the retelling of the Biblical story. When we wave our palm fronds, we are establishing our connection to the people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. But what should our frame of mind be as we do this? Should we imagine peoples' joy as they saw their awesome teacher before them? Should we anticipate people's wrath as they condemned him? Or should we look forward to the great and mysterious day of Jesus' resurrection?

For me the answer is "all of the above." And that is why this day holds such ambivalence. Is it possible to feel happy, sad, angry, bewildered, frightened, reassured, and uplifted, all at the same time? Today I think so. What a rich experience our faith places before us!

Prayer: Holy God, allow us to understand the meaning of this day, in all of its strange and wonderful complexity. And help us always to know your Grace. Amen.

John Gagosian



Monday, April 14

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

The Power of Servanthood

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
My chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

Isaiah and God celebrate and honor the role of Servant. God promises to “uphold” the servant, that is both support her and lift up her service. This counters our cultural norms regarding servanthood. A “good job” at the top of the pecking order is prestigious and valued in society, and if you achieve this you are not usually called upon to be in the direct Servant role. Isaiah’s passage advises: Don’t lose the humility to also Serve, “not crying or lifting up your voice” but rather working quietly and faithfully.

If I had any doubt about the Servant theme for this day, the doubt is removed by reading John 12, where Mary AND Martha serve Jesus and Lazarus. Martha serves supper, and then Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with oil, a last act of honoring Jesus before his crucifixion. The hands-on Serving created a significant spiritual experience for this family in the waning days of Jesus life.

After my mother’s recent death, I looked back at her life of serving: her family, her church and her community circles. Serving was her distinctive vocation. When I was a teenager I used to dismiss this role as a woman’s subservient place dictated by a sexist society. I was caught up in the allure of making a difference in a Bigger Way. But my mother had an alternative view about how to make a difference in the world: serving coffee and food while bringing people together to work, relax, pray, celebrate. Serving Meals on Wheels into her early 80’s.

Now it seems to me that serving in the most basic ways gives one the personal connection with others that can truly touch them, and prevents the Server from becoming absorbed in self aggrandizement. Isaiah predicts that Servanthood can “bring forth justice to the nations.” What simpler way could there be for each of us to delight God and serve justice?

God, remind me that the Servanthood role is an honored role, that if I can fulfill the job of “good and faithful servant,” it will redeem both me and the world. Amen.

Martha Davis

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

April 15, 2014

The conjunction of Passover and Holy Week reminds us of the historical sweep of our own Christian faith. Isaiah foresaw that God's revelation would not be confined. "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation shall reach to the ends of the earth." [Isaiah 49:6]

John's gospel introduces foreigners ("Greeks") to the Passover festival who sought out Jesus. A crowded city would witness the events that awaited. A rising tension affects John's narrative – with some listeners in the crowd around Jesus hearing a rumbling, heavenly voice. Jesus himself recognized the impending hour, and not without fear. "Now my soul is troubled..."

There is a duality in this narrative. Jesus knew that something momentous was unfolding, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out," yet he still continued to be a gentle preacher and attract followers.

Would listeners have immediately understood when he spoke of the planted seed that dies to germinate into a larger harvest? Could they have appreciated that life and death would be played out in the coming days? Would they have known what "the light" signified and what it meant to become "children of light?"

Jesus understood that an ordeal lay ahead; he was certainly a man under pressure.

For us, faith is never more strongly tested than in extreme pressure. Choices become clouded, values compromised. For the most part, our lives do not test us with anything approaching the epic challenges that Jesus encountered. But the moral challenges we face, even in quiet offices, in negotiations, in dealing with family members – these summon us to recall the calm, faithful resolve that Jesus demonstrated.

Faithfulness in the face of power is echoed in the message to the Corinthians. Reliance on something transcending human wisdom or power is at the core of what Paul asked of the community at Corinth.

Prayer: Lord, let us turn to our faith, particularly when we face tough times and do not know the way.

James Turner

Christ-Like Perseverance

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

Today, we are considering three passages that address Christ-like perseverance through suffering—no easy feat.

The passage in Hebrews exhorts us to “throw off everything that hinders [us]” and “run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” (v.1) How? By “fixing our eyes on Jesus” and “considering him who endured . . . opposition from sinners.” (v. 1-2) If we stay focused on Jesus, the passage promises, we “will not grow weary and lose heart.” (v. 3)

This sounds inspiring! We can win the race! By God’s grace, that is unquestionably true—but that doesn’t mean that perseverance is easy. Indeed, the passage in Isaiah describes in vivid terms how sometimes godly perseverance is not a walk in the park: the prophet is mocked, beaten, spit upon, and scorned.

But, despite relentless abuse, the prophet survives—and even thrives—through his suffering. How? Because of his faith, which becomes concrete in daily choices to act with God, through God, but not against God:

- The prophet listens to the Lord. (v. 5 - “The Lord has opened my ears”)
- The prophet obeys God. (v. 5 - “I have not been rebellious”)
- The prophet trusts in the Lord’s strength. (v. 7 - “I know I will not be put to shame”).
- The prophet attributes goodness to God. (v. 9 - “It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.”)

God knows that perseverance isn’t easy. We know from the passage in John that Jesus himself had to persevere through a terrible betrayal by a dear friend and follower, Judas, and that Jesus had to endure this emotional suffering just before incredible physical suffering on the cross.

Because Jesus himself persevered through incredible suffering, we know that God does not charge us with perseverance lightly. God knows that the task is hard, but in Isaiah and Hebrews, God gives us the tools to do it: stay focused on Jesus, listen to the Lord, obey the Bible’s commandments, trust in the Lord’s strength, and consciously choose to acknowledge goodness as coming from God. Use these tools and by God’s grace, continue to persevere.

Prayer: Lord God, I want to throw off sin and persevere in following You. But it’s hard. Please give me strength when I start to falter and guide me back to listening to you, obeying you, and trusting you. In the name of Jesus, who persevered through so much, amen.

Elisa Jillson

Lent 2014 – April 17th- Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 102

John 13:1-15

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Maundy Thursday has always been an important liturgical moment for me. The simple service of communion and servitude. I love the soulful music. Even the dark high drama of God's old testament instructions for the preparations for the Passover, however gory. I know in the back of my mind that I am being prepared for the re-gifting of life and the joy of the resurrection. I've even made in my mind the connection between the gore of the Passover and the gore of the crucifixion. The blood of innocents interceding on my behalf and saving me from being deservedly judged harshly and punished by my maker. I do try to hold honestly in thought my own culpability. Honestly I sometimes feel as though I wallow in it. But to what purpose?

As I look back on my life, it's not difficult to see it from a viewpoint of failure and injustice. Always when I read or hear Psalm 102, my mind fills with memories of the many friends whose actual experience is described by the Psalmist's words: "my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread. Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin." I myself "am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop." "My days are like an evening shadow; I with away like grass." Yet inexplicably and indefensibly I have survived. The crushing weight of years of end of life care giving are now largely over. Yet, instead of the sense of relief I'd hoped for, I have instead lost the sense of mission that I once felt and that distracted me from the fear of my own impending horrific decline.

So....Maundy Thursday.

As I ponder and experience this day, it comes gently into my thoughts that "before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." "Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him." I feel Peter's disbelief and sense of unworthiness, but try to remember also Jesus' words, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "Unless I wash you, you shall have no share with me." Then, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am." "So I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." Then he and his disciples share a supper together which he serves. He instructs them (me, us) to "Do this in remembrance of me." And the example he set. To *take in the substance of the Christ* and to accept and honor "the cup of the new covenant."

Lord, on this Maundy Thursday I give thanks for the renewal of purpose/life you have given me. I am grateful for communion with you and my fellow followers of your example. I promise to strive with all my strength to emulate your selfless service to the best of my God-given ability and to be open to, and to learn from the care giving of my spiritual brothers and sisters in humility and gratitude and love.

Nathan Moon

The Cross and Suffering

Good Friday is the saddest day of the year, but it's very important to us as Christians. One thing I've learned over the past few years from our senior pastor is how central "cruciformity" is to our faith. It's all about how God brings life out of the death-tending ways of the world. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we clearly see that when the worst thing imaginable happens – the unjust execution of Jesus Christ – the ultimate consequence is life, hope and renewal.

We see this happen in our own lives and in the lives of others. We all suffer devastating losses, pain, and personal injustices. We see terrible things happen to others. But, we also witness how suffering can strengthen faith and bring us closer to God. The cross and resurrection give us hope.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was no stranger to suffering. He was arrested and jailed several times on trumped up charges, his house was bombed, he constantly received death threats, and he was the victim of a near fatal stabbing. Yet, rather than react with bitterness, he found redemption in his suffering. In a paper entitled "Suffering and Faith" from April 27, 1960, King powerfully captures the idea of cruciformity:

There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So like the Apostle Paul I can now humbly yet proudly say, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." [Galatians 6:17] The suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God.

When we are suffering and going through a very difficult time, it is often hard to see the power of God. We can pray and pray and pray; yet, it may seem our prayers are never answered. Have you ever felt the Psalmist's cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." Psalm 22:1-3. Sometimes it takes years to realize the redemptive power of suffering.

One time when I was going through a difficult period of my life and it seemed like God would never answer my prayers to end my suffering, a friend sent me the lyrics of a song by a contemporary Christian group. The song "Praise You in this Storm" by Casting Crowns made me realize that God was with me in my suffering, that I would get through it, and that something powerful would come out of it.

*I was sure by now, God, You would have reached down, and wiped our tears away,
Stepped in and saved the day, but once again, I say "Amen," and it's still raining.
As the thunder rolls, I barely hear You whisper through the rain, "I'm with you."
And as Your mercy falls, I raise my hands and praise the God who gives and takes away.
And I'll praise You in this storm. . .*

Now, looking back years later, I realize that this crisis deepened my faith and brought me closer to God.

So, as sad as we may feel on Good Friday, we can also appreciate through the cross and resurrection that suffering provides an opportunity for healing and increased faith during life, as well as hope for a peaceful reunion with God after death.

Adam Bain

Saturday, April 19
Fully Human

Exodus 14:10-15:18; Matthew 28:1-10; and Romans 6:3-11

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

We say the words often: fully human, fully divine.

I spent years thinking of Jesus as solely divine, with some sort of super-power that prevented him from sinning. Extraordinarily good self-control, perhaps, or good-temperedness. I imagined him with that serene smile, chuckling at the folly of the disciples who couldn't quite figure out the secret of his Messiah-hood. A sort of wise older brother, a teaching assistant, a yoga instructor with a calm savasana voice.

But it's clear that in the last week of his life, Jesus felt the emotions I feel so often – frustration, anger, sadness, abandonment, fear. He lost his temper at the corruption he saw in the temple. He was powerless to stop his execution. He felt totally alone.

Like many revolutionaries, Martin Luther King, Jr. included, Jesus predicted (one could even say was obsessed with) his own death, and spoke about it often. We could hypothesize that he was preparing his disciples, or we can guess that he was just speaking about the most human of worries. He was talking about something that troubled him with the friends who loved him. Jesus knew what the Roman Empire and the power structure in Jerusalem did with people like him. We may puzzle over his intriguing answers to Pilate, but Jesus knew they did not matter. He knew his death was inevitable.

He was fully human in the hardest way. Jesus' earthly life ended. I imagine his friends, Mary, Peter, Mary Magdalene, James and John, waking up on that Saturday Sabbath day, heartsick and shocked, reminded of their powerlessness, missing the sound of the voice of their beloved friend. Yearning for the person who had changed their entire lives. I'm sad to say that the older I get, the more often I see "days after" like that: days that just should not be. I think of Jordan Davis, or Matthew Shepard, or Anna Politkovskaya, or any of the nine people who lost their lives violently in DC last week. My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?

I can imagine how Jesus' friends felt: not wanting to get up from their beds, or questioning the point of their Sabbath rituals, feeling God had abandoned the covenant.

And yet. And yet. Jesus had kindled a connection in those friends, the very spark that turns us from human to divine. He had built the blessed community. Their relationships, their love, did not die in those terrible days, though they were knocked around and scattered.

It was in those people that Jesus saw the kingdom. Those mourners, those ones who bore witness to his anxiety and fear, those ones who did not turn away at the foot of the cross, who heard him cry out, who went to the tomb. Indeed, because they were there: those were the ones in whom, for whom, Jesus lived, and lives.

- Rebecca Davis

Easter Sunday, April 20

Matthew 28: 1-10 and Psalm 118

Jesus Christ is Risen today! Hallelujah! The first day of the week is dawning and with it comes new hope and new life. Mary Magdalene and Mary leave the empty tomb with "fear and great joy" to tell the other disciples, as the angel commanded them to, that Jesus has been raised from the dead. I think if we are honest, we also move through Easter with our own combination of fear and great joy. Joyful that this much anticipated day is here, but fearful that this resurrection we profess to believe in might not be true. Happy that a new liturgical and spring season is upon us, but afraid to let go of old ways and habits. Joyful that Christ is Risen, but doubtful of what this means for our lives.

Most of us experience this joy/fear combination at some point in our lives: searching for a new job, caring for aging parents, preparing children for college, being newly wed or newly pregnant, searching for a new associate pastor, planning the church retreat, and financing a capital campaign. These are all occasions for both great joy and fear. For myself, I am searching for my next pastoral call and preparing for what is next. Great joy and fear!

We are greeted this day, though, by a God that is big enough to acknowledge and accept both our fears and joys, a God who helps us hold emotions that are in tension with one another, and challenges us to live fully. We are welcomed, as Mary and Mary Magdalene were, by Jesus' words in Matthew, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, there they will see me." Christ sees what brings us joy and what frightens us. He invites us to let go of our fears and doubts. For Christ goes ahead of us – encouraging us and providing a secure path. As the Psalmist says: "The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation" (118:14). Anything we are uncertain or afraid of, God has already anticipated and is making a way. Anything we believe is dead or hopeless, God is doing a new thing with. Poet Mary Oliver makes this observation about fear: "When the thumb of fear lifts, we are so alive" (May, 1994). So may we rejoice in our life-giving God today, who rolls away stones and lifts the thumb of fear.

Jesus, victorious Lord, I exult in Your resurrection. As I sing "alleluia" with my voice, let my life embody "alleluia" as a testimony to Your love and a witness to Your eternal life. As you conquered the grave, free me from fear and doubt that all I do may proclaim to the world, "He is risen, indeed!" Amen.

Reverend Katie Cashwell

