Lent 2018

The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.
(www.nyapc.org)
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<td>Wednesday, February 14</td>
<td><strong>Ash Wednesday</strong> Service, 7:00 pm, Sanctuary, Supper-PMH, 6-6:45 pm</td>
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<td><strong>Sunday</strong>, February 18</td>
<td>First Sunday in Lent – Lenten Class 10am led by Rev. Gench</td>
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<td><strong>Sunday</strong>, February 25</td>
<td>Second Sunday in Lent- Lenten Class 10am led by Rev. Gench</td>
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<td><strong>Sunday</strong>, March 4</td>
<td>Third Sunday in Lent, Communion Lenten Class 10am led by Rev. Gench</td>
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<td><strong>Sunday</strong>, March 11</td>
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<td>Saturday, March 17</td>
<td>In-Town Solitude Retreat, 8:45am-12:30pm (meditation, labyrinth)</td>
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<td><strong>Sunday</strong>, March 18</td>
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<td><strong>Sunday</strong>, March 25</td>
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<td>7:15 am Sunrise Service</td>
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<td>8:45 am Worship Service</td>
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<td>9:45 am Breakfast ($7)</td>
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<td>10:40 am Special Music</td>
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Who says that religion is humorless? In my lifetime, I can't remember Ash Wednesday ever falling on Valentine's Day. How do we experience ASHES and HEARTS on the same day?

Joel speaks of the Day of the Lord--a horrible time initially, filled with darkness and foreboding, fasting, weeping, and sorrow--ASHES. However, if we return to the Lord with all our HEARTS, all will be resolved in the final judgment, and God's kingdom will reign forever.

Matthew's passage is from the Sermon on the Mount, particularly where Jesus is instructing his followers on how to practice their religion. In contrast to Joel's vision, Jesus tells us that when we are following Him we should pray and give to the poor "without a sad face" (or ASHES). For "where your treasure is, there your HEART will be also."

In one of my favorite Scripture passages, St. Paul tells the Corinthians that, as followers of Jesus, they will be "poor yet making many rich, having nothing but owning everything." ASHES and HEARTS. Christianity has many apparent contradictions, and yet we know them to be true as we test them out in our lives.

And so, this year we will observe Ash Wednesday and Valentine's on the same day. Let's see if we can make it work.

Ella Cleveland

p.s. Easter is on April 1
The scriptures seemed random and unrelated: a long story from Ezra about sending away foreign women and children; from Titus detailed instructions from Paul on the qualities of good leaders for a rebellious people; and finally from Luke the short parable from Jesus, on the Pharisee and the tax collector.

In Ezra, the exiles in Babylon were freed by King Darius to return to Judah. When they arrived, trying to survive, reassemble their diaspora into the nation of Israel, they found many Israelites before them had married women from surrounding tribes, and the women had borne children.

Ezra demanded all exiles assemble in Jerusalem, and he commanded the foreign women and children be sent away. The people agreed, but a heavy rain fell on them. The people said, we cannot do this in a downpour, let us appoint judges to do this over time, according to law. The cases were investigated and settled in three months.

So, in the chaos and stress of reassembling Israel after many years in exile, according to Ezra survival depended on defining “us” the Israelites vs. “them” the tribes surrounding Israel, foreign women and children. The tribal instinct is and always has been powerful, the sudden decision to exile the foreign women and children seems cruel and barbaric, emotional, without mercy. Perhaps God sent mercy in the heavy rain to temper the anti-foreign hysteria, to slow the process, surging to xenophobic riot.

In Titus, Paul preached to Titus in Crete, giving him the qualities needed in the church elders to be appointed in every town. Paul instructed that these elders must be faithful, blameless, with children who believe, not violent or quick-tempered, honest, hospitable, holy and disciplined.

Paul contrasted these fine qualities “us” with “them” the Cretans. They are full of meaningless talk and deception, seeking dishonest gain, always liars, evil brutes, and lazy gluttons. Both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good. Wow, talk about xenophobic stereotyping! Paul could identify nothing of value in the Cretans. “Us,” the righteous, virtuous elders to be appointed; “them,” the Cretans, evil brutes with corrupted minds and consciousness. Paul condemned a whole people, not individuals, his stereotypes seem like modern propaganda. What words were used to describe the Germans and Japanese in WWII, the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War, or minorities in the USA today?

Finally, thankfully, after two long troublesome scriptures, we come to the short simple parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

However, we cannot shrug off troublesome Ezra and Titus. And here in Luke the light of Christ, the great teacher of all, shines upon us and into our heart. For, we think, surely and truly the Pharisee is “us.” He is not a robber, an evildoer, an adulterer. He is not even like the tax collector, a ‘them.” Jesus spoke to people who were confident of their own righteousness “us” and looked down on everyone else, “them.”

But Jesus surprises us. Jesus knew the tax collector was truly repentant and had asked God honestly and humbly for mercy and forgiveness, while the Pharisee was self-satisfied. And the tax collector “them,” not “us,” went home justified before God.

Jesus said all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Or in other words, judge not, or if you must judge, judge humbly, walk humbly with Jesus the teacher, for in truth, “we” are “them,” “they” are “us.” Jesus in divine wisdom, was sent to bring us into a new time, a new world, searching for His higher truth, above and beyond the power of tribalism, above and beyond Ezra, and Titus and even Paul.

David Powell
I once read an interview with Bruce Springsteen in The New York Times. Springsteen said, “It was very exciting for me, being in this place of my life, to go back to those forms which are filled with that sense of forever and put finiteness in it.”

Springsteen was speaking of musical forms. The forms I continually go back to and wrestle with are spiritual forms.

Today’s passage in Luke interweaves foreverseness and finiteness. Three would-be disciples interact with Jesus. The first voluntarily steps up to Jesus and says, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus responds by saying that he has no place to call home, no place to sit down at the end of the day to eat and rest, no place to sleep at night. There is silence in the Bible after Jesus’ comment. Presumably the would-be disciple is rethinking her impetuous enthusiasm.

Jesus says to another, “Follow me.” This would-be disciple says, “Okay, but first I have to go home for my dad’s funeral.” Jesus presumably moves on --- and the would-be disciple presumably moves back into the routine of his life.

A third would-be disciple volunteers, saying, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say goodbye to my family.” Jesus presumably moves on and comments that “[n]o one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

This is the intersection where forever and finite meet for each of us.

When we hear Jesus’ voice --- often felt through a tug at the heart or a stinging of unbidden tears --- we may be moved to volunteer, to jump in with both feet. We are moved by the forever moment to forget about the finite, but the finite isn’t easily forgotten.

The finite is what and who we are. The finite is what and who we struggle against as we seek to be fit for and help bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

The three people in today’s passage in Luke are people like me. They want to say yes, but they want to say it with qualifiers. Or maybe they want to ask questions and get answers before they commit further.

None of the three want to go back and do evil deeds or turn their backs on Jesus’ way of life. All struggle with the reality of Jesus’ way of life and of Jesus’ expectations. “Sleeping on the desert floor with no supper and no shower or coffee the next morning is way outside my comfort zone. I just can’t do that.” “I have obligations I’ve already made to my family.” “They’ll worry about me if I just leave and don’t say goodbye.” Each of us can add to the list of “I’m coming, but . . . .”

Lent is the time for each of us to think prayerfully about Jesus’ call on our lives and his steadfast love for us. It is the time for us to confront our comfort zones, to discard the inappropriate things that keep us from following, and to begin to formulate our response to Jesus as we move toward Easter. Maybe before we encounter the resurrected Christ on Easter morning, we must first encounter ourselves at our deepest levels. Or maybe it is only by encountering Christ on his way to the cross that we encounter ourselves at our deepest levels and ask what it is that keeps us from following Jesus.

--- Bonnie Davis
It has been said that when the British Army marched out of Yorktown in 1781 to surrender to the American rebels and their French allies, the British musicians played a ditty called “The World Turned Upside Down.” The British soldiers and leaders were staring a new reality in the face and they did not particularly like what they saw. The advice given in the tune’s refrain was, “Yet let’s be content, and the times lament, you see the world turn’d upside down.”

I have a lot of sympathy for those British soldiers. It’s not easy to accept the notion of drastic change in our world. I like my life to be under control, in order, everything in its place. Drastic change is something to be feared, avoided or simply disregarded if possible. We see disruption around us – societal, political, economic, religious – and it makes us very nervous. Not all change is good. It is difficult to be content.

And yet, as Christians, we seem to be called to support the drastic change God wants to work in the world. Robert Cady Saler, in his book on the theology of the cross says that, “…part of the message of the gospel is that the world’s way of accounting that which is valuable and that which is to be despised is in the process of being turned upside down.” Yes, God is also intent on turning things upside down. And God’s intent does not seem to be limited to the “religious” aspects of life, however one defines that term. God wants to impact all aspects of God’s creation.

Where do we fit into this picture? Am I as uncomfortable with God’s changes as I am with other sorts of changes? In today’s reading Nehemiah is a lowly cupbearer to a king in Babylon but he is sent by God’s grace with the king’s imprimatur to Jerusalem to upend the social order and rebuild the city because it is God’s will that these things be done. Nehemiah knows what God wants him to do. In Titus, Christians are told to be constantly mindful that they are saved by God’s grace such that they may “keep their minds constantly occupied in doing good works.” They have a mission. In Luke Jesus rejects the enticements of the devil. Jesus has more important work to do.

In our suffering world there is much work to be done. We too gave a mission. Missions can be institutional or personal. They may not always be completely obvious or comfortable. In doing God’s work we may have to resist enticements which would lead us in other directions. Can we discern our mission? Prayer, perseverance and alertness to God’s will would seem to be in order.

It is Lent. We contemplate a crucifixion and a resurrection which will indeed turn the world upside down. But God’s work is not yet done. How can we help?

Steve Dewhurst
Thus saith the Lord:

**According to Genesis:** Noah, because I love all creatures throughout the Earth, I now promise that I will not again punish my creatures with floods or other “natural disasters.” The rainbow is the eternal symbol of this promise.

**According to the Psalmist:** I am sovereign of the universe, and I have empowered my faithful people anew so that they can act joyfully as my agents to beautify the poor and resist the rulers’ oppressive acts, thus praising me by working to create and maintain a just social order in accord with my will.

**According to Mark:** I still love you people in spite of your continued disobedience, and I remember my promise not to destroy my creation, so I will try again to show you how to recognize my sovereignty over the universe and praise me by your faithful obedience. I have sent my disciple, John, to call you to repent from your disobedience, and I am sending my Son, Jesus, to show you through his life style and actions how to live in harmony with all my creation and what recognizing my sovereignty and praising me means in your own life style and actions.

**According to Peter:** Obedience to my will, persistent recognition of my sovereignty over the universe, will set you apart from those who prefer to honor and obey those who disobey me and fail to recognize my ultimate sovereignty over the universe. Obedience to my will can result in your suffering and experiencing hardship. Jesus is the model of one who suffered for my sake, in spite of, perhaps even because of, my love for him. I also love you and am with you in all of your suffering experiences. Just as the rainbow is a symbol of my promise to Noah, baptism is a symbol of my promise to you: you are loved and redeemed just as Jesus is loved and with me forever, having overcome the evil and suffering he endured.

**Prayer:** Gracious and loving God, thank you for sending Jesus to show all your people how to honor your sovereignty over the universe by living faithfully, working for a just social order and beautifying the poor. Empower us daily to claim your promises to love and protect us and to resist the temptations that surround us. Amen.

-- John H. Quinn, Jr.
Have you noticed that this Nehemiah text has been quoted by preachers, pastors, politicians, government officials, and pundits quite a bit, and applications and interpretations of it published on the internet these past two years? In 2016, Pope Francis was traveling back to Rome from Mexico, where he urged the United States to address the “humanitarian crisis” on its southern border. He answered reporters’ questions about then candidate Trump’s proposals to halt illegal immigration saying, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the gospel.” Some were offended by the Pope’s statement, reading it as an inappropriate judgment of the candidate’s faith by the Pope. Some preachers, pastors, politicians and pundits responded by quoting this Nehemiah passage, interpreting it as blessing, or even commanding that God’s people build walls. Some of those quoting the Nehemiah passage in defense of border wall building were then and are now in some of the highest positions of responsibility and power in our government. Some appointees quoted the Nehemiah passage in their 2017 confirmation hearings and interviews, in defense of building a border wall. The debate about whether to build and fund the building of a wall continues to this day, as do the invocations of scripture in defense of it.

How attentive are you to quotations, interpretations, and use of scripture in the public square? Do you notice? Do you stop to consider how scripture is being read, interpreted, and used in the public square? Do you stop to consider whether those who strongly declare a particular understanding of scripture in support of a public policy prophetic, principled, or presumptuous? What does God call us to do in these situations? Do you think, pray, or study to try to develop your own understanding, with God’s help? Have you succeeded on occasion in developing your own view? And if so, and it differs with what others are saying or proclaiming in circles you frequent, on the internet, in the media, or in churches, what do you do? Do you try to find your own voice and speak out? Do you engage? If so, how? If not, why not?

Do we Christians have a special obligation to be attentive to the use of scripture in the public square, study the scriptures, and engage with others who invoke them? Do we listen for God’s call to critically listen to the use of scripture by others, and to engage and speak out when we feel God may be leading us to a different understanding, or to questions that should be explored with those who use scripture in ways different from our understanding? Do we bear a special responsibility as Christians to be good students and stewards of use of God’s word? What image of God, the Bible, and Christians do members of the public, children, adults, those of other faiths, the unchurched, etc. get, when strong pronouncements of particular Biblical understandings get widespread publicity in the public square, and go unchallenged or unanswered?

Does a pronouncement of a particular understanding by others or ourselves itself build a wall between people, or between people and God? How can we know whether we are being prophetic or presumptuous? Would a more sensitive engagement in discussion be more faithful and productive? How might God speak to us through our listening to others? How might God speak to others through discussion with us? Even as we seek to fulfill our call to faithful Biblical study seeking understanding and boldness to speak out, the Luke passage about the temptation of Jesus reminds us that, like Jesus, we must be vigilant against devilish temptation to our own hubris and power-seeking in this life. Or as Dr. Walter Brueggemann has put it, it is critically important in Biblical interpretation to sort out the God of fidelity, grace and transformation from the seductive gods of certitude that seek to preserve privilege, power, empire, and religious orthodoxy.

Dr. Brueggemann, in his NYAPC McClendon Scholar in Residence lectures and preaching in October 2017, encouraged us to read the Bible faithfully, and where necessary, critically against the dominant modes of economic, political, and cultural norms of our day. He gave us a different reading of Nehemiah. To study Nehemiah further, in addition to reading other meditations in this booklet, you might begin by listening or re-listening to Dr. Brueggemann’s sermon and lectures. You can find links to his October 2017 McClendon Scholar lectures and sermon on the NYAPC website.

Lord, give us ears to hear what you are saying to us, and to the churches, through Your word. Help us to faithfully study the Bible and listen for Your word for us today, through it, through Your Spirit, and in the voices of others. Help us to be attentive to hearing Your name and Your word used in the public square, keep us humble and vigilant in our critical evaluation, yet brave and bold in our engagement and our witness, as You give us understanding and voice. AMEN

Karen Mills
Strategic Clarity

February 20, 2018

- Nehemiah 5: 1-19
- Luke 4: 16-21
- Romans 5: 1-8

In reading, and re-reading, the passages for today, I was more than a bit struck by how closely they track to how I spend my time during work hours. I carry the title of “Chief Strategy Officer” – and as such, I am supposed to help my organization define/refine our role in the world. In doing that, we are constantly asking ourselves: “(1) what is the context in which we are doing our work, what is the problem we are trying to solve? (2) What, specifically, do we look to do, what is our core mission? (3) How well prepared are we to accomplish that mission?

I have been in my current job four years next month. We still aren’t done answering those questions. But that’s another story. Let’s turn to the story line I see in these texts.

The Nehemiah passage goes quite a long way in painting a contextual backdrop for Jesus’ ministry that is to come. The Nehemiah story is about the depths of oppression of “the other” and the extent to which some are willing to go to actually profit off the financial troubles of others. This is a story of exploitation that, unfortunately, is still part of our context today. When what we need today is unity of purpose and repair, such exploitation only further divides, as it does in the Nehemiah passage.

Fast forward to Luke. Jesus enters the temple in Nazareth and, in what we believe to be his first sermon, tells a hushed congregation what it is that he has been sent to do. He speaks with a strategic clarity that is breathtaking in both scope and in implication.

- Preach good news to the poor
- Proclaim release to the captives
- Recover sight for the blind
- Set at liberty the oppressed

For the strategic planner, like me, Jesus has done two remarkable things in these words. First he has made his “population” very clear. His focus is on the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. There is no mistake. No ambiguity. He knows who the beneficiaries of his ministry are, and he never wavers. Second, he knows the “intended result” for each segment of the population he is addressing. Release. Sight. Liberty. Good news. In some way, we can say that these are the outcomes by which Jesus’ ministry was to be measured.

Finally, to Romans, where I admit I struggled at first to see the connection to my strategic framework. But then I thought of one last theory – “The Theory of Aligned Contributions.” In my day job, we do consistently ask ourselves about our capacity to carry out the mission. How much are we qualified to do? Where do we fall short? Where can we align with others who, in some way, can make a contribution to the advancement of our core purpose? I don’t think I am forcing a fit here. The Romans passage connects in two ways. In assessing our own capacity as God’s instruments, we recognize we are flawed in many ways. But, through Christ, we have access to grace, and we are called into alignment as actors in the mission he revealed in the temple. Advancing that mission day in and day out brings us face to face with suffering (back to the context of Nehemiah), and even in that suffering we know the potential for endurance, for character, and most of all, for hope.

This drives us forward as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Prayer of St. Francis: Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. Amen

Jeff Moore
Listening by Smelling

I just came back from a trip to the Philippines. This was, in many ways, a trip that I undertook because I listened to the smells that I sniffed in my residence.

In late October, I detected the faint smell of burning candles – but there were none in my residence and the stove was off. A few days later, I had a quick sniff of perfume – my mother’s perfume. My mother passed away 20 years ago and her birthday was on November 6.

This was more than just coincidence. It was clear that I was being reminded that five years have passed since I went home to pay my respects to my parents and ancestors in their graves in the Philippines.

This may sound crazy to Westerners, but to Filipinos, listening by smelling makes sense culturally. The smells were signs that were not to be ignored. And so, I travelled for nearly 30 hours each way -- because I listened by smelling.

From the airport in Dumaguete, I bought flowers and candles and visited my parent’s graves. The following day, my brother and I drove more than three hours to my grandparents’ hometown, Guihulngan. There we lit candles for all the tombs in the family’s cemetery plot, overlooking the sea.

For good measure, I offered a mass for them – and all friends and relatives who have passed on – at the Philippine Independent Church (part of the Anglican communion).

After performing these obligations, I felt as if a heavy burden was lifted from me. In a way, I had been like Jesus, wandering for 40 days and 40 nights, in a spiritual wilderness. There have been no smells since I returned to the U.S. I am now free, thanks be to the God who is always there for you and me.

Adlai Amor
How the understanding of the law evolved in the Bible is fascinating to me.

In Nehemiah we see the Israelites returning from exile, receiving the law and being told to be joyful in having it. What I realized about this is that the law allows a person to know what is expected of them. This is very freeing because you know where you stand.

In Matthew, Jesus tells people he hasn't come to abolish the low, but to fulfill it; that is, to show people how to love other people.

In Galatians, Paul pushes the envelope about the law, and reminds people that the law is not to condemn people. By that point the law had become a way of showing how much better a person was because they obeyed the law (by now encoded with all kinds of specific requirements), and bragged about it (it reminds me of the church lady in Saturday Night Live). They were sure that just obeying the law would ensure them a special place in heaven. But Jesus had raised the bar. Paul said that God's love is for everyone (even the Gentiles!) and Jesus proved it by dying on the cross as an innocent so that we could enjoy the forgiveness of our sins and live a life of loving service to all. Praise the Lord!

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the law that guides us in our relationships in community. But a special thanks for the love of your son Jesus, who loved us so much that he died for our sins and gave us a life of showing gratitude for all the love and forgiveness we have been given.
February 23, 2018

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

The verses in Matthew cover parts of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus decries infidelity and swearing.

The verses in Romans speak of God’s forgiveness.

In Nehemiah the Jewish people dress in sackcloth and praise God. They recall his saving miracles …the parting of the Red Sea and the pillar of fire that served as their guiding light. While I doubt any of us New York Avenuers have witnessed the parting of the Potomac or have been guided by a pillar of light, every day we see wonders of heaven and earth that should astound us.

Everyday Miracles

With the first whisper of dawn’s light, birds wait in anticipation for us to put sunflower seeds on the windowsill. The chickadee is usually the first to come, snatching a seed and carrying it to a branch on the crabapple tree where he pecks it open to extract the sweet kernel. Jays, titmice, cardinals, house finch and an occasional junco soon join the breakfast crowd. A redshouldered hawk perches on a limb of a tall poplar, perusing his domain. What a plethora of flying miracles abound in our back yard!

Squirrels chase one another, making soaring leaps from branch to branch. Chipmunks scurry across our patio. If we’re lucky, a handsome red fox that we call “Cinnamon” will nap in the back easement, stretching and scratching as he awakens from his fox dreams, perhaps of the vixen who occasionally accompanies him on strolls.

Sprig brings her magic … bare trees suddenly sporting green leaves or colorful blossoms. Flowers pop out of ground that has been bare for months.

There’s no church experience holier than the loud cry of a drenched, dripping baby proclaiming the miracle of life.

Praise the Lord.

Helen Williams
Nehemiah 9:16–17: “But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments .... But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.”

Stiffened their necks? Apparently in biblical times if you had an ox and you wanted it to turn left or right—or it was turning left or right and you didn’t want it to—you would change its direction by poking it on one side of the neck with a pole called an “ox-goad.” If the ox did not respond to the poke and continued down the path of its own choosing, it was said to be “hard of neck” or “stiff-necked.”

Thus, when Nehemiah speaks of the Israelites and their ancestors who “stiffened their necks,” he is referring to a stubborn people following their own path—not the one that God had chosen for them. Yet despite their stubborn refusal to follow God, Nehemiah makes clear that God nevertheless was “ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and [that he] did not forsake them.”

* * *

Sarah and I recently joined NYAPC after taking a multi-year break from church. I wouldn’t say that we turned our back on God, but I wouldn’t say that we gave him a lot of thought either. We let life get in the way, and to some extent we put ourselves above everything else. We were following our own path. But then our lives changed. In May we had our first child Alex—following years of unsuccessful attempts to have children—and the importance of God and raising our son in the church became clear to us. We had stiffened our necks for many years and ignored the plans that God had for us. But God is gracious and good and forgiving and he welcomed us back with open arms.

It is so very comforting to know that God will always be there for us, even when (and particularly when) we temporarily lose our way. It turns out that Nehemiah, in Hebrew, actually means “comfort of the Lord” or “comforted by God,” which seems far from a coincidence to me given the message his book conveys.

Dear God – We thank you for your everlasting grace and mercy. Help us to stay on the path you have chosen for us, and forgive us when we fail to do so.

R. Jason Fowler
Contemplating the Covenant

The Genesis portion of our readings today describes the covenant God grants Abraham and his following generations. God promises to give them the land of Canaan and to be their God. In acknowledgement, Abraham and his offspring will be circumcised as a sign of the covenant. God will also give Sarah another son, Isaac whose succeeding generations will share in the covenant. Psalm 150 is a short but colorful paean of praise to the Lord while the section of Mark deals with Jesus preparing the disciples for his death and resurrection. This familiar exhortation is included:

*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.* (Mark 8: 34-35).

My usual conundrum is figuring out how these passages are related, if they are related. Though in readings like this I am usually drawn to the New Testament passages because they somehow speak more directly to my faith in practice, this time the Genesis portion intrigued me. Specifically, the word “covenant” kept reoccurring. It is used 7 times in the short passage. I began thinking of the “theme” of the three readings as a “contract” with God and what we need to do to fulfill our end of it. Some of my research, however, abruptly derailed this thought when I discovered that a covenant is *unilateral*. It is a promise made by God not requiring reciprocity. That somehow changes everything! It also has a religious connotation signifying a promise made by God to his people. As a worshiping community, we hear the word at least each first Sunday of the month when we partake in the Communion service. Jesus calls his blood the “new covenant”. So, God still has a covenant with us. How do we acknowledge it?

Several years ago, I was summoned back to my family’s home ground in Illinois for an uncle’s funeral. It is always a moving experience for me to go back to the rural enclave called “Martin’s Prairie” where a picture-perfect white clapboard Baptist church stands on a small knoll on that very flat farmland. It occupies one corner of the acreage of the home farm where generations of Martins, Cryders and Spencers were raised. Standing by the gravesite in that tiny cemetery tucked in among the corn fields, one is struck by the sound of the wind and the utter silence. My aunt arranged for a piper to play *Amazing Grace* at some distance from the grave and for the second stanza, the piper turned and slowly walked away as he played. Surrounded by loved ones and experiencing such haunting and tranquil surroundings were a spiritual experience for me. To me, anyway, evidence of God’s fulfilling his covenant for me. But, again, how do I acknowledge it?

Singing hymns of praise, using pipes and drums, trumpets and organs are a wonderful but rather easy way for me to acknowledge my gratitude for God’s covenant to be my God. The hard part is contained in Jesus’ admonition to lose oneself. I find myself still not trusting the promise that by living for others, my own life is given back to me. I get caught up in the frustrations and problems presented in trying to love unconditionally or in being loved and somehow lose sight of the goal of making my life a hymn of praise as the Psalmist would want. Perhaps that is my task this Lent, to contemplate the Covenant and rejoice in it.

*God of Abraham and Sarah, help me rejoice in all that your Covenant brings to my life.*

Spencer Gibbins
Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5: 38-48 The Message (MSG)       Monday, February 26, 2018

38-42 “Here’s another old saying that deserves a second look: `Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.43-47 “You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. 48 “In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

My dad is a minister and has always loved to read from The Message. It was written by Eugene Peterson as a contemporary translation. I love what he has done with this text from Matthew: “No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.” and “In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up.” Last year I was able to spend about 9 months in the Partnership for Public Service’s Excellence in Government Fellowship Program. It works through ways to be a leader in the federal government. I would always summarize it into learning how to be mature. How great is that for loving your enemy to be summarized as “grow up”?! So true. And not easy. It takes practice, experience. We then read the lesson from Nehemiah, also from The Message, of how God shows us compassion when we call out to him, even after we sin over and over again. God’s patience in love for us, is something we strive for. I think this is the same as being mature. Consistency, perseverance in patience, and loving. May we all strive to “live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

Nehemiah 9:26-38 The Message (MSG)

26-31 But then they mutinied, rebelled against you, Threw out your laws and killed your prophets, The very prophets who tried to get them back on your side— and then things went from bad to worse. You turned them over to their enemies, who made life rough for them. But when they called out for help in their troubles you listened from heaven; And in keeping with your bottomless compassion you gave them saviors: Saviors who saved them from the cruel abuse of their enemies. But as soon as they had it easy again they were right back at it—more evil. So you turned away and left them again to their fate, to the enemies who came right back.

They cried out to you again; in your great compassion you heard and helped them again. This went on over and over and over. You warned them to return to your Revelation, they responded with haughty arrogance: They flouted your commands, spurned your rules—the very words by which men and women live! They set their jaws in defiance, they turned their backs on you and didn’t listen. You put up with them year after year and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; But when they refused to listen you abandoned them to foreigners. Still, because of your great compassion, you didn’t make a total end to them. You didn’t walk out and leave them for good; yes, you are a God of grace and compassion.

Karen Feret
In reading these texts at first, it was hard not to think of current events. I know who I thought of when I read “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...[and] whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may be praised by others.” I thought of the same person when I saw the Nehemiah passage entitled “Dedication of the City Wall” where the people were “rejoicing with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps and lyres.” I shuddered while picturing the scene - only I wasn’t picturing Jerusalem, I was picturing Arizona.

My reaction frustrated me. After all, that must be an unsophisticated and superficial application of the scripture to modern times. I determined to give this more thought and research. There are, as I learned, quite a few references to walls in the Bible. Some referred to walls in a similar fashion to Nehemiah – where walls are important and something to be cheered. However, there is also at least one reference that I remember from spirituals, in the book of Joshua, about bringing the walls of Jericho down. So, what are we to think about walls as Christians?

Some have said that a wall is a metaphor for faith. That building the wall of our faith allows us to be strong in that faith and ward off evil. It is true that walls can make us feel safe, and they can make us feel strong. However, I also worry that this talk of strong walls also can be used keep out the different, the uncomfortable, and the undesirable. This is hard to jive with so many references in the Bible to welcoming the stranger, taking care of the weak and loving your neighbor – and your enemy. But, maybe this passage in Nehemiah, in concert with the other passages here, can be taken to mean that while we do need to build a strong foundation (or wall) for our faith, it is that strong faith that allows us to open the gates of our faith, and our hearts, to comfort the poor, love each other and to take God’s love and word into the world – even when we don’t know what to expect (much like Abraham, as we are told in the Hebrews passage). This might just be a way for us to grow our faith beyond those walls and expand our understanding of each other and do more to love our neighbors.

Taken together, I think these passages are about humility, faith, and our covenant with God. That if we build our strength, pray (quietly) for God’s guidance, listen for his call (which is sometimes hard to do if we are praying too loudly or listening to the chink of our tithes in the offering plate) and take up the call (ah – that is the hardest part, isn’t it?!), then we will reap his reward in heaven. That sounds like a prayer to me:

Dear God, please help us to build the wall of our faith so that we can open the gates of our hearts to your love. We pray that we may have the humility to hear and heed your call and the strength to share Your love with the downtrodden, the brokenhearted and the stranger. Amen.

Stacey Gagosian
Day 14...Where are we?

How do we observe Lent? Do we give up chocolate and eat fish sticks? Although those days were easy – no decisions to make! - that doesn’t seem to resonate with thoughtful Christians in 2018. Most seem to want a period of reflection and, yes, discipline that brings us closer to God. Unlike in the past, Lent is not a set program of rules to follow, but a path to a change of heart, a change of attitude that can bring about new thoughts, habits and actions. What practices might we consider during Lent that can bring us closer to that lofty goal? Today’s scriptures have suggestions.

After being out of Jerusalem for some time, Nehemiah (the governor of Judea post-exile) returned to find a people who were not meeting their tithes and therefore not providing for their priests. Nor were they observing the Sabbath according to law.

Matthew tells us of Jesus's teaching concerning prayer: make it private and don’t use empty phrases. God knows what we need before we ask. Jesus even gave an example which is short, concise, and covers the important points.

The Hebrews passage concerns faith, specifically the faith of the Old Testament patriarchs. Their faith involved believing in an unseen God and the conviction or confidence in those beliefs.

What do we want Lent to look like for us? What will bring us closer to an Easter frame of mind? Is it giving more? A more mindful observance of the Sabbath? Perhaps a more active and disciplined prayer life would strengthen our faith. Whatever we choose during these forty days, let’s do it with intentionality, focusing on the day that we celebrate the risen Christ.

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. Amen.

(Matthew 6:9-13 NRSV)

Kris Golden
Faith in the Power of Prayer

“Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.” – Matthew 21:21-22

I have often thought that I should retire to a monastery and devote myself to a life of prayer. Perhaps like Thomas Merton, the well-known Trappist monk of the Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky whose writings on spirituality and pacifism have influenced me. Or the monks of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Boston, who use social media effectively to spread God’s wisdom in profound but bite-size pieces.

But I know that such a life is not one for me – at least for now. God has placed me where I am now, in a place of social justice engagement and amid all the cultural and political chaos of this country. Yet I yearn for the solitude of a contemplative. Outside of this, I must confess that my prayer regimen has, of late, been a series of ups and downs. I get impatient when I pray. My mind is cluttered despite my attempts to clear it.

I often get frustrated when I do not get what I want when I want it, despite all my prayers no matter what church I am in. I often end up feeling powerless despite the fervor of my prayers.

The Bible, however, teaches us that the power of prayer does not rely on whether we kneel or we stand in prayer, or whether we pray eloquently or simply utter the thoughts we have throughout the day. It does not rely on whether we wear a veil or not, or whether we light candles or not as we pray. Indeed, various denominations and religions have varying prescriptions on how we should pray.

Today’s scripture reminds us that we must have a strong faith and have no doubts when we pray. For when we do, God’s power comes through. It is a power that comes even if you are engaged in the hustle and bustle of the world. It is a power that comes in the insights that one is given amid all the noise of modern living.

God’s power is given to us, not because we want it, but because we need it. God does not grant it immediately, but only when the time is right. In today’s reading about the fig tree, Jesus reminds us that prayer, done with faith and without doubt, can move mountains.

May the power of your love, Lord Christ, fiery and sweet as honey, so absorb our hearts as to withdraw them from all that is under heaven. Grant that we may be ready to die for love of your love, as you died for love of our love. Amen (Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi)

- Adlai J. Amor
Wanted: Good Shepherds, Worthy Tenants

Scriptures: Jeremiah 23:1-8; Matthew 21:33-43; and 1 Corinthians 2:10-16

The daily news offers current and ample evidence of the bad actors who populate both the Old and New Testament scriptures for this day in Lent. In these sample headlines from late January 2018, we can imagine the shepherds in Jeremiah “who destroy and scatter the sheep” and the wicked tenants in Jesus’ parable, recounted in Matthew, who refuse the landowner the produce of his vineyard and kill those sent to collect it.

- Trump’s handling of the Russia probe has never looked more like a cover-up
- White House plan would reduce environmental requirements for infrastructure projects
- Ex-USA Gymnastics doctor sentenced to 40 to 175 years for sex crimes
- Clinton reportedly shielded faith outreach aide accused of harassment
- Justice Department threatens to subpoena records in escalating battle with ‘sanctuary’ jurisdictions
- New American strategy for Syria could be doomed as U.S. allies fight each other

Such headlines go on and on, relentlessly. We long for justice and righteousness, for shepherds who will shepherd, for people who will produce the fruits of God’s kingdom. Where are they to be found?

In these scriptures, we are invited—urged—to be those shepherds, those tenants whose thoughts, words, and deeds reflect the life that Jesus led and honor God by producing the fruits of God’s kingdom: among them, kindness, fairness, honesty, safety—physical and economic, inclusion, peace—not only for ourselves, but for all people and creation as a whole.

How are we to accomplish such an enormous task? Paul offers an answer to this question in today’s passage from first Corinthians: “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.” We are called to understand the gifts each of us has been given and to use them in our daily lives, from the time we wake until we sleep. We are called to prayerfully seek God’s guidance in the choices we make. We are called to reflect the “mind of Christ” for all people in authority of any kind, and thus to be witnesses to the true power of the fruits of God’s kingdom.

A prayer: God of wisdom, make us new tenants in your vineyard—new disciples in our individual and broader communities. As you bless us, help us bless others with actions born of your love for us, actions that truly reflect your kingdom on earth. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

~Edith Holmes Snyder
Does this passage cause you to wonder what Jesus might think if he walked into our church? It’s probably unwise to attempt too many comparisons between churches in 21st-century America and the Temple in 1st-century Jerusalem. For one thing, the Temple had a series of courts through which a person might proceed, getting ever closer to the center, the Holy of Holies, where God dwelt and where only the High Priest could venture and then only on the Day of Atonement when he asked God to forgive God’s people their sins.

In 1st-century Jerusalem, how far you could go on the Temple grounds was determined by who you were. If you were a Gentile, a “God-fearer”, someone very much attracted to the God of Israel, but not a child of Abraham, you could only go as far as the Court of the Gentiles. If you were a Jew, but a woman, you could only go as far as the Court of Women. I hope Jesus would be pleased that there are no barriers to entrance to the sanctuary at New York Avenue.

Are we a house of prayer? Well, y-y-yes. Prayer is certainly an important part of our worship on Sunday mornings. There is a group that meets for prayer in the Lincoln Chapel on Sunday mornings (anyone and everyone welcome!). There is a meditation room in the Docherty Center where people can go for prayer and meditation. It is not used much, perhaps because few people know it’s there and because, during the week, one would have to obtain the key from the receptionist to gain entry. We know that prayer was central for Jesus. The gospel accounts are full of references to his prayer life and the disciples were so impressed by it that they asked him to teach them how to pray. How central is prayer for us? Is “house of prayer” something we think of when we think of our church?

I confess that “house of activity” is more likely to come to my mind when I think of New York Avenue. There is so much going on, always and at nearly all times. (The Session has approved a policy allowing outside groups to stay overnight at the church – very bare accommodations – within certain guidelines, so sometimes we do achieve 24-hour “activity”.) No sacrificial animals in the hallways, no moneychangers outside the sanctuary doors, thank goodness.

New York Avenue would not be a surprise to Jesus. His spirit is here already: in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings; in the Chapel with Faith Temple on Sunday afternoons; in committee meetings where we try discern God’s will and take one more step toward bringing in the Kingdom of God; in the Radcliffe Room and in Peter Marshall Hall where marginalized people are sheltered, fed, and healed, and where young people are taught and mentored; in the entryway where hospitality is offered and provided; in the office where important administrative work is done so that all our activity can happen; and anywhere two or three are gathered in his name.

I do wonder, though, what Jesus would say to us about our house of worship. Is his admonition to Martha relevant to us. Can we put aside our activity, our important and necessary activity, for just a while? On a regular basis? And choose the better part? Can we spend more time with God?

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name ...” There. We can start there.

Miriam Dewhurst
Living into Right Relationships

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 103
John 2:13-22
1 Corinthians 1:22-25

By now we are well into the Lenten journey … that journey which begins with Ash Wednesday and concludes with Easter Sunday; that journey which takes us up to Jerusalem, to the cross, and eventually to the empty tomb; that journey of dying and then being reborn into a new life with God and with one another. Lent is a time of reflection, renewal, and reorientation; a time when we reaffirm who we are and whose we are. Indeed, Lent helps us focus upon what it means to be follower of Jesus and a Christian sojourner along the Way. For some of us, this has been a season of giving up material goods or unhelpful routines which hinder true relationships; for others, it has been a season of taking on new practices, prayers, or acts of service in order that we might fully be our authentic selves. We do this because we know that we fall short every day. Indeed, Lent challenges us to make right the wrongs in our daily lives.

In today’s psalm, we are reminded that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. And, yet, in the same psalm, we are cautioned to follow God’s commandments. During this season of Lent — in the midst of our busy and chaotic lives — what better time might it be to open our Bibles to Exodus 20 and review the Decalogue presented to Moses; that is, to recall the Ten Commandments. For the Ten Commandments offer us distinct markers with which to judge whether or not we are living into right relationships with God and with one another. And in doing so, questions that we might consider asking ourselves include:

- Am I orienting myself first and foremost to God, the ground of all being, or am I paying primary allegiance to ideas, things, or people other than God?
- Do I make time in my life for regular Sabbath? For prayer, contemplation, and rejuvenation? For reorienting myself to the presence of Sacred? Or has life become so hectic and chaotic that I simply find myself getting by day to day?
- Where in my life am I honoring and paying full attention to relationships with family, friends, and others? Where am I falling short?
- How am I contributing to the fullness of life, to that of myself and of others? How am I furthering God’s creation and all creatures large and small? Are there ways in which I am hindering the self that I and others are called to be? Are there actions I take that damage, defile, or deface the environment and the community in which I move and have my being?
- Am I conducting myself appropriately in the company of God and others in my midst? Do I act one way before some and another way before others?
- Do I find myself being jealous of what others have? Of what types of lives I perceive they are living?

Indeed, Lent offers us that time to reevaluate where we are and where we are going without getting hung up over our shortcomings. It’s an annual built in “second chance” to live more fully into the Christian life, to be more truly a follower of Jesus, the one we call Christ. Yes, by examining the Ten Commandments and by truthfully asking ourselves questions such as those above, we can begin to reorient ourselves while moving into right relationship with God and with others.

God of Mercy. God of Grace. God of Steadfast Love. On this day, in the midst of Lent, may we live into right relationships. May we take the time to honestly ask who we are and whose we are. And may we question where are we living authentically and where are we falling short. Give us the strength to make necessary changes — some small, others large — in our daily lives as we strive to be true servants walking in the Way of Jesus. And, in doing so, may we find ourselves being salt of the earth and light to the world people, living into, and furthering, your beloved community … a community of never ending faith, hope, love, and witness in this place and beyond. Amen.

- Mark A. Zaineddin
Today’s readings come with warnings: Beware! “Do not listen to what the prophets say!” (Jeremiah) “Beware of the doctors of the law!” (Mark) These warnings are against prophets and lawyers, educated people who give advice for a living, who are educated to know facts, philosophy, good and bad, right and wrong. So when they are wrong and going down that wrong path, how are we to know?

In a sense, it feels that we are on our own to determine and decipher from Jesus’ teachings, God’s Word, and the sometimes-confusing writings of Christ’s early followers (Paul). In the easiest sense, though, it is common sense! Jeremiah writes that when prophets give you false hope, advise that “Prosperity shall be yours,” and “No disaster shall befall you,” shouldn’t we be wary of the obvious of those who peddle those words? The recent “Christianity of Prosperity” trend might be a case in point. Gathering riches and keeping riches as a sign of being a “good Christian” doesn’t add up—as we saw when a prosperous church in Houston turned away those made homeless by last fall’s hurricane floods. Giving to the poor and caring for the sick and homeless as Jesus taught does not seem to enter the Doctrine of Prosperity as told in Jeremiah, so beware!

In Mark, Jesus describes the doctors of the law basically preening in others’ presence, wanting the best seats, being honored, while at the same time having no compunction taking the poor and widows’ money. As I write this, the barons of wealth and ownership, world leaders, are gathered in Davos, Switzerland—the high priests of business and the global economy who make the world go around with money, who make the Art of the Deal that affects the rest of the globe. They in no small measure determine where money flows, who gets sick or doesn’t have access to health care, whether the planet’s climate is saved or destroyed based on cost and profit. As Jesus said, “Beware!”

What can change their hearts? How can their untold wealth be tapped for the good of creation and benefit of those in need who suffer around the world? As written in Romans, “...yet always there was hope.” We can hope that hearts will be changed and softened to care for people everywhere, no matter the circumstance. We can take hope from those many wealthy among us who work to use their resources for the better good. We can take hope that some elected officials speak out and act to counter narrow-mindedness and work for good. We can take hope and be encouraged by the many thousands who see wrongs and work to right them, who tirelessly endeavor help the poor and save the planet. We can hope. We can join forces or individually seek to walk in Jesus’ path. We can pray.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to beware and to discern Your way. Help us to be your people for all your people and your creation.

Marilyn J. Seiber
False Prophets, Lies, and God’s Truth in Tumultuous Times

Tuesday, March 6

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

“I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, ‘The Lord declares’. Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams, declares the Lord. They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least.” Jeremiah 23:31-35

Jeremiah was a Judean prophet whose activity spanned four of the most tumultuous decades in his country’s history. He received his call to be a prophet during these trying times, continuing his ministry through the siege and capture of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Throughout this book, and in this passage particularly, we are given promises and lessons on how to remain faithful servants of Christ when both our faith and the world around us is challenged in ways we could not have prepared for.

We find ourselves, much like Jeremiah, living in a time of false prophets claiming to speak for Christ, leaders who lie to and take advantage of their people, and a crisis of morality. This passage felt especially poignant as we navigate what to many, feels like a uniquely turbulent time in our country and community. Every day we are fed new lies and misinformation, and details that our leaders are abusing their influence for wealth and unbridled power. I find myself asking the exact same questions, “How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds.” (Jeremiah 23:26)

What I am comforted by, is the promise and assurance that those who seek to manipulate the truth and speak for God are not sent by God and do not reflect God’s truth. And while this seems obvious, it is easy to become defeated and forget what we are told and promised by God. It is easy to become lost in the woods during times when we are tested by a world full of people who claim to speak for God. But we can take solace that as we navigate questions of morality, the facts are on our side and God’s truth in this passage is as clear as it can be. False prophets and these reckless lies are not a part of God’s perfect vision.

In these times when we are grappling with God’s truth and our own truth, we are asked, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” (Romans 8:35) We are promised, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” and “God is the one who justifies”, not the false prophets who claim to have this power. (Romans 8:37, 8:33)

We can overcome these tumultuous days with the immense and absolute love of God. We must act on our call to take God’s love into the world, do good, and reject false prophets and reckless lies that darken God’s truth. God’s truth is the guiding light through the dark times we face ahead.

Taylor Allison
Lent 2018, Wednesday March 7th


I think I know a thing or two about figs. I had a fig tree in my back yard. To get a good ripe fig from it you had to be very focused on it. Not only do they pass through from ripe to rotten rapidly but also there’s lots of competition for them at every stage from birds and squirrels (and neighbors). So a good fresh fig can seem to be somewhat of a rarity. A crow will eat pretty much any fig. Squirrels are a little more selective but have the instinct to hide and hoard. Thus many are wasted. You can’t take it with you.

In the old testament Jeremiah is of course using figs as a metaphor for people. His point being that we need to stay focused on being a “good fig” or risk the certain wrath of God. Depending on your perception of God, you’ll either be punished for your sins or by them. I try hard to be a good fig.

Luke, in the new testament, offers to us the parable of the rich fool. It reminds me of a song we sang in varsity choir in high school, “You can’t take it with you Brother Will, Brother John”. The parable is about a rich man who at some point finds himself with more stuff than storage. Rather than lighten his load by sharing with others more needing of the bounty, he decides to gleefully build more storage so he can keep it all for himself in a vain attempt to ensure a happy life for himself. Jesus words God’s rebuke in this way. “’You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

So what is the “get rich scheme” for becoming rich toward God? The selection for today from Colossians is one of my favorites from childhood (thanks Mom). It lays out the “scheme” so clearly. Nothing really complicated, but challenging if we make it so. We read “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,” and going on, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” And then the part I find particularly inspiring, “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” Just me perhaps.

Not complicated. Nor in every case difficult. But it will at least require commitment and focus in order to get and be the good figs. Because we’ll need to “get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your youth.” We must “not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” So that “In that renewal [resurrection] there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.

I’m very willing. God give me the strength and focus to be a renewable energy source for good in the world. A good fig.

Lovingly,

Nathan Moon
In reading these passages, the one that spoke the most to me was the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke: 16 "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. 17 He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

18 “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. 19 And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’

20 “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

21 “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

As Jesus summarizes, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

I’ve been thinking a good deal lately about investments, specifically of my money and my time. I often feel worried about having enough money and investments and assets, and feel like I fall far short when I look at guidelines and recommendations. But, I’m also reminded of something Roger has said in the past few months, which has been that when thinking about where to invest your money, to invest in the church, both the work that it’s doing and the needs of the space and the physical infrastructure. So, in addition to my dollars, I’m also thinking about how I can be a good steward of the gift of time that I have. I’m trying, especially during Lent, to make good and meaningful use of my time and not waste it in distractions.

And to also not let greed (or sometimes, what feels more like fear) drive me to seeking “an abundance of possessions.” Jesus’s words are an important reminder to me that acquisition and storing up “is not what life is.” That life is about sharing what we have; and that when we seek a security apart from that, that it is based not on the rock but an unstable foundation of shifting sand. And that this greed can materialize in many forms.

Loving God, your instructions are often simple and clear, but still challenge us. Please help me to reject fear, worry, pride, and the desire to store up whatever I have been given. Help me to recognize God’s hand in what I have, and guide me with wisdom in sharing what I have with others and in the right places, with generosity and a loving and grateful spirit. I ask this through your son, Jesus. Amen.

Emily Sabo
Oh my – verses 30 – 38 in Jeremiah certainly foretell of an angry Lord who “shall roar like a lion” and fill the whole world with terror and confusion. They speak of a Lord who will hold judgement over the wicked and deliver the sword unto them – the shepherds and the flock shall have nowhere to flee and the Lord shall lay waste to them and all their lands.

Hum, I don’t know about you, but I’ve never really responded well to images or descriptions of an angry vengeful God who will rise up against those who are considered unfaithful. Being crushed by the Chaldean army “who shall come like a hurricane” is certainly graphic imagery, but doing the right thing out of fear of the Lord has never been a key motivating force in my own personal theology.

Luke 12:32-40, on the other hand, provides more motivating imagery for me.

32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 35 Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ... 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

These verses from Luke sound perhaps, a bit more like Advent texts than they do Lenten texts. They do appear concerned with preparation and our role in spreading the good news of the Gospel. Unlike the Jeremiah texts though, these do not try and motivate good behavior out of fear of fire and brimstone. But, neither do they point to a quid pro quo of “be prepared and you will be saved.” Instead, they encourage the idea of being ready so that when God does call us to action, we can seize the opportunity and spread the good news.

Being prepared so that one can seize opportunity when it comes a knockin’ is motivating to me. So is one of my favorite songs from the sixties by Curtis Mayfield titled *People Get Ready*. Echoing the tradition of African American spirituals, Mayfield’s lines speak of faith: “People get ready, There’s a train a comin’. You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board. All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’. Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.”

Prayer: “All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin...,” help us Lord, to grow in our faith and recognize that you are the power behind the diesels that make the train move. Help us to be ready to seize opportunity when it comes a knockin’, and to do it all in your name.” Amen.

Hal Hiemstra
Saturday March 10th

Jeremiah 26:1-16


Ephesians 1:15-2:3

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” (Ephesians 1:15-19 NRSV)

Think about a time when you let down a family member, friend, or someone you love deeply. How did you feel? I’m guessing you didn’t feel too great, and I’m guessing it hurt that you let down someone you love. Did they stop loving you? I’m going to guess they didn’t stop loving you and never will. We are human and we all make mistakes. We fall short of God’s expectations. And yet we are never alone. God never leaves us and God never will. God’s love for us surpasses all understanding.

Prayer. It’s powerful and life changing. Paul’s prayer for spiritual insight is a wonderful reminder that we are remembered. God hasn’t forgotten us and neither has our community of believers. Paul prays that God would give us a spirit of wisdom so that we may start to see ourselves as God sees us. He also prays that we see how God has called us. Prayer and action go hand in hand. We are all called to live out our faith through action. This can be intimidating and we might have reservations. God might be calling us to do something we never imagined we would have the strength or courage to do. But the beautiful thing is we never have to do this alone. God is always there. Our community of believers is also there praying for us and giving us the strength we need.

We belong to a community of believers here at NYAPC, but also to a broader community of Christians. Every day we strive to live out our faith in our actions. We will all fall short time and time again, but what is important is that we learn from our mistakes. Falling short of expectations can teach us a great deal about forgiveness and God’s unending love. The best part of being in community with others is that we never have to do this alone. We have an incredible support system who cheers for us when life is going well and picks us up when we fall. Through all the highs and lows, we belong to a community who prays for each other. May this never change. May you all continue to pray for your community of believers.

Sarah McGinnis
“For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do good things he planned for us long ago.” Eph. 2: 10, NLT

“I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made, And my soul knows it very well.” Psalm 139: 14, KJV

I am not in the habit of thinking of myself as a masterpiece, but that’s what the author of the letter to the church in Ephesus calls me – and you. Work of art. Handiwork. “Fearfully and wonderfully made” says the Psalmist. I get up most mornings, trundle into the bathroom and sneak a look in the mirror. “God’s masterpiece” is not the first impression that comes to mind.

I draw at least three conclusions from my reading of this passage from Ephesians. First, you and I are precious, not because of who we are but because we are God’s creation. Second, it simply isn’t about us or what we’ve accomplished. The Mona Lisa didn’t paint herself. David didn’t chisel himself. The Burghers of Calais didn’t mold themselves. They are creations, and that creative work gives them their distinctive value. And, thirdly, at least part of the value they hold is because the creator molded them in love. I think the Psalmist could have added, “I am fearfully and wonderfully and lovingly made. My Creator loved me into existence.” And our response to this knowledge? We can do the good things he planned for us to do because he has created us anew in Christ Jesus. We can do good because we have been created and recreated in love.

Do you remember the scene in the movie “Turner” in which J.M.W. Turner bulls his way into the exhibition of the British Academy, goes up to his own painting and slashes the canvas with a streak of red? The Academy high muckity-mucks are suitably appalled, yet it’s clear to those of us in the theatre that the addition has brought his painting alive. In like fashion, this poem, entitled “Vermilion” by Linda Pastan:

Pierre Bonnard would enter/ the museum with a tube of paint/ in his pocket and a sable brush./ Then violating the sanctity/ of one of his own frames/ he’d add a stroke of vermilion/ to the skin of a flower./ Just so I stopped you/ at the door this morning/ and licking my index finger, removed/ an invisible crumb/ from your vermilion mouth. As if,/ at the ritual moment of departure/ I had to show you still belonged to me./ As if revision were/ the purest form of love.

Prayer: Create us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. Amen.

Paul Dornan
Monday, March 12, 2018

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

Today’s passage from Colossians is a head-scratcher in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation, talking about “elemental spirits” and “the fullness of deity,” plus a long exposition on “spiritual circumcision.” I invite you to read it first in the NRSV and then turn to The Message translation (you can use BibleGateway.com). This translation, from Eugene Peterson, is supposed to be an “idiomatic” translation of the original and it usually causes me to roll my eyes, but for this passage, I found it really illuminating. The key line:

“You don’t need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.”

I think that cuts to the heart of the issue. God’s power is beyond reach, beyond explanation, beyond understanding. And without that fullness of Christ, it’s not just an individual emptiness we would experience, but a communal – even universal – emptiness.

The idea of fullness is something I’m trying to find peace in. At our joint boards meeting recently, when the church’s four boards (Session, Deacons, Diaconal Ministers, and Trustees) gathered to discuss the church’s finances, we talked some about concepts of scarcity and abundance. I’m used to thinking in terms of that contrast: either not enough or plenty. But I think fullness is different: fullness isn’t overflowing or inadequate. Fullness seems to be measured with a different metric. God’s power can bring a sense of peace, completion, and contentment.

After reading The Message version a few times, I turned back to the NRSV and the line “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” resonated differently and more deeply.

In this Lenten season, we think about the way that God sent his only son, Jesus Christ, as a human – to live and die among us before he was raised from the dead. That corporality is astounding. In The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See, Richard Rohr writes about Jesus: “Our preoccupation with his divinity did not allow us to hear about his own proudly proclaimed and clearly emphasized humanity…we often think of Jesus of having only a divine nature, and this misses and avoids the major point he came to bring.”

What does it mean for Jesus to be fully human, fully God? What does that mean for the fullness of God’s power that Jesus was both a deity and also just like us? Can we ever comprehend not only the power that made that possible, but also the grace that motivated it? Perhaps this Lenten season, we can embrace the humanity of Jesus and look for ways that God’s power can bring fullness not only to our lives, but also to the world.

Prayer: Dear God, we know your power is beyond measure. Help us to embrace the fullness of your love for us and the ways in which your power touches everything in our lives. Give us eyes to see the path you set before us and to know that you are always with us—all of us—to bring life-giving fullness and endless grace.

Kristin Ford

The Truth Shall Make You Free
These three short passages raise an impressive combination of questions (and answers) about sin, punishment, salvation, and God’s role in all of these—questions especially appropriate for us to contemplate in this time of Lent as we anticipate the celebration of Easter.

In Lamentations, the prophet reacts to the great suffering of his people with a mixture of grief, acceptance, repentance, and, yes, a yearning for revenge. He does not abandon his faith in God. God is still in control. But God is just. The suffering is understood as deserved punishment for sins. In this passage, there is little hope for relief (that comes in other passages of Jeremiah). The only “hope” is that God will treat the surrounding nations with similar harshness because of their sins. We can understand the temptation of that prayer.

In John, Jesus confronts the Jewish leaders, the “descendants of Abraham,” who claim never to have been in bondage. (Have they forgotten Egypt? What about Rome?). Jesus’s reference to sin as bondage recalls the Lamentations passage, so it should not be such a surprise to his audience. Jesus’s main point is that God (his “father”) is speaking directly through him, and the message is one of liberating truth and eternal salvation—a message his audience is unable to hear, because they view themselves as not in need of liberation. They prefer to listen to their earthly fathers, who perhaps reflect a view of the world where the best hope is that God will protect those who follow the rules (themselves) and will harshly punish those who depart from orthodoxy (e.g., Jesus’s reference to their seeking to kill him).

Peter’s letter develops Jesus’s “word” of “truth” about God’s will for humans, and thus what is sin and what is righteousness. He condemns revenge and tit-for-tat ethics. Instead, bless others, “knowing that you have been called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.” The values are unity of spirit, love, compassion, and humility. The hope and reward are that God’s eyes and ears will be open to those who pursue these values, while God’s face will be “against those who do evil.”

What do these questions and answers say to us today? Where are our values in a world so apparently alien to the ethic proclaimed by Jesus and by Peter? Do we, like the people in Lamentations, hope for the time when our enemies who are currently triumphant will receive their just deserts? Or do we approach our “brethren” with compassion and humility?

*Lord, help us to resist the temptation of longing for you to deal harshly with others, and instead to focus on freeing ourselves from the bondage of sin. Help us to live faithfully, trusting you and your justice, and embracing your liberating truth.*

Jim Bird & Betsy Merritt
The man in this passage has been blind since birth. In this passage the man doesn’t ask for sight. He doesn’t say thanks after he is given sight.

The disciples don’t understand blindness and they ask Jesus who sinned --- this man or his parents? Why else would he have been born blind if someone hadn’t sinned?

I have a children’s book that I keep at our house for our grandchildren. The name of it is *Last Stop on Market Street*. It is written by Matt de la Pena.

In this book a grandmother and her young grandson board a bus after leaving church one Sunday. At one of the stops a man climbs on. He has a dog and a long cane with him.

The young grandson, CJ, offers the man his seat, then CJ turns to his grandmother and asks, “How come that man can’t see?”

His grandmother, Nana, replies, “Boy, what do you know about seeing?”

She then tells CJ that some people watch the world with their ears ---and then the blind man, seated beside Nana, speaks up and says that he sometimes watches the world with his nose, and he compliments Nana’s perfume, which makes her laugh.

When a guitar player gets on the bus and begins playing his guitar softly, the blind man whispers that he, the blind man, likes to close his eyes to better feel the magic of music.

Jesus didn’t say any of these things to his disciples but he could have.

Instead Jesus knelt and spit into the dirt and made mud by mixing the dirt and his saliva. He spread the mud on the man’s eyes, then told the man to go wash in the nearby pool.

The man “went and washed and came back able to see.”

Most of us---probably all of us---today are blind in various ways and to various things. And like the man blind from birth, we may not even know what being able to see is —we don’t know the places or the people or the extent to which we are unable to see.

May we in this season of Lent go and wash and come back able to see ---with our eyes and with our ears and our noses --- and in our seeing to speak up for fairness and justice when we must but also to speak words of love and to touch with love all those around us.

---*Bonnie Davis*
Trust?

Lamentations 2:7-16
John 10:1-6
1 Peter 4:1-6

Thursday, March 15

In these suspicious, conspiratorial times, do people need some advice to guide their way? I find Jesus’ parable about leadership to be clarifying (John 10:1-18). It’s about who can you trust. It could be the difference between life or death in a wolf’s mouth. So the good shepherd teaches, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep ... whoever enters through me will be saved...The true shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...But watch out for the hired hand, when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away!”

I find this to be good advice today – Money paid and big promises are worthless when the wolf slips in unopposed. It’s crucial to know the one who leads you: to have really listened – to know His voice (teachings). Never settle for one who has never led or protected anyone but himself.

Jesus promises, “I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.” Look at the Cross. This is what he did: “I have come so my sheep may have life and have it to the full.” We don’t often hear how heroic Christ was. He died to save us. So in Lent we need to see how trustworthy Christ is. We have proof that nothing will deter or scare Him away. He stood up to the wolves of His times. This is a form of bravery and deep love that can inspire people for 100’s, 1000’s of years. And has.

O Lord, now is the time to pray, not sleep. The mystery is that after the agony in the garden, the heart of faith endures. Amen.

Tom Dunlap
Lamentations 2:17-22

John 11:55-12:8

Hebrews 2:10-18

Lamentations. What a deeply devastating picture of the destruction of Jerusalem, as described by Jeremiah. The original text of these passages mimicked the style of Jewish burial songs. The sadness of this tragic scene in chapter two resonates even in English as we see the people of Jerusalem cry out, wallowing in the result of their sin.

The heaviness of the Lamentations passage, however, when paired with the excerpts from John and Hebrews, depicts a cyclical beauty of human life. In John, we see Judas confront Jesus, who tells Judas off and then foreshadows His own death. Jesus sees straight through the thieving Judas' façade, but does nothing to stop or change him. Jesus divinely knows that what Judas deserves will come. In the same vein, we understand that Jesus has a thorough knowledge of us and our intentions, which should compel us to keep our actions consistent with our words.

When we do stray from the thoughts and actions God desires for us, we experience suffering like the people of Jerusalem. But, as Hebrews tells us, our sin-derived suffering enables us to act as Jesus would. We know pain and are therefore able to reach out with compassion to those who also experience suffering. Understanding that Jesus endured pain and temptation helps us to face our trials and look to Jesus for strength.

When we trust God and commit ourselves to Him, we are released from sin’s power over us. Strengthened by the freedom we gain from Christ, we must then reach out to those who are swallowed by sin. As Christians, it is our calling to extend our hands to them and say, “I’ve been where you are now. Trust me and let’s conquer this together through Christ.” Jesus did this for us. Let us follow in His footsteps.

Lord, You have known me in the deepest valleys and on the highest mountains. You know what is on my heart. Let the desires there be to trust in You, to grow wise as a result of my past suffering, and to use my wisdom and strength through You to help those in need of Your love and grace. Amen.

Katherine Leiden
Nevertheless [s]he persisted


For if in this world misery must exist, so be it; but let some little loophole, some glimpse of possibility at least, be left, which may serve to urge the nobler portion of humanity to hope and struggle unceasingly for its alleviation.

- Rabindranath Tagore (Nobel Prize-Winning Economist)

The passage from Lamentations could be a contemporary poem written by one of many million refugees - perhaps even a DACA recipient - around the world today who are struggling to flee persecution and war, only to face deportation or arrest (further persecution) when they reach their land of refuge.

More broadly, it could be the cry of anyone going through a sustained difficult period. A time when it seems the chips are stacked and the powers that be, indeed the whole world, continually conspires against you. A desperate time that could make you feel, in the words of the verse: “17 My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; 18 so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.”

But for anyone who is going through such a time, don’t give up! Don’t lose hope in the Lord. I have personally gone through tough times when I was tempted to lose hope and belief in God’s grace. But I never gave up. A resolute persistence and hope in God’s grace is what kept me going until the tide turned.

When faced with a seemingly unbearable situation, keep steadfast faith in God’s grace and allow it to inspire perseverance. Sooner or later, in due time his glory will be made manifest in your life. In the words of St. John: “15 Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming.”

Leslie Lartey
Though I hadn’t really heard of it until I started seminary, centering prayer is just one of many spiritual practices that God has “written upon my heart.” It’s a practice that I’ve sought to renew this year, particularly during our journey to the cross this Lenten season. The goal of centering prayer, at least for me, is opening to the presence of God in the present moment. In this form of prayer, people sit in silence and use a sacred word to draw their attention back to God whenever thoughts start to creep in or the mind begins to wander. For some folks, sitting in silence for twenty to thirty minutes sounds absolutely awful. Others find this sort of quiet contemplation restorative or invigorating. For me, I’d have to say it’s a little of both.

Sometimes, I find myself able to settle down and embrace God’s invitation into silence. But most of the time it’s just hard – it’s hard to sit there, it’s hard to pause and let go of productivity, it’s hard to be open, it’s hard to be vulnerable, it’s hard to be present. Occasionally, though, I find myself approaching my prayer practice as if it’s another dreaded chore on an already too long to-do list. On one such occasion, I had managed to drag myself to prayer, just eager to get it over with. I was convinced that while I had covenanted during Lent to sit in prayer for this set amount of time each day, I never promised to be open to it, and I definitely never promised to like it. Slumped down in my chair, I crossed my arms over my chest and did my best to scowl at God. I had this mental picture of me and God, sitting as far away from one another as possible while still being in the same room. God would smile patiently, knowingly, and I would just cast my withering stares from the corner of the room, like a toddler put in time out. Eventually, though, after a few minutes of scorn had come and gone, an unusual thought began to creep into my consciousness. I imagined God turning to me and playfully joking: “Your face is gonna get stuck like that.”

With one simple little sentence, there was a gradual softening – my shoulders relaxed, my face smoothed, my resistance began to dissolve. As grace wove its way through my defense mechanisms, I suddenly became more receptive, more open. God chose humor, of all things, to reach out to me when I was most closed off. God “created a clean heart in me,” God “renewed a right spirit within me,” God “taught me wisdom in my secret heart” not by shaming me for my stubbornness or berating me for my shortcomings, but by inviting me to laugh at myself.

During Lent, we talk a lot about repentance. We hear about deserts and temptation, wilderness journeys and sets of commandments. We read penitential psalms that remind us we were “born guilty,” that we were “sinners when our mothers conceived us.” Our lectionary presents the Jesus of Lent as someone who chases the moneychangers off the Temple grounds with a whip. This is the same Lenten Jesus who verbally rips into Peter when the disciples struggle to come to terms with Jesus’ impending death. Throughout our journey toward the cross, the harshness of repentance doesn’t seem to leave much room for tender movements of mercy.

It’s easy to read today’s psalm, Psalm 51, solely as an expression of human remorse or preoccupation with failure or guilt. The Reformer Martin Luther once observed that whoever called this a penitential psalm “knew what he was doing.” But the psalmist also looks beyond the self to God and lays hold on the wondrous possibilities of God’s grace. Even in a thought-world where holiness and impurity were mutually exclusive, the psalmist acknowledges that despite his iniquities, his transgressions, and his sins, the Holy Spirit is still with him. He hasn’t managed to
scare God off no matter how many scornful glares he may cast or how obstinately he’s behaved or how grumpy his centering prayer practice might have been that day. God isn’t going anywhere. In fact, God was working within the psalmist even before he offered this prayer, even before he recognized his own sinfulness, because only by God’s grace are we ever even able to reach out our hands toward God.

God’s grace always precedes our awareness. Recently, I came across a saying by 9th c. Islamic scholar al-Bukhari that sums this up quite nicely. He writes that “when we come closer to God by a single hand-span, God comes closer to us by arms’ length. When we draw closer to God by an arm’s length, God draws closer by the distance of two outstretched arms. When we go to God walking, God comes to us running.”

When it comes to mercy, God outdoes us all. And who are we to think we can limit the ways in which God initiates transformation? Repentance doesn’t have to look like a thousand lashes or a week in the stocks. As the poet Mary Oliver writes, God doesn’t demand that we “walk on our knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.” Maybe God washes away our sins, not by scrubbing our souls raw, but by gentle exfoliation and a generous use of moisturizer. Maybe God calls us home with lullabies rather than rebukes or reprimands.

The process of repentance can be gentle, it can be tender, even, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy. Any way you slice it, it still involves change, and as we all know, the momentum of “we’ve always done it this way” can be pretty hard to reckon with. Change has to begin with a letting go, a process we know to be fraught with anxiety and grief, even when we’re letting go of something that no longer serves us. This is something that Christians often practice during Lent – traditionally this is a time of giving up of unhealthy behaviors or old habits that are holding us back. But often we find that as we open our hands to let go of something old, we’re also poised to welcome in something new.

The letting go required of true repentance is hard work, no doubt about it. But God doesn’t pry our fingers off of whatever we need to relinquish. God knows a white knuckled grip when God sees it, and instead of reaching for the crowbar, God just smiles and says, whenever you’re ready, I’m here. From one sinner to another, though, don’t wait too long. Your face might get stuck like that.

Rev. Emily Rhodes Hunter
The prophet of Lamentations Chapter 3 recounts a dolorous list of terrible personal sufferings: flesh wasted away, wearing heavy chains, besieged with bitterness, driven into darkness, and more. Alternating between physical pain and spiritual affliction, this chapter presents a soul-crushing set of maladies that lead to despair. “I say, ‘Gone is my glory and my expectation from the Lord.’” Few of us privileged 21st century Americans may completely relate to this, really. But sometimes personal tragedy, the political demagoguery of recent years, or even ennui from having “too much” can make us feel “driven into darkness without any light.”

In verse 21, the prophet makes a startling pivot (if one can still use that word) to just state this belief:

“But this I call to mind: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning.”

The striking contrast between 20 verses of heart-felt lamentations switching to the comfort of God’s enduring love seems to show what can only be a leap of faith. It’s a total change in the lens through which life is viewed, to see there are new mercies every morning of our lives. The prophet is telling me to live in and savor God’s gifts in the present moment. Whether in the blue sky above or the love of family or the hospitality of Ethiopians or the uplifting tune I can sing to myself (Glenn Burleigh’s spiritual comes to mind, “Lay aside every weight, so you can run with patience this race,” as the choir sang recently), these gifts can truly define my life and my hope.

At the January memorial service honoring Marian Carroll, one NYA member recalled Marian exemplified this. On the morning of the funeral for her own daughter, Marian declared “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” She laid aside every weight and recognized God’s mercies are new every morning. What a marvel.

Prayer: Dear God, let me not dwell on my afflictions and wallow in bitterness, but renew my faith in the power of your mercies and open my heart to the blessings I receive each new morning.

Martha Davis
Whenever I read Lamentations, I am reminded of a Russian movie I saw some 60 years ago when I was in Graduate School. It was the Alexander Nevsky Cantata by Sergei Prokofiev. In the next to last movement, an alto sings the mournful solo: Field of the Dead. The soloist, who represents Mother Russia, imagines the scene after a battle, young men struck down by swords and arrows, their earth stained red from their blood, She vows to be a true and faithful wife to the hero who fought bravely for his country. The camera pans over a battlefield littered with the Russian dead.

Alexander Nevsky was a Russian hero. He resembled Cincinnatus, a Roman farmer who, some four hundred and fifty years before Christ, rallied Rome to defeat a barbarian invasion. At the call of the politicians, he left his plow in the field and took over the army. After his success, he returned to his farm.

Similarly, Alexander Nevsky was a farmer, who rallied Russian people to turn back an invasion of Teutonic Knights. After the battle, he returned to his farm.

Jeremiah’s Lamentations is a similar panning of the ruins of Jerusalem. The Babylonians had razed it and removed the leading families into captivity. But in these verses of Lamentations there is no Cincinnatus; there is no Alexander Nevsky. There is no consolation.

The consolation in these assigned readings comes in 1 Peter. The new Christian congregations in what is today Turkey feel the contempt of all around them. Roman officials have not yet joined the oppression, but are soon expected to. The writer of 1 Peter tells them to ignore the oppression, that through Christ they have “been born anew”, they have “tasted the kindness of the Lord.”

Today we may feel full of misery because of what is happening in the world and in our country. Refugees are fleeing natural and man-made disasters throughout Africa and the Mid-East. Those in our own country are threatened with deportation. We may figuratively feel like those in Lamentations: “they flung me alive into the pit and cast stones on me; water closed over my head; I said, ‘I am lost’”.

But we, like the writer of 1 Peter, can pray with Isaiah (40:6-9):

All flesh is like grass
And all its glory like the flower of grass,
The grass withers, and the flower fades.
But the word of the Lord abides forever.

Phil Hanna
Help My Unbelief

Lamentations 3:55-66 Romans 10:14-21 John 12:49-50 March 21, 2018

The message to the Romans – that the Israelites might believe in Christ – presents in this modern era to liberals such as myself, an ethical conundrum. In my office area, when I was working, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Christians and Atheists surrounded me, all reasonable people treating each other with mutual respect and dignity. It did not occur to me that they might lack something in their lives if they did not believe in Christ Jesus. I certainly did not view them as obstinate and disobedient people for failing to adhere to the beliefs upon which I was raised. Most of us inherit the religion passed down to us from our families, and so, as Christians, we have to reconcile within ourselves whether we have been superiorly enlightened in a cultural and religiously diverse world. I myself prefer to take the statement – “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans) – and think, “Everyone who calls on a power greater than themselves will receive peace and understanding.”

All three scriptural passages deal with belief in some notion of God. They suggest that alone, we cannot dig ourselves out of the pit, however we may define that. We live in a culture of covert individualism that suggests that rather than ask for help, we should look within ourselves for the strength and answers to our problems. While self-help books might prod us towards church, community service, therapists, and other forms of human outreach, there is also an underlying message that we need to figure out the answers by ourselves, lest we become too dependent. We nearly cringe at the writer in Lamentations who cries, “Do not close Your ears [O Lord] to my cry for relief.” For we are a rational people who outwardly may bury our complaints with the common notion that God knows better than we what is right, although at the same time, inwardly we might rail at God anyway for our suffering. How many times have we heard when we try to share our complaints (and, as a depressed person, my misery) “You have everything you need; just think about the hungry and destitute people in the world,” or more commonly, “If you’d only do something for others and stop focusing on yourself.” Little wonder, then, that those who suffer deeply might be reluctant to complain to God, for what if the same answer comes back from the Almighty? So we cover up our petty complains, and hover in a nether world, our belief flickering.

But the Lamentation complainer does get answers. We hear the writer’s excited tone, “O Lord, you took up my case; you redeemed my life!” After exhorting a plethora of grievances, the writer receives redemption. Perhaps his ability to fall on his knees and allow the gush of unhappiness spill forth led him to a greener pasture. He did not qualify his grief; he simply let it out. I need to hear this message of hope. Rather than blame everything that seems wrong in my life on self-centeredness, I need to turn to Jesus during this Lenten season, and say, “O Lord, Help my unbelief. Bring food to the hungry, shelter for the homeless, peace to war-torn nations, and justice to unjust. Guide me down a path of spiritual understanding.”

God’s still small voice can speak to anyone of us – Christian, Jew, Muslim. We need to discern what others tell us and ask for God’s help in knowing when we have heard the message that is right for us, for our country, for the world. Faith does come from “hearing the message” but tuning our ears takes hard work. Unless we lose our inhibitions and erase all the “shoulds” from our consciousness, we can’t clear the pathway to hearing. We live up in our heads, so many of us, but it’s sometimes hard to think our way to letting the Lord into our heart. I used to laugh at the seeming sacrilegious red velvet figurine of Jesus sold in local stores, but now I wonder if that profane statue doesn’t represent the longing in all of us for a personal Savior.

Prayer: O, Lord, during this Lenten season, let us grieve and cry out at the wrong in our lives, in the world, in our hearts. Urge us to let go of our self-analysis and convoluted reason so that we step off the precipice of veiled unbelief. Amen. Elizabeth Ross Young
At the beginning of Mark Chapter 13, Jesus discusses the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and tells his disciples what they should expect before the Kingdom of God. “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

It is easy to think that Jesus is describing our present era, or at least the last century. In the last 100 years there have been two world wars, and plenty of earthquakes and famines. And, just recently, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists advanced the “Doomsday Clock” by twenty seconds. So for 2018, the group believes, we’re just “two minutes to midnight.” The scientists state “In 2017, world leaders failed to respond effectively to the looming threats of nuclear war and climate change, making the world security situation more dangerous than it was a year ago—and as dangerous as it has been since World War II.”

So, we must be in the “end times” that Jesus is describing, right? The Kingdom of God must be near? Any day now the Son of Man will appear, the world as we know it will be destroyed in a nuclear holocaust, and the rapture will occur. But, of course, there have been plenty of terrible wars, earthquakes, and famines in the prior nineteen centuries, too. Are the present times really that different?

As I started looking into Mark 13 a little further, with the help of the internet, I found that there is another way to interpret Jesus’s words to his disciples. Yes, we are living in the “end times,” but maybe what Jesus is describing is an ongoing “end times” that have been present since Jesus’s death and resurrection. The “end times” began with the crucifixion of Jesus. This marked the beginning of the “end times” because it signaled the beginning of the perfection of God’s creation through which God’s Kingdom is established.

Considered this way, the “end times” is not something we wait for, marked by a huge apocalyptic event. Rather the “end times” is something we live every day as Christians actively working to bring God’s Kingdom to this world. This appeals to the optimist in me. A recent article in Forbes magazine entitled, “Why the World is Getting Better and Why Hardly Anyone Knows It,” reported that world poverty has been steadily decreasing, with less than ten percent of the global population living in extreme poverty, which is an all-time low. At the same time world literacy, health, and individual freedom have been increasing at impressive rates.

So, instead of the world’s destruction, perhaps we’re seeing some signs that the Kingdom of God is gradually being established. The broken are mending, the sick are healing, and the lost are being restored. Yes, there continues to be suffering, violence, and injustice. Indeed, the “birth pangs,” continue – war, climate change, terrorism, refugees. But, the redemption of creation means that the long “arc of the moral universe” is “bending toward justice,” to quote Martin Luther King, Jr. And, the completion of that redemption ushers in the second coming of Jesus, the Kingdom of God.

Considered this way, the “end times” is not something to fear and worry about. If we are living in the “end times” now, that means it is our calling as Christians to be part of actively bringing God’s Kingdom to earth. The season of Lent is a time when we can reflect on how we can do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, restoring the Kingdom of God to earth.

Adam Bain
“Our Hope: the Coming of the Son of Man”

The scriptures for this day mirror reading the newspaper – destruction, persecution, desolation, betrayal, rumors, pain and fear! And the false Messiahs telling us -- “I alone can fix it!” “I can make us great again.” “Don’t worry I will protect you from ‘them’ coming into our country.”

How do we read these scriptures of end times in today’s upheavals?

“To take the Scriptures seriously is not to take them literally. Literalism is invariably the lowest and least level of meaning. Serious reading of Scripture will allow you to find an ever-new spiritual meaning for the liberation of history, the liberation of your own soul, and the liberation of God in every generation. Then you realize the text is true on many levels, instead of trying to prove it is true on only the simple, factual, or historical levels. Sacred texts always maximize your possibilities for life and love, which is why we call them sacred. I am afraid we have for too long used the Bible merely to prove various church positions, which largely narrows Scripture’s range and depth. Instead of transforming people, the biblical texts become utilitarian and handy ammunition.” (Adapted from Richard Rohr, Yes, And…Daily Meditations (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2013), x.

The whole of Mark 13 is known as “The Little Apocalypse” as is Matthew 24 and Luke 21. This kind of writing shows a pessimistic view of history, and anticipation of the end of the world in some great crisis, a dualistic understanding of human existence, and visions of cosmic unheaval. There are even three verses: vv. 14,19,26 that are verbatim from the Book of Daniel, apocalyptic literature. (See Interpretation Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching on Mark) Often such scripture has been used for ammunition to prove the end of the world is coming. Needless to say, we do not take this scripture literally, but look for the meaning on this side of the resurrection.

The verses selected for our devotion tell us of the sacrilege of the sacred and the warning against false prophets. And then the call is to expect the “coming of the Son of Man,” the phrase that Jesus uses for himself. Certainly with the doomsayers we can concur with the violation of the sacred in our times because all of life is sacred and there is so much violence through war, greed, abuse, name-calling in which we violate and destroy life. I believe we are called to focus on the Coming of the Son of Man, because Christ IS coming to us all the time – that is our hope! God is constantly coming to us, not only “on the clouds” of dreams and visions, but in a friend’s email, in a journal article, in a bedside conversation, in every act of love and kindness. Verse 23 says, “be alert; I have already told you everything.” We have the whole gospel story – Jesus has embodied in word and deed all we need today to guide us in all times of our suffering and persecution. The end time is God’s to determine! Let us commit ourselves in this Lenten season to stand firm and participate in The Gospel story of grace in these times of upheaval and many false prophets.

PRAYER: God of Grace, still all the distractions of our mobile phones, laptops, iPads, and televisons to hear your still small voice for a few minutes each day. Help us to be alert to all the ways your Spirit of love and hope are moving in our worlds and give us grace to trust in your power to redeem and make new, through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen. 

Rev. Beth Braxton
Lamentations 5 is a wonderful set of poetic expressions to God and conversation with God. It is actually quite an enjoyable and heart-stirring read, full of emotion, and relevance for us at NYAPC who are hungry for Spiritual Vitality according to the CAT survey. Jeremiah is the possible author and he seems to be expressing his feelings (lament) as he walks through the streets of Babylonian-conquered (585 B.C.) Jerusalem. He sees so much suffering and sadness. The Jews have lost their inheritance, women are raped, children are hungry, and all hearts are sick. Jeremiah asks God to “remember” what has happened to the Jews, acknowledges the possibility that the bad times result from their sin. After “lamenting” for a while, the poet then acknowledges that he feels hope/confusion/doubts and then flip-flops between praise, humility and anger. Overall, he is asking for God’s mercy. Look at this:

“But you, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.
Why have you forgotten us completely?
Why have you forsaken us these many days?
Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored;
renew our days as of old—
unless you have utterly rejected us,
and are angry with us beyond measure.

Jeremiah is all over the emotional map…like so many of us these days as we try to stand up to social injustice, suffering, and the arrogance of dis-compassionate leaders. What shall we do? Jeremiah ends up asking for mercy, but only after pointing out to God all the Jews have endured already. He is afraid that the generations will end. Is that our tactic with God? Hmmmm?

Mark 13 gives some guidance in his famous parable comparing the importance of recognizing when the fig tree is about to produce. Mark says that it is the same in recognizing the “signs of the times” heralding that the time of our Lord is at hand. He encourages us to prepare our house as a master prepares for a journey, be alert, keep awake; the generations will not end.

Paul attempts to continue God’s reassurance in Romans 11 (over 600 years since poor Jeremiah was lamenting).

“Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them,
when I take away their sins.”

Paul also must have known the book of Lamentations because he makes reference to Jeremiah’s (our) confusion and concerns about the “generations” and the need for mercy.

Eric Slaughter
Sunday, March 25
Palm Sunday

- Isaiah 50:4-9a;
- Psalm 29;
- Philippians 2:5-11.

“The Master, God, has given me a well-taught tongue, So I know how to encourage tired people. He wakes me up in the morning, Wakes me up, opens my ears to listen as one ready to take orders. The Master, God, opened my ears, and I didn’t go back to sleep. I didn’t pull the covers back over my head.”

Isaiah 50:4-5

I was struck by this passage of Isaiah, reminded of the many, many opportunities that I have had throughout my life to learn—to drink deeply from the Bible, with many versions and interpretations to provide a depth of understanding, to read commentary and to reflect on those, and most of all to be blessed with teachers and preachers who are learned, compassionate, patient instructors and encouragers.

This passage reminds me that I have a ‘well-taught tongue,’ and especially with the challenges and daily upheaval, there are tired people—and I know how to encourage tired people. That is an important role to play, and perhaps more importantly, not to give way to exhaustion myself.

Father God,
Here I am! Wake me in the morning from restful sleep. Open my ears to hear. Pull me from the temptation to dive back under the covers. And give me the words—and the actions—to encourage tired people.

Amen

Laura Asiala
The passage from John reminded me of two experiences that I had several years apart in two different churches. The church I attended between the ages of 2 and 12 had two worship services. One service was held in the sanctuary, with hymns accompanied by the pipe organ, anthems sung by the adult choir, and the pastors wearing their black robes. The earlier service, however, was held in the Fellowship Hall, with hymns and songs accompanied by the piano, anthems sung by the youth choir, and the pastors preaching without their robes. At the second service, we sang exclusively from the hymnbook, but at the earlier service we sang a variety of hymns and songs. These included many of the songs being written at that time (the 1960s and 1970s). For some reason, I remember this one by Sydney Carter in particular:

Said Judas to Mary, "Now what will you do with your ointment so rich and so rare?"
"I'll pour it all over the feet of the Lord, and I'll wipe it away with my hair," she said, "I'll wipe it away with my hair."

Said Jesus to Mary, "Your love is so deep today you may do as you will. Tomorrow, you say, I am going away, but my body I leave with you still," he said, "My body I leave with you still."

"Oh Mary, O Mary, O think of the poor. This ointment, it could have been sold; and think of the blanket and think of the bread you could buy with the silver and gold," he said, "You could buy with silver and gold."

"The poor of the world are my body," he said, "to the end of the world they shall be. The bread and the blanket you give to the poor you’ll know you have given to me," he said, "You’ll know you have given to me."

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, I'll think of the poor; tomorrow," she said, "not today; for dearer than all of the poor in the world is my love who is going away," she said, "My love who is going away."

"My body will hang from the cross of the world tomorrow," he said, "and today. And Martha and Mary will find me again and wash all the sorrow away," he said, "And wash all the sorrow away."

The passage from John also reminds me of the pastor at the church that I attended during college. Every December, he would conduct a lengthy search to find the perfect Christmas tree. He would drive all over the city looking for a tree that was the right height and the perfect shape. It could not have a “bad side” that would have to face the wall. It could not have bald spots that had to be filled with extra ornaments so that they appeared less obvious. It had to be just right. His search, of course, took a lot of his time and extra gas for his car. The cost of the perfect tree was also far more than he really needed to spend. He referred to this extra expense as “holy waste.” He knew he was spending more time and money than he needed to, but he felt that it served a worthy purpose. He probably would have felt that same way about Mary’s actions. Yes, the ointment could have been sold to support the poor (although we are warned that this is a cover for how Judas truly intended to make use of the money), but there was a worthy purpose to her actions.

Daniel A. Stokes
A Servant of God

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

Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother’s womb he has spoken my name.  
Isaiah 49:1

Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.  
John 12:26

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.  
1 Corinthians 1:25

“Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”  
1 Corinthians 1:31

I was baptized 14 years ago, while I was attending a college in Seoul, South Korea, which makes me a 14-year-old Christian. This is the season, I evaluate my faith, spiritual journey that I have been on for the most of my adult life. Evidence of all the blessings and prosperities that I have experienced in my life, no doubt I have followed the right master. But I am not sure if I am an adequate servant of the almighty God, seems like I’m falling short as a servant for the unconditional love and forgiveness that I have received, the treasures I have access to.

In my 20s, my drive and motivation were searching for a right way, finding a better career path to live a better life. I remember those days, the jobs that I was qualified for were -art-time temporary positions. I always needed more jobs, always looking for new jobs. It was the holy spirit guided me through, out of the bondage, built a strong foundation for my financial life, found my financial freedom.

By acknowledging all the blessings that I have received, the guidance from internal GPS (Holy Spirit), living a new life that I only could have imagined back then. I’m not quite ready to dedicate my whole life to God, but I’m willing to dedicate 50% of my life to God and God’s mission to save other people whom he loves as much as he loves me.

Helping other people is not an easy task, things could get complicated. Instead of appreciations, the returns from the people I’m trying to help cold be complaints and accusations. With the challenges ahead, I think I should carry the responsibilities, because God loves me, and I am continuously favored by God.

Prayer: Gracious god, thank you for all the wonderful things that you have provided me, opened my eyes to a bigger world than myself. I do not understand your plans, but willing to be used as a servant who is adequate to serve you, and glorify you. Guide me and correct me when I’m wrong each day of my life.

---ShuXian McKenna---
Wednesday March 28, 2018

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

The Suffering of Jesus

The three scripture passages offered today deal with enduring suffering. There is the prophesy of physical pain to be endured by Jesus from Isaiah. The spiritual pain of the betrayal of one of your chosen – Judas in John’s Gospel. And Paul’s explanation of this suffering in his letter to the Hebrews. Some of the greatest music written in history has dealt with the passion of Christ from the renaissance to Bach’s St. Matthew and St. John Passions to Broadway’s “Jesus Christ Superstar” Perhaps no work is more popular than Handel’s “Messiah”. This oratorio has three sections: Christmas, Lent, and Easter. I have found the Lenten section or the Passion portion to be the most powerful. And one of the most moving numbers is the Contralto aria: “He was despised and rejected, rejected of men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” The strange thing about this aria is that Handel chose to write it in a major key (E-Flat Major) usually reserved for more joyous lyrics. Think “For unto us a child is born” or “The Hallelujah Chorus.” And it has a lovely, though mournful melody. But there is a second section to this aria that is often left out. The musical mood suddenly changes almost violently to E-Flat’s relative minor (C-Minor). The accompaniment by the instruments now sounds like the drum beat of Roman soldiers marching in lockstep prodding Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem. The lyrics come from today’s Isaiah passage: “He gave his back to the smiters and his cheeks to them that plucketh off the hair. He hid not his face from shame and spitting.”

And the music transports you – from your church pew or concert hall seat to Golgotha.

David Williams
Keeping Commandments

Imagine the Ten Commandments on a magazine in bold yellow type: “Do these 10 Things and You will Prosper” the cover might say, with a group of smiling faces standing in the land of Canaan. Yes! We will do all of these things, we say as we buy the magazine. All of them, we say as we make our new year’s resolutions. All of them, we promise ourselves anew. All of them.

And we mean it. We really do.

Today’s Exodus passage is that promise – a really serious promise – the covenant at Sinai. It’s part of a long passage full of thunder and lightning, sounds of trumpets, and laws and instructions, including the Ten Commandments. “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do,” say all the people in one voice, and Moses dashes the blood of the sacrifice over the altar and the people. It’s a climactic moment of great promise. But it’s only a moment. Moses will soon go up Mt Sinai, and while he’s gone, the people will beg Aaron for the golden calf. What happened to the covenant? To that solemn “we will obey all of them” promise?

The disciples take an even shorter time to turn away from Jesus. As they gather for their last meal together, Jesus predicts that one of them will betray him. “Surely not I!” they say to each other, and everyone but Judas must really mean it. But it won’t be long before they will all fall asleep on Gethsemane while Jesus prays. And Paul’s Corinthians are squabbling about all kinds of issues, debating who to follow.

On this Maundy or “commandment” Thursday, what to do with these stories? How do we keep from breaking our promises? From falling asleep like the disciples? I’m afraid the answer is that we don’t. I’m afraid the answer is that we will worship our golden calves, that we will fall asleep, that, like the Corinthians, we will lose our way.

But these three passages have something else in common: a focus on ceremony. The ceremony of the covenant at Sinai; the ceremony of the last supper in Mark; the ceremony of communion in Corinthians. With the Corinthians, Paul gets down to basics:

“I speak as to sensible people: judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”

What to do with all the times we fail to keep our promises? All the times we say “surely not I” and then promptly fall asleep? All the times we are divided instead of united? Maybe the answer is in coming back to the table, as we will tonight. The answer is in communion – in the sharing of the bread and the cup, and in community. In returning, over and over again, knowing that even though we are not constant, God is.

- Meg Hanna House
Why does it seem like the bad guys always win?

This has been the topic of much conversation in our house of late – our 4-year-old, Callie, is obsessed with who is “good” and who is “bad.” In her eyes, bad and good are binary. Her recent questions have included: is someone who believes in God good, and someone who doesn’t bad? Is someone who listens good, and someone who doesn’t bad? Shouldn’t good be rewarded with treats (read: candy or ice cream), if bad seems to be punished with breaks from treats? I can understand her obsession to classify like this. In her newly developing nightmares, the bad guys seem to pull ahead every time, and it leaves her crying and distraught. The monsters always seem to win.

Can you relate?

I confess that I, too, feel too often the bad guys have won. Whether the bad guy is a politician or a gossipy neighbor or a sneaky competitor at a client, most of the time, the bad guy is always someone else.

In the Gospel reading for today, I’m reminded not only of the feeling that not only do the bad guys win, but also that sometimes, perhaps even often, I am the bad guy. When Jesus tells Peter that Peter will deny knowing him, Peter says he will not, and yet he does in today’s reading, three times. When Pilate realizes the chief priests are up to no good, he tries to wash his hands of the whole affair. But ultimately, his hand washing is in and of itself participating in Jesus’ crucifixion – in his apathy, Jesus is sacrificed. Did Pilate and Peter think they were bad guys?

How many times have I thought another was the bad guy, rather than turn the lens on myself? Was that other consultant sneaky, or was I paving the way through my own agenda? Is that neighbor the gossip, or am I, by listening? Is that politician the worst, or am I, when I fail to demonstrate my beliefs in the way I behave, spend my resources, and care for others?

Good Friday is a reminder that we all are the bad guys. We all sin and fall short, even when we have the best of intentions. And before we can be “good,” we must come face to face with who we really are, in the darkness and quiet of our hearts. Only then, can light break in.

When Callie awakens from her nightmares, she calls for us, runs to our bed and asks if she can crawl in. What a testament that is to how we should confront badness, whether in others or our own. Can we call for God, and ask for help, whether the bad is from others or of our own doing?

A prayer, borrowing from Hebrews 53:

We, like sheep, have all gone our own way. Thank you, Jesus, for bearing the sins of many, and intervening for all of us, who are all undeserving and in need of your grace. Thank you for the mystery of giving us peace and mercy through your own suffering. Help us offer grace in return to those around us. Protect us, let us crawl into your fold.
Saturday, March 31

Seeing the Cross Again and Again for the First Time

Roger J. Gench

I have a quandary. My quandary involves the cross—the central symbol of the Christian faith. We profess the centrality of the cross, but a critical dimension of it has virtually disappeared from ecclesial faith and practice: the cross as a public or political symbol that exposes not just the brokenness in our individual lives, but also the corresponding social and political brokenness in our world, for the two are intimately connected. This public dimension of the cross is, in my view, essential to the life of the church, but it is absent from too much of our life and faith. Thus, to remedy this absence, for the last ten years or so I have been teaching, preaching and practicing a public theology of the cross, but it has not been easy! Thus, my quandary. I often find myself floundering as I’ve struggled to help folk understand it. However, my Next Church Cohort group is helping me to gain perspective on these struggles, perceived or real. To paraphrase Marcus Borg, I am seeing the cross again and again for the first time. Let me explain.

In the scholarly world, the theology of the cross has undergone significant change over the past 50 years, resulting in a recovery of more biblical understandings of the cross—for the New Testament presents a broader and richer range of perspectives on the cross than traditionally acknowledged, including what I am calling a public or political theology of the cross. From this perspective, the cross of Jesus represents the humiliating, dehumanizing abuse of power anywhere and everywhere it is exercised—on however large or small a scale. The cross is a place where all such abuse is exposed as not the way of God in the world, and also as a place where God seeks to bring life, healing and justice in the midst of brokenness. A public (or political) theology of the cross is grounded in our earliest biblical witnesses. The apostle Paul berated the Galatians with these words: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!” (Gal 3:1). As Pauline scholar Davina Lopez astutely observes, “Paul's Galatians... did not see Jesus' crucifixion, but they did not have to. There were plenty of examples before everyone's eyes (in real life, in stone, on coins) of capture, torture, bondage and execution of the others in the name of affirming Rome's universal sovereignty through domination.”¹ This quote represents a quintessential expression of public or political theology that sees the cross of Jesus as exposing other crosses, large and small all around us. Theologian Ted Jennings puts it succinctly when he says that the cross represents a collision between the way of Jesus and the politics of domination.² Kelly Brown Douglas is even more concrete and contemporary when she speaks about the crucified Jesus’ complete identification with the Trayvon Martins of our world. Moreover, she insists that this identification “with the lynched/crucified class is not accidental. It is intentional. It did not begin with his death on the cross. In fact, that Jesus was crucified signals his prior bond with the ‘crucified class’ of his day.”³

¹ Davina Lopez, Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul’s Mission (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 163.
² Theodore Jennings, Transforming Atonement: A Political Theology of the Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 61
A public or political theology of the cross has profound implications for every aspect of ministry—whether discernment about pastoral care, children’s ministry, budget allocations, staffing, committee configurations and membership, to social witness and action—for our own wounds (marks of the cross) are deeply connected to the wounds of others in our community and world. Recognizing these interconnections can profoundly affect the way we do ministry.

My intentional focus on a public theology of the cross for the ministry of The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church has included invitations to the Session and other groups within the church to engage readings on the subject. I have also preached on the cross ad nauseam! I am even considering inviting the Session to rewrite our twenty-year-old mission statement based on a discernment process that engages the spirituality of the cross. But the work has not been easy; indeed, at times I pondered giving it up! Yet the question my Next Church Cohort group posed to me helped put all of this in perspective. Their question was this: “How would you know if this understanding of the cross was reflected in your ministry?” How would I know?

Buddhism teaches that every symbol is a finger pointing to the moon. In other words, a symbol points to a reality not completely captured in the symbol. So a symbol like the cross needs to be “light on its toes” – it can be reflected in varied and expansive ways. Compassion, for example, is a sign of the cross when it moves beyond patronization into real interrelation with others who are suffering. When Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:19), he is intensely identifying with the crucified of the earth. It seems to me that Paul’s theology of the cross resonates with statements by the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh --“killing someone is killing yourself”⁴ --and James Cone --“When whites lynched blacks, they were literally lynching themselves – their sons, daughters, cousins.”⁵

So how would I know if a political understanding of the cross was reflected in my ministry?” I suppose the truth is that I will never completely know, because the cross is a finger pointing to the moon. But there are intimations of it in every act of compassion – even an act that begins in patronization can, by the power of the Spirit, open us to the possibility of identification with the crucified, of seeing our wounds in the wounds of others. By the power of the Spirit, there are also intimations of the cross every time someone rails against an abuse, because harm of any one person harms all of us – as Martin Luther King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”⁶ Indeed, I’ve come to realize that intimations of the cross are present everywhere in the ministry of the church because the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ is present there too. It’s like learning to see the cross again and again for the first time.

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⁶ Letter From the Birmingham Jail.
Oh Mary, Don't You Weep

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-14
John 20:1-18
Mark 16:1-8

Mary Magdalene finds the tomb open with the stone rolled away. Jesus’s body is missing. She begins to weep. A man she first identifies as a gardener greets her by saying “Woman, why are you weeping?” The man says he is Jesus. She recognizes him in amazement, and calls him “teacher.” She departs to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen.

At Easter we remind ourselves of Jesus’ ability to change the world. In life, He brought His good news to the poor and the marginalized and transformed His followers into leaders. And in His resurrection, Jesus again reached out to the oppressed—to Mary, a woman, and more so a woman who even among women lived as an outcast because she was once a prostitute. Mary, through Jesus’ resurrection, became The Witness for all history.

Jesus sought to change the world at the most basic level of society: how one person treats another. Sixty years ago, the Civil Rights Movement sought to transform a marginalized minority into full citizens—a struggle that continues to this day. In October 2017, the #metoo Movement swept across the country to transform silent victims into vocal witnesses. Too often our society must live out the truth of Martin Luther King Jr’s insight, “Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

When we learn from within ourselves to transform how we treat others—person to person, people to people—we celebrate His continuing presence in the world and in our lives, and we recommit ourselves to His goal to change the world.

Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!

Paul and Gwenn Gebhard