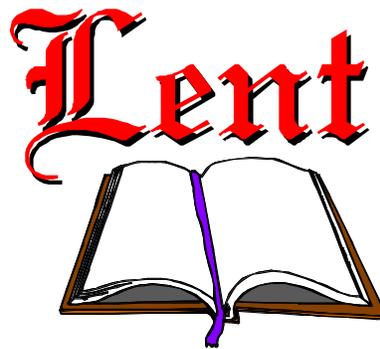


Come, Walk With Us



2016

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

2016 Lenten Calendar
(Sunday Services at 8:45 and 11:00)

Wednesday, February 10	Ash Wednesday Service, 7:00 pm, Sanctuary, Supper-PMH, 6-6:45 pm
Sunday , February 14	First Sunday in Lent
Wednesday, February 17	Taize service, 6:30pm, Lincoln Chapel
Sunday , February 21	Second Sunday in Lent
Saturday, February 27	In-Town Solitude Retreat, 8:30am- 12:30pm (meditation, labyrinth)
Sunday , February 28	Third Sunday in Lent
Sunday , March 6	Fourth Sunday in Lent, Communion
Sunday , March 13	Fifth Sunday in Lent, Mozart's <i>Requiem</i>
Wednesday, March 16	Taize service, 6:30pm, Lincoln Chapel
Saturday, March 19	McClendon Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Douglas Ottati, Professor of Reformed Theology and Justice, Davidson College
Sunday , March 20	Palm Sunday, Dr. Ottati
Thursday, March 24	Maundy Thursday Service 7 pm, Sanctuary (Communion), light Supper, 6 pm, PMH
Friday, March 25	Good Friday Service, 12 noon, Sanctuary
Sunday , March 27	Easter Sunday, Communion 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

A Sugar-Free, Righteous, Reconciling Lent

February 10, 2016. Biblical Verses: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17a; Matthew 6:1-6, 16; and 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Return to me with fasting and weeping and mourning (Joel 2:12). Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others. If you do, you will have no reward from God the Creator (Matthew 6:1).

A couple of years ago, I attended a large birthday party with a lavish spread. When we entered the dessert room for the final celebration, a woman said to those of us near her, "These desserts look delicious, but I can't eat any of them. I gave up sugar for Lent."

That remark still haunts me. Why did she need to let people know of her decision to be sugar-free during these forty days? Was her announcement a kind of blanket apology to the host for not partaking? Did she wish us to prevent her from impulsively picking up a piece of chocolate cake? Or did she want us to praise her for making this sacrifice? My own reactions included guilt for indulging and for not making my own sacrifice during Lent. I finally commended her for doing something good for her health and then promptly helped myself to a large piece of cake with gooey frosting. After all, I'd reasoned, the party planners would have had a real dilemma on their hands if we'd all given up sugar for Lent!

In past Lents I have vowed to end shopping for new clothes or indulging in Starbucks lattes. But fasting and baring our souls to God with weeping and mourning demand a lot from us. I get cranky and churlish when I've missed a meal. Skipping ice cream requires some modicum of will power, but my stomach doesn't rumble if I omit it. However, if I'm really looking to make a connection with God, I have to do more. In place of sitting down to watch *NCIS* while I bite into a Klondike Bar, I have to consider opening up the scriptures, speaking to God, and listening for guidance. Questions loom, however. Do I really want to deepen my spiritual life? What if a better relationship with God uproots my comfortable existence? Am I ready to perform righteous acts, all without letting others know about it, as Jesus asks? That's a tall order, a sacrifice that niggles at the edges of my mind.

Matthew's verse states clearly that announcing at a birthday party that you've given up sugar for Lent essentially cancels out any reward from God. On the other hand, if I've done nothing to better my spiritual life during Lent, I also will receive no reward from God. As I look back at that night, I realize I missed a chance to engage in a true spiritual conversation with that woman. I could have asked her how her life had changed as a result of refraining from sugar; did she think her relationship with God had gotten stronger? I had a chance to hear her faith story but got too caught up thinking about whether going sugar-free during Lent had any spiritual merit.

Giving up sugar can be a true sacrifice, a component of fasting. Joel urges us to "sanctify a fast." He also encourages weeping and mourning. But Jesus puts a new spin on this issue. In *Matthew*, he says "do not look dismal" if you do fast, and certainly do not tell others. In *Corinthians*, we learn that followers of Christ endured "hardships" and "hunger." So we have two challenges put before us during this Lenten season: we should fast but also not speak of it to others. Our reward will be reconciliation with God if we repent. Conversely, if we never speak of these sacrifices, how do we share our faith journey? I believe now that God would have forgiven the Sugar-Free Woman for speaking out.

Prayer: God, We are not perfect people. Our best intentions sometimes get tarnished by misunderstandings. Help us along our journey this Lenten season. Bless us as we work towards knowing you better, whether through fasting, prayer, almsgiving, or all of these things. Amen.

Elizabeth Young

WE ARE SURROUNDED BY A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Thursday, February 11

Judges 7:1-18; John 17:1-8; and Hebrews 12:1-8

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1-2

Hebrews 12 begins with “Therefore,” making it essential to read what came before, to appreciate the meaning of it. Hebrews 11 recounts the names of many people who accomplished much in Old Testament times—“by faith.” Judges 7 tells in more detail the story of Gideon, who is mentioned in Hebrews 11:32. Hebrews 12 refers to those named in Hebrews 11 who lived and acted “by faith” as a “great cloud of witnesses” whose examples can inspire each of us, too, to run with perseverance the metaphorical “race that is set before us” in this embodied life. Hebrews affirms that it is not only the great cloud of witnesses who faithfully persevered before us that can inspire us to run the race set before us, but it is also looking to Jesus as the perfecter of the faith we will need to run it, and the discipline God may use to lovingly direct and mold us.

Recently, I visited one of our number who I consider among the “great cloud of witnesses” who surround and inspire me: Rev. Gary Campbell. A retired pastor, former missionary, and current NYAPC Parish Associate, who remains networked with and actively engaged in supporting colleagues in ministry and who, together with his wife Chess, is now raising their grandchildren, by faith, he continues to run the race set before him, doing God’s work in challenging situations. During our visits, Gary shares with me stories of many, many people with whom he served in ministry, in the United States and in Mexico and Central America, who are among his “great cloud of witnesses,” and now—because he shared their stories with me—a part of mine as well. During our visit, Gary played for me some CDs recorded by Takestone Records, of Nashville, TN. Among the beautiful songs on the Songs for the Masses: Songs from the Scriptures CD were “By Faith,” telling the stories recounted in Hebrews 11, and “We need to fix our eyes on Jesus,” interpreting Hebrews 12. Each song was recorded twice: once with lyrics, and once in an instrumental only version. Listening to these recordings in both versions is inspiring, encouraging, and comforting. I thank Gary for sharing them and his stories of ministry with me.

Each of us is surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses,” living and dead, who by faith fixed their eyes on Jesus and ran the race God set before them, accepting God’s loving guidance and discipline if necessary along the way. Here are some questions to ponder and spiritual exercises, if you will, that you might choose to use to prepare yourself for the race set before you:

- Who in the Bible stands out to you among the great cloud of witnesses, and why?
- Which people have been among the great cloud of witnesses in your life, and why?
- Which people alive today are among the great cloud of witnesses for you, and why?
- Who might you acknowledge and thank for being among your cloud of witnesses?
- What stories about the great cloud of witnesses could you share with others?
- How might you be among the great cloud of witnesses for others, now or in the future?

Dear God, Thank you for surrounding us with so great a cloud of witnesses, for sending Jesus to be the perfecter of our faith, and for your loving guidance and discipline. Amen.

Karen Mills

The earliest devotional booklet for Lent in the church archives dates from 1976. It was prepared by one of the Pastors at that time, the Rev. Rusty Lynn, and was based on the theme “Tempted in the Wilderness.” Below are two of the devotions that he offered.

The Temptation of Jesus: Magic vs. Faith
Matthew 4:1-4

Jesus had grown up in a humble home among working-class people. He must have been all too familiar with hunger. He knew how sore and tired a person’s body can become after a hard week’s work. He knew how people were clamoring to the magicians who roamed the countryside. Had not God fed the people in the wilderness on quails and manna? Had not Moses struck the rock and did not water pour forth to quench the thirst of the people? Why then does Jesus not use his wonderful power to turn the stones, a plentiful commodity in Palestine, into loaves of bread, an all-too-dear commodity? If Jesus has the power to do such magic, why should he not use it?

Jesus knew that people’s hunger could be easily satisfied with bread. If a person is satisfied, he seeks no more. To magically make bread and feed people, Jesus would have detracted from the real issues in his ministry. Jesus would have clouded the issue that God is a Spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit. Faith in God, the sustainer and giver of all life in the spirit, is too easily transposed into a faith in God as the sustainer and giver of only the material in life. In his ministry, Jesus would show that the real cause of hunger was spiritual malnutrition, and that faith in God would lead to spiritual well-being. “Man cannot live on bread alone; he lives on every word that God utters.”

The Temptation of Jesus: Sensationalism vs. The Call to Spiritual Growth
Matthew 4:5-7

Jesus and the pinnacle of the Temple. The image is either a reference to the 450-foot drop from the porch of the Temple to the Kendron Valley below, or from the top of the Temple roof. If Jesus had jumped from either and lived, he would have been a sensation and all of the people would have been forced to believe in his miraculous power.

Yet Jesus knew that if he tricked people one day into belief by a sensational display of his power, they would believe in him today, but would they tomorrow? Tomorrow he would have to produce an even greater miracle. And when would it end? Who could possibly produce enough sensations to keep people on the edge of their seats? A more disturbing problem grows out of sensational religion – that of believing in the power of the person rather than believing that God’s power is at work in that person. Sensationalism detracts people from the truth of God.

In fact, sensational religion is a denial of God’s power. Anyone who sells religious truth in a glittering, eye-catching package is demonstrating a lack of trust in God to work quietly and sincerely through the truth of life. Whenever we attempt to dress up the hard facts of life in more acceptable packages, we are not trusting God to work through the truth. We must not play with God’s power, we must learn to simply trust God.

Dan Stokes

Judges 8:22-35
Hebrews 12:25-29
John 17:20-26

February 13, 2016

Present Continuous God

I've been procrastinating doing this devotional. I've puttered around the house, doing unimportant things that somehow felt important at the time. Yes, I needed to get clean sheets on the bed, but did I really need to polish those copper pots hanging in the kitchen? Why are they there, anyway? They were free, hand-me-downs, and they fill an empty space. Right now, newly polished, I like how the light is bouncing off of them, but are they important?

What else do I use to fill empty spaces? There's that piece of pottery that sits on the shelf and those cheap painted potholders on the kitchen wall. Other items fill space more meaningfully, the coffee pot that gets me up on cold winter mornings, the child-made candle and clay creations, the photograph Doug and I found on a trip to Alexandria's Torpedo Factory.

Things can be meaningless or too meaningful – like idols – but they can also be practical or spiritual tools. It's a fine line. In Judges, Gideon refuses requests that he become king after his victory over the Midianites. The Lord can be your ruler, he replies. But then this Old Testament hero proceeds to build an "ephod" of the Midianites earrings, for all to worship. Apparently a bad decision – "it became a snare to Gideon and his family."

The one-volume Interpreter's Bible credits Judges' editors for not deleting this record of the Israelites' primitive faith. "Judges shows the Israelites at an early step of their search for their self identity under Yahweh. ... It is to the lasting credit of the editors of Judges that they did not expunge or rewrite the stories of Israel's first uncertain steps in this process of religious discovery."

Uncertain steps. Many of my steps are uncertain, and I've grown to expect that they will continue to be so. I don't look for sudden revelations, just as I don't expect the sudden transformations sometimes promised in certain women's magazines. I take comfort in the fact that God's chosen people were as uncertain as I.

The Hebrews passage emphasizes that God's kingdom cannot be shaken. Those copper pots can shake, but not what's really important. Something else strikes me as well (or perhaps the editor in me): the present continuous tense. "We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken," says Hebrews. It's not a one-time thing – it keeps going! In John, Jesus' prayer is about keeping going – "Jesus' prayer for the church universal," according to the RSV. He is looking ahead, praying for future followers.

So we are traveling from golden ephods toward a kingdom that cannot be shaken. In between, taking uncertain steps, we may use copper pots to fill empty spaces, but that's not where we stay. We are a present continuous people traveling with a present continuous God.

Meg House

Lenten Devotional for Sunday, February 14, 2016, The First Sunday of Lent
Luke 4:1-13 "The Temptation of Jesus"

Our Gospel reading for today is the story of Jesus being in the wilderness for 40 days and in his time there being tempted by Satan. It is included in all three of the Synoptic Gospels and Hebrews 4:15 highlighting Jesus' humanity and identification with all of us. We are tempted daily, but as both divine and human, Jesus Christ was tempted too.

Through this temptation story see that Jesus would not compromise for desires of personal or social authority. Jesus would not compromise for political or religious power. Jesus would not compromise to theatrics or to demands of others.

For each temptation, Jesus responded to Satan each time with Scripture. After 40 days of being in the desert without sustenance and shelter, Jesus is exhausted and rather beat down. Jesus does not need to rely on his own words because he deeply knows the words of the law and the prophets that have come before him.

He fulfills the command at the heart of the Hebrew scriptures "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your should and all your might." These are the words that introduce the Shema, the central confession of faith and the center of every Jewish prayer service.

During this Lenten season, my discipline will be to commit more of scripture to memory. Sometimes I use these passages that I know by heart on a card when I can not seem to find the appropriate words. More often, I use these passages as an internal compass when making a decision. I have to admit that most passages I have not memorized in full. I know a part of the passage or have an general idea so I look it up on the internet. That usually works.

But the passages that I know completely sit deeper on my soul than the ones I might casually know. These memorized passages become written on our heart and embedded into the body of our soul. These are the passages we can take out in in all moments of life from those moments when we want to say speak but can not find our own words. These times can come in any moment - from times of joy and thanksgiving to times of anger and lament.

These are the passages that I hope guide my actions even when I am not aware. My favorite among these is Romans 8:38-39, which I know from singing it out-loud. Perhaps it can be your prayer for today. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Blessings,
Alice Tewell

“The Uses and Abuses of Suffering”

Hebrews 2:12-18

February 15, 2016

“For the suffering he [Christ Jesus] himself passed through while being put to the test enables him to help others when they are being put to the test.” Hebrews 2: 18

As Frances Taylor Gench points out in her commentary, the Letter to the Hebrews is a missive to a tired, dispirited people who see no good reason to move forward in the journey of faith. They have been enthusiastic and active in the past, but now all that energy has been dissipated, and they are perilously close to dropping out. Frances argues that the author introduces a new metaphor to revive those believers from their stupor, that of Jesus as the High Priest, a powerful one in the ancient world but one that strikes most people today as exotic and dated. And a principal aspect of that High Priest role is that the Christ will mediate between God and man because he **is both God and man** and because, as a man, he **has suffered**. The author of Hebrews says as much in the text above.

But let me for a moment move away from this theological argument. Can I simply ask, “Does suffering actually enable us, as humans, to help others?” Can my/your pain and suffering actually serve some good purpose? How does the death of a son or a horrible diagnosis or constant pain serve any earthly purpose? And understand me, I am not going to argue that I/we can “redeem” that death or diagnosis or suffering. Nothing that I or anyone else can do, in my humble estimation, can change those circumstances into anything other than tragedy. There is no earthly – and I doubt any heavenly – calculus that could move them into the plus column. What I am left with are questions: To what extent can the pain and suffering of us humans be transformed into life-giving and life-enhancing empathy, mutual understanding, generative imagination? What does it take to allow me to connect my suffering with the suffering of another person or another tribe? Can that empathy work to wrest justice and mercy from pain and suffering?

As a partial response, I will quote several passages from Wendell Berry’s wonderful novel, “Hannah Coulter”: “You can’t give yourself over to love for somebody without giving yourself to his suffering.... It is this body of our suffering that Christ was born into to suffer it himself and to fill it with light, so that beyond the suffering we can imagine Easter morning and the peace of God.... [I]magination is needed. Want of imagination makes things real enough to be destroyed. By imagination I mean knowledge and love. I mean compassion. People of power kill children, the old send the young to die, because they have no imagination.... The room of love is the love that holds us all, and it is not ours. It goes back before we were born. It goes all the way back. It is Heaven’s. Or it is Heaven, and we are in it by willingness. By whose love ... do we love this world and ourselves and one another? Do you think we invented it ourselves?”

Paul B. Dornan

God's Call

Judges 9:2-25; 50-57
Mark 1:14-28
Hebrews 3:1-11

Tuesday, February 16th

As I read the passages for today, I was struck by the following verses:

- “The trees once went out to anoint a king over themselves. So they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ The olive tree answered them, ‘Shall I stop producing my rich oil by which gods and mortals are honored, and go to sway over the trees?’” (Judges 9: 8-9)
- “As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” (Mark: 1:16-18)
- “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness” (Hebrews 3: 7-8)

The main crux of these passages boils down to this for me: When do I know that God is truly calling me to do something? How do I know it is God calling when it would require taking a different path, a divergent course, trying something, perhaps, I do not have expertise in? In the reading from Judges, the trees seem to know they are good at what they do – making oil, figs, wine, etc. They have a “skill set” so to speak, and do not believe they should give that up to be king. The trees are not lulled into what might be called a “false calling.”

Compare the Judges passage to Jesus calling his first disciples in Mark. Simon and Andrew seem to know in a split-second that following Jesus is a calling for them. They “immediately” drop their nets to become disciples of Christ. I am in awe that they act so decisively – how did they know this was a true call from God, and know it so quickly? Why did they not say, as the trees would have said, “I’m a good fisherman, and this is my calling - I’m going to stick with this?”

I am not sure I have answers to the questions I just posed. And I am quite confident that I will continue to find times when I am challenged as I try to listen for, and discern God’s call. However, I take to heart the words in Hebrews from the Holy Spirit, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...” One of the most important things we can do is open our hearts to God and to his voice. If we do that, and are honest with ourselves about what we hear, we will hear and know our true callings.

Prayer: Dear God, during this season of reflection and contemplation, let me keep my heart and mind open to you and your love for me.

Sarah Barclay Hoffman

Judges 11: 1-11
Heb. 3: 12-19
Mark 1: 29-45

Wednesday, February 17, 2016

Miriam and I have belonged to an NYA study group for many years and in our most recent meeting we were discussing an article in the *Smithsonian Magazine* entitled “Excavating Jesus”. The article presents some archeological work in Palestine which seems to provide new evidence of some of the places and communities referred to in the Gospels. This is exciting, especially because scholars have historically been very dubious about the Gospel accounts. This in turn led to a discussion about why we need evidence to support our faith. Why can't faith stand on its own? I don't know the answer to that question but it does seem to me that many people long for such evidence. Without it, faith is even more fragile than it otherwise would be. It is almost as if we want to treat God as President Reagan treated the Russians – trust but verify.

I was reminded of this as I read today's passages. In Judges, the Israelites are about to have a war with the Ammonites. They need a general. They don't seem to have strong internal candidates. They are looking for proven experience and so they reach out to a man named Jephthah. He had previously been banished from the community because he was the son of a harlot, but he was a valiant warrior and a proven leader and he ultimately agreed to come back and lead the Israelites. God is on their side, but it helps to also have a great general.

In Hebrews, Paul reminds us that the Israelites had another great leader named Moses who did great things, and yet many did not believe. Apparently, evidence can have a short shelf life. People were unfaithful and disobedient, and they did not reach the Promised Land.

And then we meet Jesus in today's passage from Mark. He is performing miracles in the very same places that are mentioned in the Smithsonian article. Large crowds are following him everywhere. There is wonder and enthusiasm. Will these crowds be with him at the cross? Does this evidence of divine purpose have staying power, even in the most difficult circumstances?

We of course know the rest of the story. There will be the cross, and ultimately there will be the resurrection. Will this miracle have staying power with us? Has God done enough or do we need more evidence? I think God will give us whatever we need if we are alert enough to recognize it.

Steve Dewhurst

Faith and Superstition

Judges 11: 29-40

February 18, 2016

Today we have before us one of the saddest stories in all of scripture, Jephthah's vow and sacrifice. Jephthah was one of the judges of Israel. Before the Age of Kings there was no ongoing government of the tribes of Israel. Only when another people threatened the confederacy was a judge called forth out of the community to lead the tribes into battle. Before Jephthah entered into battle against the Ammonites, he vowed to the God of Israel that, if the Israelites were successful in battle, he would sacrifice the first thing to come out of the doors of his house to greet him upon his return. Jephthah and the Israelites humbled the Ammonites, and tragically, but not very surprisingly, the first thing to cross the threshold to greet Jephthah was his only child, his daughter, the person he held most dear. Jephthah, ever the sensitive father, then cries out, "Oh, my daughter, what misery you have brought upon me! You have joined those who bring misery into my life!" Jephthah's offspring is given a brief reprieve to wander the mountains with her fellow virgins, but after two months she returns to her father and is dutifully sacrificed.

Note one very important thing. God is nowhere present in this sorry narrative. God does not demand the sacrifice. There is no evidence that the Israelites win as the result of Jephthah's vow. There is nothing here to suggest that God demands that Jephthah actually keep his foolhardy promise. The whole shabby affair takes place in Jephthah's head. He has a picture in his mind of the way God is, and all his actions follow as night follows day. The problem is that the picture is mere superstition and sentimentality. Someone has defined sentimentality as "loving something more than God does". Jephthah in effect loves his "picture" of God more than God – or than his daughter. And I'm afraid that I and perhaps you have at times been guilty of that same misapprehension. We cannot know God -- God, as we have been reminded, is entirely "other" – yet what we see of God revealed in Jesus, the Christ, is love incarnate. That still leaves lots to work out as we live out our lives, but it's a great start. So let's embrace the mystery!

In her wonderful song "Let the Mystery Be", Iris Dement sings, "Some say they're goin' to a place called Glory/And I ain't sayin' it ain't a fact/But I've heard that I'm on the road to purgatory/And I don't like the sound of that/I believe in love and I live my life accordingly/But I choose to let the mystery be". Personally I would keep the mood but amend the lines to say something like, "I need to believe in God and live life accordingly; beyond that, I think I'll just let the mystery be."

Paul B. Dornan

Eating with Sinners

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Mark 2:16-17, NRSV)

Early in his ministry in Galilee, Jesus met a tax collector named Levi, the son of Alphaeus. In other gospels, Levi is known as Matthew.

As a servant of Rome, tax collectors like Levi were despised by people. They were viewed as agents of Roman oppression. They were wealthy, enriching themselves by collecting much more than what Rome required. They sent Rome what it wanted and skimmed the rest.

Levi/Matthew was at his collection booth near Capernaum when Jesus called him to follow him. By so doing, he asked Matthew to embrace the kingdom of God.

The Pharisees did not like this at all. They were especially critical when Jesus and Levi dined with tax collectors and other sinners.

While Mark does not describe how the dinner went, it was a transformational moment for Levi/Matthew. From being a tax collector, Levi/Matthew became one of Jesus' most trusted disciples. He later died in Ethiopia.

Dining with tax collectors and sinners was a radical act. Jesus broke a taboo – associating himself with unclean and impure people. Yet, it showed his wisdom. In response to the Pharisees' criticism, Jesus said that he did not come to heal the righteous, but the sinners. He dined with sinners because they needed him. The Great Physician did, indeed, make house calls.

Jesus did not let the cultural norms of the day dictate whom he saved. Unlike the Pharisees, he did not require that they be changed before he met them. Instead, Jesus sought them out and met them where they were. By offering them love and hope, Jesus knew that change would come from within them.

By following Christ, Matthew proved to be a risk-taker. Among Jesus' disciples, he gave up the most. John, Andrew, Peter, and James could always return to their fishing boats and their communities. But it was doubtful that Matthew could return to being a tax collector, to his old life. Instead, he chose a new life, a decent life, a life in Christ.

During this Lent, ask yourself: Have I eaten with sinners? What risks have I taken to follow Christ today?

When we shut the door on those who seek entry, God forgive us. When we fail to recognize stranger as kin, God forgive us. When we keep people in the cold who need to know warmth, God forgive us. God forgive us and make us anew. Amen. (By Bruce Reyes-Chow from "40 Days, 40 Prayers, 40 Words." Westminster John Knox Press)

Saturday, February 20, 2016

KEEPING THE SABBATH

Judges 13: 1-14
Mark 2: 23—3:6
Hebrews 5: 1-10

Two Sabbaths, 32 C.E.

At the grainfields (Mark 2: 23-28, NIV)

Disciple: I'm hungry; let's eat this grain.
Pharisee: You are breaking Sabbath laws!
Jesus: Your ancestor David ate consecrated bread, lawful for only for the priests.

*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.
So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.*

In the synagogue (Mark 3: 3-6 NIV)

Pharisee: Let's see if Jesus is going to heal on the Sabbath.
Jesus: (to the man with the shriveled hand): Stand up in front of everyone.

Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"

[The Pharisees remained silent. Jesus got angry.
Jesus healed the man in the synagogue on the Sabbath.]

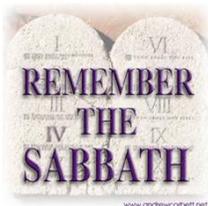
Pharisee: We need to kill Jesus.

Your Sabbaths, 2016 C.E.

You: I'm going to church to listen to Jesus' teachings.
I will have (righteous) anger.
I will do good, not evil. I will heal, not break down.

Prayer: Loving God, help us to observe the Sabbath in appropriate ways.

Ella Cleveland



Record Breaking Levels

Gen 15:1-18; Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35; Phil. 3:17-4:1.

Sunday, Feb 21

Do we live in an Age of Anger? Are many politicians feasting off the anger and disappointment of millions? Are sensational rumors and scandals sweeping the country on Internet and Talk Radio? What is it about this disturbing emotion that drowns out all reasonable dialogue? According to a new book on the subject, "in the stone age, anger was indeed useful to us as hunter-gatherers...then, in a crisis requiring quick action, it gave us the focus we needed to survive...In modern politics however, anger undermines democracy...People who are angry cannot see others' point of view. Angry people don't compromise."(Carlos Lozada's review of Rick Shenkman's Political Animals.)

This seems to explain lots of the bizarre behavior and popularity of recent headline seekers. Suddenly the recovering economy is labeled a huge mess; the incredibly complex wars in Syria/Iraq demand simple carpet-bombing. These rash "solutions" are full of blind outrage, provocations for more war and hatred of outsiders. Suddenly it seems we live in an out-of-control and collapsing country. Is the sky actually falling as these theatrically angry politicians are crying? And what are we to do? Should we listen to this siren call? Each of these four Lenten passages takes a dark turn: Jesus despairs over Jerusalem, "Oh, Jerusalem, you kill prophets and stone those sent to lead you...Your house is desolate!" (Luke 13:31-35) Paul warns, "with tears in my eyes, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction... their glory is in their shame!" (Phil. 3:18-19) Shamelessly they brag about themselves and lie about others.

One large, negative turn overwhelms Abram as he lies down – "a dreadful darkness comes over him."(Gen 15:1-18) He is 85, childless and wants to know if God's promise of unlimited descendants is still true. It turns out, Yes, but there is a steep downside. His descendants will be enslaved and cruelly treated for 400 years! This would be a natural time to be extremely angry, to be outraged at this grim news. But Abram remains faithful, trusts God and accepts this vision. He will wait for God's promise and the Lord will be his rock and shelter. He knows he will "gaze on the beauty of the Lord." (See Psalm 27 as a beautiful expression of Abram's faith.)

Courageously Abram trusts in the Lord. Instead of exploding in anger, he remains calm, waiting out this dreadful time and not letting it panic him. His faith and love casts out his fear.

Another shield against anger comes from a church patriarch – "If it is true that the Holy Spirit is peace of soul...and if anger is disturbance of the heart,...then there is no greater obstacle to the presence of the Spirit in us than anger. (John Climatus- The Ladder of Divine Ascent.)

Lord, give us the strength to wait, to work for the good and to trust in You.

Tom Dunlap

Judges 13:15-24
Mark 3: 7-19a
Philippians 4:8-13

The third chapter of Mark opens with Jesus' defiant healing of a man with a paralyzed arm that He encounters in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus refuses to be proscribed by what the leaders of the Synagogue consider to be appropriate religious behavior. He knows very well that His actions will anger them, but He goes ahead anyhow. Jesus is unwilling to tell the man that he must wait until the Sabbath has ended because his injuries are not life threatening. (Medical attention was permitted on the Sabbath if it was an emergency.) Jesus saw a man who was suffering and wanted to help him. In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, William Barclay writes that "To the Pharisees, religion was *ritual*; it meant obeying certain rules and regulations." In contrast, Barclay says that for Jesus religion was *service*. To be a religious person meant to love God and to treat others with love, kindness and compassion.

The leaders of the Synagogue are beside themselves with anger at Jesus' actions and the threat He presents to their positions of power and prestige within the community. They begin to conspire with Herod's men to have Jesus killed. Meanwhile, Jesus withdraws to the Sea of Galilee where hundreds of people follow Him, begging to be healed as well. Among the crowds were many desperate souls possessed by unclean spirits; men and women we might now consider to be mentally ill. But in Jesus' time, those gathered round him would have believed that these "spirits" were demonic in origin. As Jesus casts out these unclean spirits, they fling themselves down before him crying out "You are the Son of God." But Jesus sternly admonishes them to be quiet.

Why? Why does Jesus forbid the unclean spirits from announcing who He is? Is the problem with the messenger? After all, it could be a bit awkward having demons vouch for you. However, the demons are not the only one Jesus tells in Mark to remain silent about His true identify. In Mark 8: 29-30, Jesus asks his Disciples "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers Him 'You are the Messiah' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." The problem, it turns out, is not with the messenger, it's with the message itself.

As William Barclay points out, "Son of God" was not an uncommon title in the ancient world. For example, it was used by Egyptian Kings who referred to themselves as the "sons of Ra", the Egyptian god and from the time of Augustus onwards, many Roman Emperors were described as "sons of God." It was a title that was associated with power and prestige of a sort that was diametrically opposed to the nature of Jesus' power. In the popular mind, the "Son of God" would be at the head of a conquering army marching toward Rome to overthrow the empire, not riding on the back of a donkey heading ultimately for crucifixion. Before Jesus was willing to let his true identify be revealed, people had to learn what Jesus' kingship was really all about.

Prayer: Dear God, As much as we might not like to admit it, there are times when we, too, would much prefer a Messiah whose earthly journey does not end at the cross. Knowing the ultimate outcome of the story doesn't necessarily make it any easier to follow Him there. Too often we look around and see the other kind of power winning and we feel discouraged. Help us to feel your guiding presence as we seek to follow in Jesus' footsteps, acting with love, compassion and mercy toward everyone we meet. And give us the courage to pay the price. Amen.

Kathryn Doan

Judges 14:1-19
Mark 3:19b-35
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Tuesday, February 23

Both the Judges passage and the Mark passage loosely illustrate what it can feel like when God calls you and his spirit is upon you. The Mark and 2 Thessalonians passages remind us that those who do God's work with us become our family.

In Judges, Samson is following God's plan by marrying a Philistine woman, despite his parents urging him not to. When the spirit of the Lord comes upon him, he also kills a lion with his bare hands and eats honey from the carcass. In Mark, Jesus goes forward with his plans, despite his family thinking he is crazy and the teachers thinking he is possessed by Beelzebub. Both Jesus and Samson just can't seem to get away from those who nag them and those who don't believe in what they're doing. Samson's wife cries for all seven days of their wedding celebration, trying to wheedle the answer to the riddle out of him. (Generally a bad sign to start a marriage!) In Mark, the teachers of the law think Jesus is possessed and don't understand what he is doing. In 2 Thessalonians Paul encourages his readers to work hard and follow his teachings, and to bring those who don't do this back into their fellowship.

There are some other ghosts of similarities. In the Mark passage, Jesus says you cannot steal from a strong man unless you tie him up first, echoing some of what happened to Samson in later passages of Judges. In Mark, Jesus says to those sitting in the circle around him, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." Paul echoes this, in that while he is admonishing his readers not to associate with those who don't follow his teaching, and are idle, he also encourages the readers to bring those lazy people back into the fold.

For me, these stories illustrate that doing God's work is not easy and others may not always be able to understand or see why we are doing what we are doing. People around us may nag us, they may not agree with our choices, or think we have lost our minds. However, as we answer God's call, we will be part of his family, and we must keep working hard and keep faith that God has a plan for us – and be glad that we are unlikely to have to tear apart any lions with our bare hands.

Stacey Gagosian

“Do You Have the Spirit?”

Judges 14:20-15:20
Philippians 1:19b-26
Mark 4:1-20

February 24, 2016

How often do you feel the Spirit with you? When do you know you are being guided by the Spirit? Is the Spirit woven into your daily life?

Samson had a big job on his hands. Before birth, God had chosen him to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, but did he know that was his purpose? Samson torched the Philistines' crops, vineyards, and olive groves, and proceeded to slaughter the Philistines who killed his wife and her father. When the Philistines chased Samson and overran Lehi, Samson was turned over, bound in ropes, to the Philistine mob. Suddenly, “the spirit of the Lord seized him,” Samson's ropes melted away, and “he slew a thousand men.” Did he know he was following God's script? He must have, because when he became thirsty and had no water, he cried to the Lord, “You have let me win this great factory, but must I now die of thirst?” And the Lord provided water.

Samson must have truly believed in, and relied on, God and the Spirit to guide him, just as Paul was guided while in prison to spread the Gospel and encourage the Philippians. He told them of the joy in Jesus Christ and the Spirit that was supporting him. How else can one who is bound in chains and facing death exude such confidence, exuberance, and peace except by having the Spirit? To have and experience the Spirit, we must, as Jesus said through his parable, be open to the Gospel, to Jesus' word, welcome it, and act on it.

So where are we in our day-to-day activities? Do we exude Paul's strength and belief in Jesus Christ, knowing the Spirit is with us? Do we act on this belief and demonstrate our commitment to Christ through caring and support of others as Paul did with the Philippians? So much in our world, in our community, needs our caring touch, our outreach. If we open ourselves to the spirit, to the teachings of Jesus, and listen for God's word to us, we will know how to carry out his purpose for us. And in the process, we, too, will feel the joy and Spirit as Paul did long ago.

Prayer: Dear God, show us your purpose for us through the Spirit that we may do your work, and through Jesus Christ touch others in our community to show them your love.

Marilyn J. Seiber

Scripture References: Judges 16:1-22, Mark 4:21-34; Philippians 1:27-2:2

Philippians 1:27-2:2 "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that ...I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel....complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind". (Revised Standard Version)

Paul's epistle to the Philippians stresses the importance of unity in the church and how it can be maintained by following Jesus' example of humility. This was a real challenge for early Christian churches just as it is for us today. As I reflected on Paul's words I thought about our Vision 2020 Campaign and how the planning for it required the firmness in spirit and the unity in Christ that Paul described in his letter. For a long time NYAPC members and clergy have been meeting to create a plan for how best to repair our aging church building--and finance the repairs thereon-- so that worship and mission can continue long into the future.

Reflecting on Paul's charge, I realized that we at the NYAPC have the opportunity every day to experience Paul's concept of unity and witness to the possibilities of the church at work practicing the love of Jesus--in the life-changing mission, the prayer ministries, the Bible study groups, the great music and inspiring worship, the quiet one-on-one ministry that takes place among and through us as we care for each other--all of which have a ripple effect beyond the participants, to the family and friends and volunteers involved in each program, and to the community outside the church which sees The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church at work. The Vision 2020 committee studied all aspects of our church life and looked ahead to the future-- we prayed together, shared meals together, spent hours discussing all aspects of the Campaign, wrote reports about work to be done, prepared materials to explain the plan to the congregation and went out into the homes of many congregants to visit and share their hopes and dreams for the ministry of the church. It was truly a life-changing experience!

The Vision 2020 Campaign recognized that our ministry has impact only as we invite the Holy Spirit to enter us and all that we do; that our educational programs must have a purpose, providing for a renewing of our minds along with a growing faith; that we must enter the mission field as we live our daily lives and let our light shine before others so that they may see our good works; and that we must recognize that what we do is not "busy work", but "kingdom work," touching hearts and changing lives for Jesus Christ. We learned that members of the NYAPC know why we give to God through the church: we give not to sustain an institution but to make an eternal, transformational impact. I would like to think that Mohandas K. Gandhi was describing NYAPC members when he said, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we come to church to praise you, to sing a new song to you, to bless your name and tell of your salvation and marvelous works among all the peoples. Open our hearts to the needs of all your children and show us how to witness to them, both near and far. Thank you for the NYAPC and the opportunities it provides for us to witness. Give us wisdom and strength to continue your work there. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Cathy Schultheis

Faithful Living?

Judges 16:23-31
Galatians 3:23-29
Mark 4:35-41

February 26, 2016

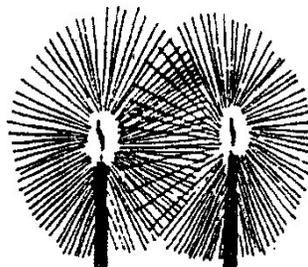
As we move through Lent, we draw closer to those moments that define and exemplify the relationship between God and the faithful. Paul assures us in the letter to the Galatians that, through Jesus, we are all children of God through faith. But how do we express that faith?

One of the acts of the faithful is to ask God for help. Our culture today is dominated by the concepts of self-reliance and independence, but these influences can serve to distance us from God. Samson was similarly distanced from God at the beginning of today's passage from Judges. When Samson asked God for help, however, God responded. Samson's request had demonstrated his faithfulness. A contrast is shown in Mark, where the disciples – fearful that their boat would be capsized – do not think to ask for help. Instead they awaken Jesus, incredulous that he is not concerned about the conditions. After calming the seas, Jesus rebukes them, asking them if they have no faith.

The key to our faith is not the conscious decision to ask God for help, but rather to ask reflexively. Instead of turning to God when all other options have been tried, we need to incorporate God's grace into our every activity. We claim that God is as close to us as breathing. What if we acted as if it were true?

O God, we confess that too often it is the storms of life that drive us to call out to you.
Forgive us our pride and self-centeredness. Help us to become faith-full people.
Amen

Brian Dewhurst



Judges 17: 1-13
Mark 5:1-20
1 Peter 2:1-10

February 27, 2016

When Sharing Faith, What's Enough?

Graven and molten images. Demonic swines drowning at sea. Spiritual milk. These passages conjure images painted by Hieronymus Bosch. And after a full day of work, homework and bedtime, I'm left thinking, huh? This is a strange collection. How is this supposed to be a Lenten meditation?

There are also ideas in these passages that are confusing and make me uncomfortable. In Judges 17, a young man from Bethlehem is installed as a priest based on prestige alone. I also wonder if the words in 1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people..." have been used to regard one people as more worthy than another. There's also evidence that each passage addresses preaching, evangelizing, and setting up church; although Judges seems to give more attention to how to care for our pastors. (By the way, the current exchange for 10 ounces of silver is about \$146. That's not a living wage.)

So I dive back in. Perhaps the story of the young man travelling from Bethlehem could be just the story of a stranger who is considered faithful and is therefore accepted and valued. Because Micah accepts the stranger as an act of faith, he says, "Now I know that the Lord will prosper me..." Micah was doing what was "right in his own eyes."

In Mark, we read about another traveler from Bethlehem, this time Jesus, who encounters a man possessed by demons, Legion. He expresses his faith by running to Jesus and worshipping him. Once the evil spirits are cast into the unsuspecting, nearby swine who drown themselves, the man requests to leave with Jesus. Jesus rejects his plea and instructs him to spread his faith.

In 1 Peter, we are instructed to "be a holy priesthood...to declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Now I am uncomfortable again because sharing my faith has always been difficult. Words never come easy and feel forced, fake, and insincere. I have no pedigree, no prestige. I've not felt "saved" or had a transcendental experience. Yet 1 Peter 2:4 also states, "Come to him, to that living stone..." Come, and make a choice. "Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:10) You are enough.

It's enough to choose to be God's person. It's enough to simply say to that woman who I met at a friend's house, "Yes, I attend church. It's important to me." Enough.

Molly Johnson Wagner

February 28, 2016 Sunday

Isaiab 55:1-9 Psalm 63:1-8 Luke 13:1-9 1 Cor. 10:1-13 (Luke 1:38a)

Dear God,

More often than I dare admit
My life feels like a wilderness.
There is always Prayer
 Movement
 Strong community
And I know I am surrounded by angels.

Yet, wilderness persists. It has a personality.
It takes a hold of me like a fig tree that bears no fruit, and it will not let go!
Maybe next year (month, week) will be different?

“O God, you are my God, I seek you,
My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you,
As in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

Thus I call, and cry – my cycle of repentance triggered again.
Will the days proceed this way until I am no more?
Calling, crying, seeking sustenance...

You say, “Come to the waters (everyone who thirsts).”
Come to the waters!

And then you help me to say:
“Here am I, the servant of the Lord.”
So, inclining my ear, I listen. I live. I am not unaware.

Dearest God:
“Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.”

I recognize the new.
Will I allow these words to frame the entirety of my life?

Yes, I will.

I have come to the waters to stay.

Love you,
Kathryn

You are invited to pray this prayer in your own name.

Kathryn Sparks

Parades

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

Monday, February 29, 2016

I love a parade. Thinking of a parade conjures up images of floats, marching bands, and large numbers of happy people. These mental images are especially sharp today as there is a blizzard outside as I write these words. I don't want to think of having to shovel several feet of snow from our sidewalks and driveway. Better to think of sunny days and happy people.

But of course there are all kinds of parades. Forgive me if I stretch the term, but it seems to me that the world is full of much grimmer parades – long lines of refugees fleeing violence, repression and hardship; military parades intended to demonstrate the power of despots, sad parades of folks mourning the loss of loved ones.

This line of thought came to mind this morning as I was reading today's verses. Given my perhaps expanded definition of the term "parade", I am impressed that the Bible seems full of parades of all types. If you want a grim and troublesome parade, read today's passage from Judges. The tribe of Dan is looking for a place to live in the promised land. Their scouts locate a settlement of defenseless people. A parade of 600 armed members of the tribe crosses the land and descends on these people engaging in a slaughter seemingly approved by God. I confess I don't really know what to make of this except that I am reminded that our world today is still witnessing people doing terrible things in the name of God.

Much more to my liking is the reading from Mark. Here is Jesus leading a parade of people. The verses do not specifically identify these people but simply note that it is a "large crowd". Jesus does not seem interested in knowing which tribe, clan, nationality these people may represent. He is busy performing miracles. He is saving people spiritually and demonstrating his power physically through signs and wonders. Such a parade! Where is Jesus going?

At some level, Lent is a spiritual parade. We travel with Jesus to the seeming disaster of the crucifixion but then to the joy of the resurrection. Are we up for this parade? Do we understand its implications? Are we willing to take its message into the world? I hope and pray that we do.

Steve Dewhurst

Judges 18:16-31
Romans 14:1-12
Mark 6:1-13

Tuesday, March 1, 2016

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ...¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

So what is going on with this group of people who were listening to Jesus in his hometown? Perhaps a little jealousy. Maybe a natural skepticism based on what they knew about Jesus, or maybe about his family. Or maybe a failure of logic: they had not been on the travels and seen Jesus baptized or preaching to the multitudes or raising Jairus' daughter. Or even a respect for authority or a little self-loathing: how could learnedness come out of their own backwater town?

Remarkably, even Jesus, truly affected by the lack of faith they have in him, has trouble doing his work, which says something about the power of the community.

I read this so many ways. One, that God's efforts in our lives/my life can be transformational, but that I need to let them be. Two, that I need to watch for signs that God is transforming others, and witness to the growth I see in them. It's easy to decide that someone is good with numbers, or has a gift for visiting, or great at cooking meals, but finance guys can become teachers and carpenters the very son of God.

And finally that the Jesus' call to action, to go out among people who need us, extends to us. That we may encounter skepticism but that's no reason to stop, but that we should trust that we'll find people along the way who will support and help us.

God has done marvelous things. Praise the Lord. Amen.

Rebecca Davis

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11
Mark 6:13-29
2 Timothy 2:8-15

March 2, 2016

Nothing New Under the Sun?

The first chapter of Ecclesiastes is both sublime and somewhat depressing. On a first reading, one can think the point is: “our lives don’t matter.” It says, “All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.” *Ecclesiastes 1:8*. And, “the people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.” *Ecclesiastes 1:11*.

But, I believe the point of this passage is that there is nothing really new in the universe. God’s creation is forever. The sun will rise, the seasons will change, and the waters will flow. Our lives won’t change God’s creation. They are part of God’s creation. In other words, to say that there is nothing new under the sun does not ignore changes in human culture or scientific advances. Rather, I think it emphasizes that human efforts cannot affect any fundamental change to God’s creation.

That doesn’t mean, however, that we shouldn’t spend our lives to affect change. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” If this is so, then the long “arc” which “bends towards justice” is as sure a part of God’s creation, as the rivers and streams that run to the ocean. Shouldn’t we strive to be part of that arc? Change agents for justice in our own society?

I think about the great changes in the world that have taken place in my lifetime. In particular, how our country has made strides to achieve basic civil rights for all people irrespective of race, gender, or sexual-orientation. It’s really breathtaking when you stop and think about it, but there’s so much more to do. And, the beauty of our reformed Christian tradition is that we don’t resist change, but we embrace it when we discern God leading us in that direction. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, loosely translated, “reformed, and always reforming.” Indeed, as our website proclaims we are “an inclusive, justice-seeking church.”

The challenge for us as individuals, then, is not to try to change God’s creation. But rather, our challenge is to be part of that change embedded within creation the “bends toward justice.” We know the day is coming when justice will roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:24. Let’s immerse ourselves in those waters.

Prayer: Dear God, Let me be the change I want to see. To do with strength and wisdom all that needs to be done and become the hope that I can be. Amen
(Lasallian Prayer)

Adam Bain

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

Thursday, March 3, 2016

"We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:9-11)

I have always had trouble with this passage. It sounds very much as if Paul is claiming that we can be rid of our tendencies toward sin, toward placing ourselves at the center of the universe, always acting in our own interest, clinging to any advantage. In our baptisms, Paul says, we have died with Christ and through his resurrection we now have access to life in God. Everyday experience makes this hard for me to believe.

Richard C. Halverson, long ago pastor of 4th Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, says this: "We may not feel that we have been emancipated from sin, that this Adam nature has been broken. As a matter of fact this has nothing to do with feeling; it is a matter of faith in the Word of God which declares it to be so. Knowing this, therefore, we count on the truth of it, live on that basis. ... One great philosopher said, 'Faith is the assent to any proposition on the credit of the proposer.' ... So in these verses, 3 through 10, the emphasis is on the word knowledge, 'know,' and in verse 11, 'reckon' or 'rely' [NRSV says "consider"] on what you know because God has said so. Rely on this promise however you feel. Rely on what God's Word says to be true, and you will discover that it is."

Further, he says: "You see, this is one of the very practical problems in the Christian life. We say that we trust God when circumstances are good; but we prove our distrust when circumstances are contrary, indicating we have been trusting circumstances rather than God all the time. This is the test for faith, the acid test: you don't have to have faith in God when circumstances are right, the circumstances sustain you. Faith in God has its opportunity when circumstances fail you. It is this reversal of circumstances which allows faith to be exercised that it may be virile and strong."
(Prologue to Prison, pp. 136-138)

There is a lot to ponder here. Can we believe that we are, in some real way, dead to sin? That we don't have to be prisoners to the self-centeredness that is still part of us? What does it mean to live into that truth? When our circumstances get tough, will we remember to believe?

What a gift it is to have this season of Lent to encourage our pondering. What insights might we have to share? Stories to tell?

Gracious God, help us to rely on the truth of your Word, trusting in your promises no matter how we feel. Amen

Miriam Dewhurst

`Credentialed!

Ecclesiasties 2:1-16
Mark 6:47-56
Colossians 1:11-20

March 4

“...being strengthened with all power according to God's glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”
Colossians 1:11-14

If there is one thing that this city is big on, it's credentials: degrees, titles, where you work, and even sometimes who you work for. I'm not saying these things are not meaningful. My gosh, we do need jobs! But as I read the Colossians passage, I hear Paul saying to his readers that God has essentially pre-qualified (i.e. credentialed) them for their life in Christ. God has taken the initiative to show love for them through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

So, my friends, we are already credentialed to joyfully and patiently share this good news with our sisters and brothers all over the world: We are all loved and are good to go!

Praise the Lord!

Jenean McKay



The Profane and the Sacred

Ecclesiastes 2:16-26

Mark 7: 1-23

Colossians 3: 1-11

March 5, 2016

These three passages relay a consistent message: human endeavor in itself is a fragile, ultimately disappointing, and even dangerous foundation for the meaning of our existence.

The Ecclesiastes passage is the most well-known, with its poetic refrain, “all is vanity and grasping for the wind.” It is also the most depressing, as Solomon leads us to wallow in existential angst about the fruitlessness of human labor and wisdom. “What’s the point of working your fingers to the bone if you hand over what you worked for to someone who never lifted a finger for it?” (Ecclesiastes 2:21, *The Message*). It brings to mind Percy Bysshe Shelley's haunting 1817 poem *Ozymandias*, with this ironic inscription on the ruin of a once-imposing statue: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings; Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

But Solomon also begins to open our eyes to see the way to liberate ourselves from this cycle of vanity and despair. God must be the source of our meaning in life, not our own human striving. Without God, genuine joy and satisfaction in our daily lives will remain elusive. But *with* God, even mundane acts such as eating and working can be seen as the heavenly gifts that they are.

The passage in Mark reminds us again that vanity can lead to evil results, as when humans invent laws or interpretations to satisfy their own interests (“in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men”). Too often, these man-made rules end up contradicting God’s more fundamental prescriptions (e.g., allowing children to evade their familial obligations to honor their father and mother by instead giving all their assets to support the priesthood).

As Ecclesiastes focuses on the vanity of human action by itself, Paul in Colossians presses the second part of the message—urging us to turn toward Christ and God’s values, embracing a new life, and rejecting the evil values that are so prevalent in the culture around us.

These passages bring to mind another, more contemporary, work—the modern fable “*Hope for the Flowers*,” which details the struggles of a young caterpillar to succeed. First striving to climb over others to reach the top of a column, the caterpillar eventually reaches the top and realizes how meaningless and unsatisfying it is. Inspired by a friendly butterfly, he abandons the pursuit of the column, builds a cocoon, and becomes transformed into a butterfly himself.

Lord, help us to let go of our vanities, and to reject the dark side of our culture, which surrounds us. Help us instead to embrace a new life and turn toward you, seeking joy and delight in all your gifts.

Betsy Merritt & Jim Bird

Reflection on Psalm 32

"While I kept silence, my body wasted away..."

March 6th, 2016

We've all likely experienced something like the psalmist's "wasting away"—as long as we refuse to admit the truth of our own failings (or perhaps otherwise choose not to accept them), we diminish ourselves. And we only feel relief and newfound energy once we come to terms with our iniquities and bring them before God.

When the teacher's voice cuts in a few verses later—which may be God's voice—it tells us to use our minds and not to be stubborn, to walk in the way of the Lord. I don't see a true dichotomy in "righteous" versus "wicked." In looking at this psalm, it seems to me that the righteous are simply the ones who have come to terms with their own fallen state, who admit such state and failings, who ask forgiveness, and who seek to be more aligned with God's will in the future.

Even David's own lived experience must have taught him as much about himself. And hence, "the wicked" is a tricky term later in the passage, because we're all part of this group in some ways.

"Steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord..." But this love is not actually providing prevention from torments. It's more a revelation of the fact that even in the midst of torment, we may hope in the fact that we're loved, in the fact that we can bring more of an in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven here to earth, even in small ways.

So, perhaps those who are wicked (that is, those whose wills are bent toward themselves instead of toward God) are the overall group, encompassing all of us, and those who trust in the Lord are a subgroup. As we adjust the direction of our wills, we become more oriented toward God; and by the end of Lent, we may find we are thinking more of what may be God's thoughts than we did before.

During Lent, we traditionally don't use the word "alleluia." Once Easter arrives and immediately afterward, we use the word even more than usual to reinforce the contrast of the changing liturgical seasons and our own redirected wills.

We may recognize this contrast in a metaphorical way, but some Christians have made this shift literal and visual. Catechumens of old would learn and train during Lent, and then on the night of Holy Saturday, as Easter was imminent, they would fill the church with light, even illuminate the whole town, gloriously showing forth the new brilliance realized from God's love and their decisions to follow Him. And in that light they would be baptized.

Newly shaped wills, newly realized contrast, an acceptance of what has come before, and a hope for a more aligned life—aren't these "glad cries of deliverance?"

Phil Bolles

Mark tells us that a Syrophenician woman "begged [Jesus] to cast the demon out of her daughter." Jesus resisted, saying, "It is **not fair** to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus replied, 'For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."

Since this was written about 50 years after Jesus died, it's amazing that it retains the hostile tone Jesus used in responding to the woman. One might expect him to have been "cleaned up" from such humanity! But we surely recognize that first reaction: don't you hate to be badgered for special attention from someone over and over, someone who might not even be deserving? We can all probably remember that children, students, clients, other church members say, or imply, "It's just not fair!" So, here is Jesus reacting by drawing a line around his generosity; and saying, "No, it wouldn't be fair." But when we learn from historians that the Syrophenicians were oppressing the Jews at that time, and that they were taking more than their share of the food in the region; when we realize that they were causing hunger in the Jewish families who grew the food, we see why Jesus the Jewish leader might have seen the woman as an annoying supplicant. Maybe Jesus would not have wanted to give away his blessings to one of the enemy, "the dogs." There's a real **justice** issue here.

But, miracles happen. Perhaps the woman knew what **Ecclesiastes** reminds us: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die...; a time to kill, and a time to heal...; **a time to keep silence, and a time to speak...**" In spite of their being on different sides in the social order, she was humble enough but desperate enough not to be resigned and silent: she apparently sensed that this was a time to speak out, to plead with Jesus, the healer, on behalf of her daughter. She apparently had faith and hope that he could in fact remove the illness. And she was clever in using his own metaphor (food, crumbs, dogs) to convince him to do so. She pled with him.

Jesus changed his mind and showed mercy, even when "no" might have been entirely justifiable.

Colossians teaches that, as one of God's chosen, we must strive to act as Jesus did, "with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." He acted out of lovingkindness, and a miracle occurred: change happened.

It reminds me of the Serenity prayer, written by Reinhold Niebuhr, and adapted by groups struggling with addiction:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
the courage to change the things that should be changed,
And the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Sometimes we are granted the wisdom to see a situation in our lives, whether in or out of church, where we are justified in setting a limit to our generosity; but occasionally that wisdom tells us that this is a situation demanding mercy more than fairness. Change can happen -- in ourselves and in those others -- if only we act as Jesus did, with compassion and love. Even an unreasonable love.

Prayer: Loving God, grant us vision, understanding, even wisdom, to know when we can act in Christ's name to make a difference. Amen

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

Tuesday March 8, 2016

Jesus called his disciples to him and said,² "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.³ If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

⁴ His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"

⁵ "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.

"Seven," they replied.

⁶ He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so.⁷ They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them.⁸ The people ate and were satisfied.

Mark 8 starts with the feeding of the four thousand, and ends with Jesus telling his disciples that his time – and theirs – will end with tremendous suffering. As for the crowds he feeds, who have many days before the end of their journey, the road for the disciples will be long. When I think about these stories, ordered in this way, the word that occurs to me is "enough."

Our resources seem scarce, especially our time. But as Jesus blesses that bread, and pulls it apart, it multiplies. For these destitute seekers who have come so far. For the disciples who are confused by the task ahead of them. For Jesus, who will need strength in the face of torture and abandonment. For us, facing health crises, negative habits of thought, budget woes. For us, facing fear and division. For us, as we discern what is next. There is enough in the bread. There is enough in what we share.

The first time I really read this story, I found it funny that Jesus asked how many loaves there were. But something about counting the loaves, about giving thanks over something so humble and seemingly insufficient for the task, makes them real, and tangible, and specific to what I have in front of me: seven days, twenty four hours, one life. It is enough, if I am ready to follow, to listen, to trust God will lead me in the right direction. Resources will present themselves. Solutions will occur. The path forward will become clear. We have enough.

Rebecca Davis

Getting Out of Town

Mark 8: 11-26

March 9, 2016

"They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to him a blind man whom they begged him to touch. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. Then, putting spittle on his eyes and laying his hands on him, he asked, 'Can you see anything?' The man, who was beginning to see, replied, 'I can see people; they look like trees as they walk around.' Then he laid his hands on the man's eyes again and he saw clearly; he was cured, and he could see everything plainly and distinctly. And Jesus sent him home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'" Mark 8: 22-26 {New Jerusalem Bible}

As St. Augustine instructs us, "Let us ask of the miracles themselves what they tell us about Christ; for, if they be understood, they have a tongue of their own." So what is this intriguing miracle story trying to tell us? Two things call out to me. First, Jesus led the man outside town to work his healing miracle, and, once he had cured the man, he told them not to go back into town. Second, the miracle was staged; that is, the blind man did not receive his sight immediately. At first, everything was blurry; only in time could he see clearly. As my father used to say, "What in the Sam Hill is going on here?"

Let's take the second surprise first. Why is Jesus' healing power not instantaneous? Joseph Sittler has written, "The parables are spoken miracles; the miracles are spoken parables." In this instance, the story of the miracle, the healing, follows directly upon the fallout from an earlier miracle, the feeding of the four thousand. The Pharisees immediate response to the miracle of the loaves is to demand of Jesus, in effect, "So give us a sign." Then follows a scene on the boat in which it is clear that the disciples are as clueless about the miracle of the loaves as the Pharisees have been. And that's when Mark interposes the staged miracle. The man is blind; he sees dimly; he sees clearly. The disciples – and we – have a chance! By the grace of God, even our blindness can be healed -- but it may not be instantaneous.

Now what about the first surprise? Why are some places, some communities, barren places for the working of miracles? Two chapters prior in Mark, Jesus goes home to Nazareth and finds he can work no miracles there. Clearly some places, some communities, are more amenable to the workings of God's love than others. The only thing we can do is either leave town or work to transform it so that it becomes more miracle-friendly. In this context, I guess the questions would be, "How miracle-friendly is the New York Avenue Church community? Can we be trusted to be a community in which God's justice and mercy are alive in Washington? Are we on the path to seeing God's creation in the way that God sees it?"

Gracious God, melt us, mold us, fill us, use us to see and then to do. Amen

Paul Dornan

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

Thursday, March 10, 2016

Who do you say I am?

Dear Pastors, Staff and Congregation,

I want to thank you for 58 years of memories.

Thank you for my memory of Dr. George Docherty, Rev Jack McClendon, Rev Philip Newell, Rev Bryant George and all the pastors who would say "You are the Messiah" when asked by Jesus "who do you think I am".

I am grateful for having known Jack Carroll, Lee Hogenson, Helen Jervis, Marjorie McCleskey, Will Myers and so many friends, some of whom are no longer with us, and cherished friends I see doing God's work every week.

I am proud and grateful for The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church efforts to stand and be counted; to provide leadership to make the institutional changes necessary for the poor, the homeless, for peace.

"Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it" .

Especially important to me is the following account, not found in the book, Capital Witness, the excellent history of our church.

In 1968 Mississippi was the most racially violent, racially segregated, and poorest state in the union. In April 1968 the Ad Hoc Committee to Save the Children of Mississippi (CDGM) came to Washington from Mississippi to make an effort to stop OEC from cutting the funds from 10 Mississippi county Head Start programs.

The children and families who participated in CDGM Head Start schools were the grandchildren and great grandchildren of slaves who were living in shacks and shanties in extreme poverty in rural Mississippi. The education of share croppers' children in Head Start programs run by CDGM was a small step toward a life beyond the cotton fields. The money earned by family members, maids and field workers, whose children attended the targeted Head Start programs was perceived as a threat to a way of life the Mississippi power structure of the 1960's was determined to maintain. Our church was the first stop for the buses that brought the Mississippi mothers and children to DC. Arriving mid-day the tired mothers and children were served refreshments by our church members and then the children rested and played in the Sunday School rooms. For two weeks our church served as the staging area for demonstrations by these mothers and children in front of the White House. The committee leadership; Rev. Charles F. Thomas, Pearle Draine and Tex Wilson used room 127 as their office during the two weeks as they tried to convince OEC to fund 10 counties of CDGM Head Start programs. The money was not restored. However, the cotton plantation owners of Mississippi continued to receive farm subsidies, paying them not to plant cotton.

Eleanor Klein Robins

Gracious God, during this Lenten season let us turn our ears again to the voice that speaks to us with authority, the voice we hear crying out for justice, for mercy and for acts of love.

(Bruce F. Davie, Lenten Booklet 1995)

OUR WALK WITH GOD

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

Friday, March 11, 2016

Ten years ago, I had open-heart surgery to remove a giant aneurysm from my heart's right atrium. I was 27 at the time and no one was sure I would live. My family and loved ones hoped I would live. They prayed hard for me to live. But they also flew to Minneapolis to be near me and to be strength for my mom, just in case God had a different plan.

I wasn't sure how the surgery would go either. And in my uncertainty, I prayed my version of Hezekiah's prayer. It was "my" version because the prayer was not based on my earlier good walk with Christ, as was Hezekiah's. (2 Kings 20:3) In fact, in the space of about one minute, two big recognitions unfolded in me at once.

First, I recognized that what matters most in life is how wisely we steward the relationships that God gives us – our relationships with our fellow human beings, strangers and friends alike, and of course our relationship with His Son. I probed whether I could have been kinder, more generous, and more extending of grace. Those were the memories that mattered.

Second, I saw with sadness that, for the past ten years, I had not been living my life in relationship with God. As a corporate lawyer at the second largest privately held company in the world (sounds fancy, right? it really seemed that way), my achievements felt empty. I was far short of what God could have done through me – wanted to do through me – if I had walked with Him. Had I walked with God in grace, in prayer, and in faith, I would not have been caught *under-living* life and quite empty from it near the end.

Our walk with God is one thread that ties today's Lent scriptures. In Ecclesiastes 5:8-20, God explains through Solomon that we all stand in equal relationship to the earth – the servant and the king both depend on what we can produce from the earth. However, our focus is not on the relationship with the things we have or can achieve. Instead, the right focus is on our relationship with God and His excellent grace. **We walk with God in grace, rejoicing not in the things we have, but in the unmerited favor of a God who provides.**

In Mark 9:2-13, Jesus takes three of his disciples on one of their customary prayer walks. And in that time of relationship, they see Jesus transfigured before them. God reveals the story of reconciling Himself to us through Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, His Son. And during these moments of intimate devotion, Jesus shares with them things that are to come. God wants to show us things. And to that end, God wants the intimacy of prayer with us. **When we walk with God in prayer, we learn His truth, His power, and what is to come.**

In Romans 1:16-23, God explains through Paul the relationship He has with what He has made. We see that in creation are natural parallels for the attributes of God, His eternal power and divine nature. All these invite us to believe, to have faith. Through faith, we access God. Through faith, we please Him and embrace the fullness of a meaningful life. Our faith is proof of what we cannot physically see, pertaining to God. (Hebrews 11) Indeed, faith is the very binding of our relationship with God. **God asks us to walk with Him by faith, that He may release His power on our behalf.**

In the ten years since my version of Hezekiah's prayer, I am still working on walking with God in grace, in prayer, and in faith. My walk has been slow and plodding – maybe like any pilgrim – but I can attest that when we draw near to God, He very swiftly draws near to us. In the Old and New Testaments, Lent is a time of prayer, fasting and repentance. A time of laser sharp focus on one's walk with God and drawing nearer to Him. This Lent, let us remove anything that may have gotten in the way of our walk with God. By His grace, through prayer, and with faith, let us draw close to Him.

A prayer from Psalm 25:4-7 — "Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good."

—China Boak Terrell

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

Saturday, March 12

Have a Messy Lent?

I haven't read *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo. I suspect I should. My home looks relatively neat ... until you open a cabinet or closet. There's messiness in those dark recesses—artifacts, junk, dust bunnies. I haven't opened one cabinet downstairs for several years. I keep putting "clean out one thing" on my to do list, but I seldom get to it. During the January snow I spent a few hours on one bookshelf. The pile of books now takes up space in the utility room.

I want to follow through on tidying up, but I am wary of the "life-changing magic" part. It appears that whoever wrote Ecclesiastes was too. Both Ecclesiastes and Job can be read as part of an ancient conversation with Proverbs, which brims with neat, tidy formulas for a good life.

In today's Mark passage, Jesus descends from the transfiguration on the mountain into a mess. Scribes argue, crowds surge. A boy convulses—several times—rolling on the ground, foaming at the mouth, and the disciples cannot help. Jesus sounds exasperated: "O faithless generation, how long am I to bear with you?" The story's also messy on a meta level: My One-Volume Interpreters Guide says it is two stories sloppily sewn together. Even Jesus' healing is messy. The boy convulses again and lies so still that the crowd thinks he's dead—until Jesus takes his hand and lifts him up.

It's as if the story occurs in a valley—between transfiguration and healing. And standing in the depths, a father who has lived for years with his inability to help his son cries out: "I believe; help my unbelief!" The story turns on this declaration, a declaration not only of faith, but of doubt. From here, the son is healed, the crowd disperses, and Jesus and his disciples go on their way. "Why couldn't we help?" the disciples ask. I imagine Jesus sagging a little, tired. "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

I often wish my life—and my spiritual life—were neater. Instead of going through peaks and valleys (it feels like the same valley over and over again), I wish I would follow a neat arc of growth toward a happy ending, or at least toward a wise moment when everything would make sense. Not surprisingly, this hasn't happened. I continue to travel through high points and low ones, cleaning out closets only to mess them up again.

Neat. Messy. Faith. Doubt. In Geraldine Brooks' novel about David, *The Secret Chord*, prophet Nathan ponders faith and doubt as he remembers his father's vineyards and winemaking.

"I thought of that other kind of rot, the soft gray fungus that sometimes afflicts the late grape harvest if the air turns unexpectedly moist. ... The wine pressed from such grapes was the best of all. Maybe doubt was like that sometimes. Maybe it, too, could yield rich fruit."

This Lent, I plan to clean out some of the debris in my house ... but first I must open that cabinet downstairs! I must confess the mess. Maybe Marie Kondo's "magic" here is process, not result. Sometimes, the mess is exactly where I need to be. Sometimes, it's better to proclaim and embrace the mess than to deny it. Because "this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Dear God, I believe, help my unbelief. Help me to live out what you would have me to be and do, despite imperfections and doubts, despite messy desks and crazy closets. And help me to pray. Amen

- Meg Hanna House

“The Prize”

Let me paraphrase what Paul writes here to the Philippian church:

If anyone has a right to be really confident as a Christian, a Presbyterian Christian, I do! I have all the credentials – I was baptized at National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC; educated at Wooster College, Princeton Seminary and got my PhD. at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. My grandfather and greatgrandfather were Presbyterian pastors, and I now teach theology at Pittsburg Seminary. And in terms of volunteer work, I am a shining example of Christian virtue: I stay overnight once a month at the shelter, make sandwiches at the Food Bank with my son every Saturday afternoon and I serve on the Presbytery’s Earth Care Committee committed to lowering our carbon footprint and on the Advisory Board of the General Assembly Mission Council. Impeccable dossier, wouldn’t you say!

But I count this bio as worthless compared to knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!

Paul wants to know Christ and His sufferings AND the power of His resurrection.

This is his goal for his life. Jesus is primary. *Sometime we can have all the right connections at church and a theological vocabulary about God and Jesus, but we do not have **Jesus!*** - as a living presence in our lives, as the first and most important person in our lives. As noted in Paul’s writing, the goal is a process. Paul says that he does not feel that he has really obtained the full measure of Christ’s power in his life, but he presses on toward the “goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (verse 14)

As Fred Craddock says in his commentary, It is not fully clear what Paul means by “the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ”, but Paul is probably speaking of the call to faith. And a call to faith and call to ministry are not separated in Pauline thought. Certainly it is the fundamental conviction of the church that in one’s baptism one is called to discipleship to Jesus Christ – that means our foundational call in life as a Christian is to ministry and service of Jesus Christ. This foundational call has two wings - a call within the body of Christ, the church and a vocational call out in the world.

As we journey in Lent, there is no better time to reflect on our particular call(s).

“All Christians are considered to have a call to what is commonly termed ‘the priesthood of all believers;’ all are expected to use their lives so as to reveal the grace of the Holy Spirit working through them.” Kathleen Norris

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Frederick Buechner

“When we work deep down in our soul, it is like a river running in us – joy!” Rumi

PRAYER: O God of our lives, may Jesus’ life, sufferings, and resurrection be the prize we seek for our lives. Lead us in this Lenten season to find the joy of a surrendered life to Jesus. In His name we pray, Amen.

Rev. Beth Braxton

A Leap to Faith

Ecclesiastes 7:1-14; Mark 9:30-41; and Philippians 3:15-4:1

Monday, March 14, 2016

...prosperity...[and] adversity...God has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them. – from Ecclesiastes 7:14

But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. – from Mark 9:32

...and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. – from Philippians 3:15

Faith is a struggle. And I have to admit that it has been a struggle to write this devotional since thinking about Lent has engendered a healthy dose of self-doubt. Being a former member of the Assemblies of God has something to do with these feelings as Lent was barely mentioned and never observed during my time there. Add to this the fact that I have only recently been introduced to the Reformed/Presbyterian branch of Christendom and a part of me feels like an imposter. Simply put, while I may partially “know” Lent in my mind, I cannot say for sure how strongly I *feel* it in my heart and *sense* it in my soul.

Hints of struggle and doubt can be discerned in the Bible passages dedicated for today. The Book of Ecclesiastes is haunted by doubt in various guises. Throughout this text we are presented with expressions such as “vain,” “futile,” “empty,” “meaningless,” “fleeting,” so on and so forth. And as the epigraph from Ecclesiastes 7:14 indicates, human knowledge is always already *limited*. In Mark 9:30-32 we also find threads of uncertainty when Jesus foretells again of his death and resurrection to his hesitant and perplexed disciples. And in Philippians 3:15 Paul explicitly engages the motif of doubt, assuring the saints of Philippi that “God will reveal” in this as well.

While on the surface Philippians seems to offer the most positive spin on doubt, when closely read together all of today’s Bible verses allow us to glimpse within doubt something productive and not simply destructive. As a force of *questioning*, doubt refuses the notion that one-dimensional ideas are adequate responses to the fractal problems we face personally and globally. This connects in some ways to the “vulnerable vigilance” that the theologian Douglas John Hall has insisted must be the *thoughtful* basis for a truly astute, sincere, and *humble* theology of the cross. Doubt can be viewed, from this perspective, as the fertile ground in which thought may take root.

To *truly* think is, as Socrates once declared, to know that we know nothing. The secret to this familiar paradox hinges, I suggest, on the question of *faith*. Not a blind and dogmatic belief. But instead something along the lines of what the Danish writer, philosopher, and theologian Søren Kierkegaard had in mind: a leap *to* faith. For Kierkegaard, faith is a continual risk. We must choose to risk holding on to what he calls “objective uncertainty” (doubt) with the personal “passion of the infinite.” For me this means, in part, facing head-on the emptiness and the meaninglessness rendered in Ecclesiastes. It is in those desolate spaces and lonely times when things seem utterly meaningless where God *is*. God dwells in doubt. As 2 Corinthians 12:9 reminds us, God’s “grace is sufficient...for [God’s] power is made perfect in weakness.” We should note that the word “power” in this passage is translated from the Greek *dynamis*. In contrast to *energeia* (power in action), *dynamis* connotes capacity, ability and, I would suggest, *potentiality*. Weakness, emptiness, meaninglessness. Nowhere and at no other time is God’s power (*dynamis*) and thus our strength made more *possible*.

Imagine a cherry blossom in the moment it begins to bloom. As the petals unfurl there is an empty space that opens up between the petals and across the face of the flower. It is in this *emptiness* that we witness the utter *fullness* of life. Perhaps it is here that we can begin to hear again the Socratic dictum above. Perhaps it is here where we may continue the beautiful struggle of nourishing our faith with doubt. And perhaps it is here that we begin to see what it takes to live the *good* life: the first must be last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35).

Joon Choi

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

Tuesday, March 15th

I told Miriam I'd write this reflection because I knew it'd be a good spiritual discipline for me, but I didn't know how true that would be! May God's Word speak to you with the gravity with which it spoke to me....

Ecclesiastes is often remembered for the wisdom, "*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven*" (Ecc. 3:1), made popular in the Pete Seeger song, "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)." As I meditate on these three passages from different places in the Bible, written by different authors at different times in history, I am keenly aware of how true this concept of seasons of life is for the people of the different eras of the Bible and for my own life (and yours). And I am immensely grateful for the grace God provides according to each season.

1 Corinthians 9:24 says, "*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*" So much of my life has been spent in training and in running—and there are good reasons for these seasons. Paul reminds us of the import of the work of God and our critical role in being God's hands and feet. There is everlasting purpose for the work that we do when we care for God's people and we should not take lightly our call as God's disciples.

1 Corinthians 9:23 gives Paul's work as a model for us to follow: "*I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*" Read this Scripture to see lots of beautiful examples of how he strives to relate to people! We too are called to serve others, and to do so with great zeal!

Yet for me, and perhaps some of you other Type A personalities out there—for which there seem to be many in this church!—I need to be reminded that this is just one of the seasons of life that God has designed for us. Fortunately, Ecclesiastes does just that, "*So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun (8:14).*"

You'd think this would be the easiest part of Scripture to follow! But for many of us, including myself, we are so compelled, so pushed, so driven to do the work of God (alongside our own selfish desires too of course), that we often forget to relax and enjoy life and, when we finally do try to relax, we find it quite difficult! Yet what is life in God if it is not meant for joy?! God gives us abundant grace—grace to live in joy and peace, and seasons for rest amidst the seasons of intense running.

God, thank you for speaking to us through your Word and continuing to teach us about Your Ways. Thank you for providing the richness of different seasons of life; for creating us for such and for knowing us well enough to know how good it feels to cycle through them. Help us to know what this season of Lent is for us. Give us the wisdom to discern our own seasons and then the energy to run with zeal sometimes and also peace to sit, eat, drink, and be glad sometimes. Amen.

Molly Lauer



March 16, 2016

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

Mark 10: 1-16

1 Corinthians 15:20-26

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

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

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

Stacey Gagosian



Ecclesiastes 11: 1-8
Mark 10: 17-31
2 Corinthians 4: 1-12

Thursday, March 17

A Call to Action

Ecclesiastes 11: 1-8 is dubbed “A Call to Action” by one bible commentary, which must be what attracted me to these verses. I tend to be better at action than contemplation. Yet throughout these verses the call to action is woven into an ongoing awareness of God’s divine mystery, represented by uncertainty throughout life. Maintaining our will to take action and be productive, while recognizing the ephemeral, temporary nature of each of our human lives, seems one of our toughest balancing acts.

Verse 1 is a familiar one: “Cast your bread upon the waters,” which instructs us to take action with our resources (time, money, wealth, energy). We need to part with these things and send them out into the world to do good, both in our vocation and our benevolence. Be decisive and take risks, and we will reap blessings in return (“after many days you will get it back.”)

The next verses highlight the uncertainty that permeates much of life, not realizing when a disaster may strike. Despite that, and even actively knowing that, we need to live our lives boldly. “Whoever observes the wind will not sow, and whoever regards the clouds will not reap” is my favorite line from these Ecclesiastes verses. To merely observe conditions and weigh choices, without getting to the action step, is no way to live. On the other hand, we really “don’t know (understand) the work of God, who makes everything,” and even while we may enjoy our lives and the sweet light we may experience, the darkness of our inevitable death lies ahead.

Reading the newspaper this week I was struck by a woman’s story about her brain tumor. She was found to have a very small, benign but growing tumor, but decided not to pursue surgery or treatment until 10 years later. Due to risk of surgery she decided initially to wait, and live with the tumor. This courageous decision falls within my definition of “action.” She said her decision required a tolerance for uncertainty and willingness to live with something that could be a ticking time bomb. Knowing there are no guarantees of how life will go on, she pursued an active life despite the uncertainty. She said that she successfully found “an equilibrium—that steady place between effort and surrender – which is the key to watchful waiting.”

That balancing of our efforts and action with genuine acceptance that God’s mysterious plan holds we-know-not-what, I think is the lesson in Ecclesiastes.

Prayer: God, give me the faith to act boldly and joyfully throughout my life, while knowing my life is fleeting and your Divine plan is beyond my knowing.

Martha Davis

Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:14
Mark 10:32-45
2 Corinthians 4:1-12

Friday, March 18, 2016

Servants in the Snow

What does it mean to have and exhibit the divine within us? When I see what God would have us be in the actions of others, I try to note it, to remember it, to use it as a guide in living my own life.

I caught a glimpse of Christ-like behavior in mid-January when, like so many others in the Washington metropolitan area, I was surprised by a snow storm that was supposed to bring no more than a dusting short days ahead of the arrival in the region of an historic blizzard, now dubbed Snowzilla. Driving from my place of work in Alexandria on Wednesday, January 20 at about 8:00 p.m., I was startled by the snow shower, but thought I could stop at the grocery store at Spout Run and Lee Highway in Arlington, buy supplies for the big storm, and easily make it home to Falls Church in reasonable time.

The trip from Alexandria to the Giant near Route 66 proved to be no problem. I parked, shopped for about 45 minutes, and returned to my car to see the roads clogged with vehicles on all the surrounding streets. With 66 at a standstill, I decided to take my chances on Lee Highway. WTOP confirmed my decision, informing me that either an accident or a snowplow had severely hampered travel on the six-lane highway—a problem that persisted into the wee hours of the next morning. Traffic was creeping along on Route 29, but at least we were moving.

Until we didn't. The fine snow had covered the cold untreated pavement, and the pressure of countless wheels had turned it into a thin sheet of ice. Cars inched along and regularly lost traction, slipping from side to side when drivers applied their brakes. I made it to Harrison Street by about 10:00 p.m., averaging 1 mile per hour, when everything came to a hard stop. It took me a little while and then direct experience to realize that the trouble ahead was the gentle sloping and now slick hills between George Mason Drive and Sycamore Street.

The car in front of me lost control and spun around so that its headlights were facing mine. I remained stopped a good distance away and was considering what to do when a young man appeared at the side of the road. He walked to the skewed car, beckoned to the driver to roll down her window, and spoke with her. He then began pushing the car, slowly turning the vehicle around so that it again pointed in the right direction. The man did this at no small danger to himself; at one point he lost his footing and nearly fell beneath the car.

Three or four more young men joined him, and over and over again, they helped other motorists navigate the downward slope of the hill, physically pushing their cars along and later spreading rock salt and sand in front of their wheels. The line of traffic finally made progress, but only because of their efforts.

I rolled my window down to thank them: "You are doing a great job." "We're trying," one man replied. Another ignored my thanks and used the open window to issue instructions: "Don't brake hard. Keep your wheels straight. Remember to use the momentum you gain from going down this hill to get up the next one." I nodded and drove on, finally making it home by midnight. Had it not been for these good Samaritans, I might have spent the night in my car.

To be sure, that night and the challenge it presented represent what a young friend of mine refers to as “First World problems.” I have a car, I have food, I have a home with power that we did not lose that Wednesday or in the days that followed. I am a “have,” not a “have not.” And the problem wasn’t so severe; so what if I had to wait in the car for daylight and rising temperatures?

Nonetheless, I found it remarkable that these young men would give of themselves to help others navigate the icy roads that evening and at some risk and certainly discomfort to themselves. They could have gone home to dinner or repaired to a local bar for a drink with friends. Instead, they acted selflessly, and their example influenced others. I only heard one car horn during my three-hour, three-mile journey.

I doubt that these young people thought about the verse for this day in Lent from Ecclesiastes: *“Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.”* Or from the Gospel of Mark when Jesus says to his disciples, *“whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”* I am certain they did not think of themselves as *“treasure in clay jars”* as Paul and Timothy wrote to the Corinthians: *“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.”* Still, to me, these young men acted entirely in keeping with these scriptures. They put others ahead of themselves. They displayed the warmth of God on a cold winter night and heartened all of us who needed their help.

A prayer: Dear Lord, may we follow the example of Jesus, the Christ, becoming servants to others and may we do this in all things—large and small.

~Edith Holmes Snyder



Saturday, March 19, 2016

Zechariah 9: 9-12

Mark 10: 46-52

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

Have Faith

*Once all villagers decided to pray for rain. On the day of prayer,
all the people gathered, but only one boy came with an umbrella.
That's faith.*

We've been praying for Peace on Earth for years, decades, centuries, millennia. Still, maybe more than ever, that prayer has special meaning. We feel the uncertainty of the times all around us as the world becomes more dangerous, with some bent on destruction. Even people who worship God can't agree on the right way, the acceptable way, to worship and pray. Our prayers seem futile.

However, we know from today's scriptures, that isn't the case. Zechariah tells us, "Lo, your king comes to you, . . . and he shall command peace to the nations." The Apostle Mark, through the story of Blind Bartimaeus, tells us that what we need most is faith: "Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?'" After Bartimaeus asks to have his sight restored, Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well."

Faith. Do we have it? Do we have enough? Are we asking the right things, praying the right prayers? During Lent we examine our prayers, our relationships with God and Jesus and each other, and our desires for our lives and this world. Peace on Earth. For all people. Everywhere. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians, "Grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart."

Prayer:

Lord, Grant that we not only look at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen, that is eternal. Grant us faith as we wait and yearn for peace. Grant us wisdom and discernment in our prayers and in our relationships with others. Grant us grace as we extend grace to others and show your love. Thy will be done. Amen

Kris Golden

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Luke 19:28-40
Philippians 2:5-1

Sunday, March 20, 2016

I find the scripture readings for this Palm Sunday a little peculiar. We usually celebrate on Palm Sunday. Often the children lead the choir and clergy down the center aisle, waiving their palm branches as they come. But except for the Luke passage, which is the familiar entry into Jerusalem, the other passages all have a theme involving sorrow.

The Old Testament passages emphasize the kind of sufferings Jesus was about to endure. The Isaiah selection is known as the third of the four Suffering Servant passages, in which the Servant states "I gave my back to those who struck me" but ends "It is the Lord God who helps me. Who will declare me guilty?" The Psalm wails "I am the scorn of all my adversaries. . . .They scheme together against me; they plot to take my life.' Yet it ends "But I trust in you, O Lord: I say, 'You are my God.' "

I'm sure that Jesus knew what was going to happen during what we call Holy Week. He must have known that he would be arrested, tried, whipped, and killed on the cross. Evidently the disciples (as usual) didn't understand what was going on. Yet Jesus did decide to ride in on a donkey, as did so many of the ancient kings of Israel approaching their crowning. He must have expected the many pilgrim visitors in the city to celebrate the little parade he presented.

The Philippians passage combines the exaltation Jesus deserved as God with the suffering he endured as human. In our Bible it is written as a hymn, whether composed by Paul or common in his day is not known. It presents fully the paradox of the Christ being part of the Godhead but also fully human. Jesus was born; he was a helpless baby. He humbled himself to the equivalent of a slave, the lowest level in Roman society. He accepted death on a cross, the cruelest execution. Then in the resurrection he was "highly exaltedso that every knee should bend.. .. and every voice confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Prayer: Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice.

Psalm 130



Phil Hanna

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

Monday, March 21

Isaiah: 42:6-7 (NIV) “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

Philippians: 12-14 (*The Message*) “I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don’t get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I’m off and running, and I’m not turning back.”

I am struck by the promise in Isaiah that God would send a light for all people—to open eyes and to free us from prison. Some prisons are physical. Some prisons are emotional. Some prisons are spiritual. Sometimes people imprison us. Sometimes traditions imprison us. Sometimes we imprison ourselves. God promises to send a light that frees captives of all kinds, in these verses from Isaiah.

In Philippians, Paul reflects on the prison from which he has escaped—the one of his traditions and narrow-mindedness—not something he has earned through good and righteous behavior, but through the love of Christ, “Who has so wondrously reached out for me.”

Prayer

Lord thank you for the freedom from the prisons of our lives—freedom which is not earned, which can never be earned, but given freely through our loving Lord. Make us grateful, Lord, and mindful, that this is also the way that we should love and forgive, as you have loved and forgiven us—making us free. Amen

Laura Asiala



Tuesday March 22 2016

Stretching Post

1 Corinthians 1:18 – 31

Between mile markers 13 and 13.5 on the W&OD bike trail, a cross was erected about 12 years ago. The cross is about 5 feet tall and both the horizontal and vertical bars are of thick, unfinished wood. Etched into the horizontal bar are the words Stretching Post. No notes or clues tell us whether we are to stretch physically, mentally, or spiritually. No notes tell us who placed this cross in that place or who etched those words into it. But there are bare spots in the ground in front of it and on the sides of it where many have leaned into it to stretch.

This cross sits alongside the trail, a couple of feet off it. Next to it is a small bench for resting and a small, covered kiosk where posted notes alert us to community news, lost dogs or keys, and where random, single gloves that have been found are sometimes hung.

It seems appropriate to me that there is a bench next to the cross. Who among us doesn't need to sit down when we consider the complete inappropriateness of Jesus' humiliating death on a cross---a means of death meant to convey "ugliness, contempt, weakness, loser, criminal, slave"* . . . those thought to be too contemptible even to contemplate.

In *The Way of the Heart*", Henri Nouwen writes that "our secular or false self . . . is fabricated, as Thomas Merton says, by social compulsions It points to the need for ongoing and increasing affirmation."

In an election year, we see in overdrive that need for ongoing and increasing affirmation. It is not only those seeking election who have that driving need. We the voters are the drivers of that national need. Yet Jesus' birth, life, and death all point us to the fact that God sees life and us very differently than this.

These verses in 1 Corinthians remind us that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (vv 27-29).

Maybe we've lost our sense of shame. But shame, humiliation, self-awareness are what Lent brings us back to. To the cross, to self-reflection, to repentance, and to rest.

The Stretching Post cross on the W&OD trail is within walking distance of my house. I have walked that part of the trail almost daily for over 35 years now. I have encountered God on that trail many times in many different forms. And I've encountered God many times and in many forms on the streets of D.C. and in the Radcliffe Room, both of which are also stretching posts for me.

I don't know who erected that cross on the trail near my house but every day I am thankful for it. All of us need a stretching post and I don't know of a better one than the cross. These 1 Corinthians verses are also useful stretching posts. And all of us need a bench occasionally, right there next to the cross and to the kiosk that announces community news and lost items.

---Bonnie Davis

**The People's New Testament Commentary*, Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock

QUICKLY!

How do *you* pull off a band-aid – slowly and cautiously, or let her rip? In today's Scripture, Jesus favors the latter, and made me feel more fully His humanity. It is a passage of almost unfathomable pathos. He knew he was to be betrayed, and by whom, and He wanted it over with. "What you are going to do, do quickly."

The entire setting of this passage reflects the intimacy of that last gathering of the close-knit band of followers, as Jesus reveals that one of this brotherhood will betray Him. It must have been unthinkable to the disciples that the bonds they had forged in love and challenge and common purpose were about to be sundered by one of their own, and that Jesus knew who it would be. "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."

Surely, at that point everyone present must have immediately begun speculating who. Peter beckoned John, who was lying close to Jesus, to find out. In His typical way, Jesus answered not with a name, but with a circumstance, "he to whom I shall give this morsel..." and gave it to Judas, telling him "What you are going to do, do quickly". Whether this admonition was intended to get Himself past this horrific act with minimal angst, or to ensure that Judas would actually follow through in his own role in this tragedy, is not explicit. My Wycliffe Bible Commentary says that "from this hour Satan was fully in control", a phrase I find troubling. Is Satan ever "fully" in control? But certainly, the die was cast, and Jesus, despite his own eagerness to have His sacrifice quickly behind Him, was on the path to His purchase of our Salvation.

Prayer: Lord God, thank you, for not shrinking from the terrible sacrifice you required of Jesus for the salvation of Your mortal daughters and sons. **Amen.**

Mary Krug

God's Steadfast Love ... Our Faithful Response

Jeremiah 31:3-34
Psalm 89
Luke 22:7-20
Hebrews 10:16-25

March 24, 2016

A meal in an upper room. During this season of Lent, we have journeyed with Jesus to Jerusalem. And today, we find ourselves before a meal in an upper room. The table is set. The food, prepared. In the midst of community, we sit beside Jesus and beside others who are much like ourselves. As the bread is about to be broken and the cup to be shared, Jesus knows the events to follow. And so do we. Denial. Betrayal. Doubt. Forgiveness. Mercy. Redemption.

And so, when the hour came, Jesus took his place at the table and the apostles were with him. And after giving thanks, as the bread was broken and the cup shared, Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." And every time we break the bread and share the cup, we are to remember what Jesus said and what he did, both prior to and following that night in an upper room.

On this Maundy Thursday, in the scripture before us, we are reminded of God's steadfast love ... an everlasting love, a love that endures forever. Through God's grace, it's a love that we receive without solicitation and without a litmus test. A love, we receive despite ... despite that, at times, we deny, we betray, we doubt. It's a love affirmed in the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s *A Brief Statement of Faith*: "*Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal son home, God is faithful still.*"

And while we are redeemed and reconciled by God's grace and love alone, the scripture before us today suggests a faithful response. In Jeremiah, it's shouts of joy and songs of gladness. It's the shaking of tambourines and the dancing of merrymakers. For the Psalmist, it's the praising of the heavens and the exulting of the people. For the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, it's holding fast to a hope without wavering, to an encouragement of one another, and to a provoking of others to love and to good deeds. Again, we see a response clearly spelled out in the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s *A Brief Statement of Faith*: "*In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives.*"

Traditionally, John 13:34 has been read on Maundy Thursday. It's the beginning of Jesus' farewell discourse and occurs following Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet and foretelling of his betrayal. It's a faithful response.

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

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

God of Grace, on this day and every day, may we bless our food, give thanks, and remember what Jesus said and what he did. And, on this day and every day, may we be reminded of your steadfast love. And may we respond faithfully, with joy, to it. May we seek to be a reconciling and justice-seeking peoples; striving for a better world, for the attainment of the beloved community, and for the Kingdom of God on earth this day and beyond. Amen.

- Mark A. Zaineddin

Friday, March 25th 2016

Good Friday Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

John 18:1-19:42 Hebrews 4:14-15, 5:7-9

Considering Good Friday.

One might ask, "What's so good about it?" Don't we commemorate Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday? Where's the good in that? The citations from Isaiah 52 for this day affirm that Jesus would "prosper" and "be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high." A good presentiment for the litany of horrors that follows first in the 53rd chapter. Jesus is "despised and rejected", "oppressed, and he was afflicted". He was "wounded for **our** transgressions, crushed for **our** iniquities". "They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, **although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.**"

The 22nd Psalm also is a cry for mercy and deliverance. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" It resolves, though, into a declaration of a covenant with God, obedience to which is the path to deliverance. "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." "You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!" This seems a good plan, though at risk of being empty evangelism if not followed up on with actions and sacrifice.

As St. John tells the story of the arrest, trial, condemnation, execution and burial of Jesus it becomes clear that at the precipice of betrayal, injustice, humiliation, pain and death Jesus maintains an equilibrium of justice and forgiveness. No self-righteous claims or protestations of innocence, rather gentle reaffirmation of purpose and forgiving of those in the process of deeply wronging him. Remember Malchus whose ear Simon Peter cut off angrily in what he thought to be the protection of the master? Before restoring the slave's ear Jesus says, "Put your sword back into its sheath. **Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?**" It's much easier of course to empathize with Peter's rash striking violence than with Jesus' protecting and restorative way.

I remember asking my mother why Jesus did that. Even more so, why didn't he just pass through the crowd and go his way as he had before. My mother of course said that he had important work to do for us and he had the courage to follow through. No empty evangelism in him. If we refer back to the latter sections of Isaiah 53 and the 22nd Psalm we see the promise that motivates his ultimate sacrifice. "Out of his anguish he shall see right; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." And, "dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations." "To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him."

Lord, I pray for the courage and spiritual mindfulness to follow Jesus' example and to realize his lessons to me through deeds and not just words that I may be not an empty but a grateful evangelist.

"Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." Hebrews 5:8,9

Nathan Moon

Get Moving: Walk in Newness of Life

Exodus 14:10 to 15:18
Luke 24: 1-12
Romans 6: 3-11

Holy Saturday
March 26, 2016

Today we conclude our Lenten journey. What have we learned during these forty days of study, prayer and reflection? We have yearned for understanding, discernment of God's will for our lives, for peaceful and loving relationships among our family and friends, and among nations, and indeed with all creation, yea even to be an integral part of God's community. We have prayed for liberation from fear and attitudes or behavior that prevent us from experiencing the newness of life that God promises for us. The Scripture passages for today summarize God's transformative and redemptive plan and the dramatic actions to implement that plan.

Liberation from hopelessness: The Exodus story reminds us that God's people were liberated from slavery in spite of their stubbornness and reluctance to leave the relative security they knew under Pharaoh's oppressive reign. "Tell the Israelites to *get moving*," the Lord said to Moses when Moses was complaining that the people he was attempting to lead out of slavery were afraid to rely upon God's promise of freedom. The story reveals that God motivated and led Moses to provide necessary leadership and also sensationally acted to part the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to escape the military might that was pursuing them.

From fear and an empty tomb to fullness of life: Even more dramatic and startling than the Red Sea story is the account of spice-bearing women arriving at the place where Jesus' dead body had been laid before the Sabbath began, to find an empty tomb. "Why do you look for the living among the dead," they are asked. Neither they nor the apostles to whom they report know how to answer the question. "Nonsense," respond the apostles. And of course, until one understands and is willing to act upon what God is doing and has done, both the Red Sea and empty tomb stories are nonsense.

But Paul interprets the story of the empty tomb for us. It symbolizes the triumph of God's life-giving and life-sustaining graciousness over the power of sinfulness and death. It is our baptism that records and reflects the commitment (in the Presbyterian tradition, if baptized as infants, by our parents and the congregation, for us) to live a transformed, converted life, one that is free from the power of alienation from God (or sinfulness). The tomb is empty as a manifestation of God's nature and God's love for humanity so that *"we too can walk in newness of life."* Each of us is free to function as an integral part of God's community.

Tomorrow we have the opportunity joyously to celebrate God's conquering the powers of sin and death so that all of God's creation can experience God's redemptive love by loving one another and the rest of creation too. Dare we reject this dramatic and startling act by our fearfulness and nonsensical behavior? Paul tells us that the empty tomb reveals that God so loves us that God calls us to be "alive for God in Christ Jesus"!

Do we respond with Easter's "Halleluiah" or Saturday's "Nonsense"?

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

– John H. Quinn, Jr.



Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; John 20:1-18; Acts 10:34-43

March 27, 2016

The Lord has Risen! The Lord has Risen Indeed!

In the Isaiah passage for today, we are given a picture of paradise; where pain and suffering cease, and natural enemies like wolf and lamb eat side by side. However could it be, that life could have harmony, no end, no pain, only joy?

By some mystery, Jesus comes to the world as God but also man, feeling our pain, grieving our losses, laughing, celebrating, loving his friends. And he is persecuted. On the cross, he forgives those who have unfairly hurt and persecuted him. His enemies believe they have won.

And then Easter arrives. The stone is rolled back; Jesus is no longer entombed. He is free, and through his resurrection, so are we. We are free!

But what exactly are we free from? How are we free, in this world, where indeed babies do die too soon, and women and men don't live out the fullness of years; where enemies can feel more common than friends? The world is a broken place.

As I think of Easter and what it means to live in a post-Easter world, I think of those who have practiced radical forgiveness. Many in our world have been subject to the worst kinds of evil. Those who survived the Holocaust or any number of history's genocides; those who have been wrongly punished and sentenced to die, like Walter McMillian; even those of us who have been hurt and wounded by bullies or cowards; the cross is for us. The Resurrection is for us. In the Resurrection, we can say along with Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." In Resurrection, we can say, we cannot forgive, but teach us how to forgive, give us the heart to forgive. In choosing life, in asking to see what God sees in someone, in praying for justice, we begin to be free. And in understanding the Resurrection, might we see that it's for all, not only for those who have wronged us, but for us as well, imperfect as we are?

In writing this, I think of the families of the nine men and women killed in a Charleston church last June. Family members of the nine killed showed up at Dylann Roof's bond hearing. There would be many things I might have wanted to say had my loved one been killed that night. Through tears, sobs, and through test of wills, these families offered mercy and forgiveness: *"You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."* *"We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."* *"Hate won't win."*

How often it feels that Hate may have won. Today, remember as Easter people, it has not won. Forgiveness wins. Life wins. Love wins. Even when the evidence seems contrary, love wins. As we forgive and are forgiven, resurrection comes.

A prayer: Lord, please let me see what you see in my brothers and sisters. Help me understand their brokenness and extend grace. And please forgive me, when I fall short of your picture of life and love, grace and mercy. Thank you for allowing us to be Easter people, resurrection people.

Kate Hays Olson