Lent 2020

The New York Avenue Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.
(www.nyapc.org)
2020 Lenten Calendar

(Sunday Services at 8:45am and 11:00am; Christian Education 10:00am)

Wednesday, February 26  
**Ash Wednesday** Service, 7:00 pm, Sanctuary, Supper-PMH, 6-6:45pm

**Sunday**, March 1  
First Sunday in Lent (Communion) – KammerChor Saarbrucken singing at 11:00am

**Sunday**, March 8  
Second Sunday in Lent – reception of new Members, 11:00am service

**Sunday**, March 15  
Third Sunday in Lent – One service at 10:00am

reception

Congregational meeting at 11:00am;

for Rev. Alice Tewell following

Saturday, March 21  
In-Town Solitude Retreat, 8:45am-12:30pm (meditation, labyrinth)

**Sunday**, March 22  
Fourth Sunday in Lent – Rev. Jessica Tate preaching

**Sunday**, March 29  
Fifth Sunday in Lent – Rev. John Molina-Moore preaching

**Sunday**, April 5  
**Palm Sunday**

Thursday, April 8  
**Maundy Thursday** Service 7 pm, Sanctuary

(Communion), soup supper, 6 pm, PMH

Friday, April 9  
**Good Friday** Service, 12 noon, Sanctuary

**Sunday**, April 12  
**Easter Sunday, Communion**

8:45 am Worship Service
9:45 am Breakfast ($7)
10:40 am Special Music
11:00 am Worship Service
Why “Ash” Wednesday?

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

Wednesday, February 26, 2020

When the Worship and Music Committee decided to have an Ash Wednesday service, I was surprised at the different reactions to the idea. If you’re like me, you grew up thinking Lent was just a Catholic holiday, and you were always curious what mysterious ritual accompanied those smudged crosses on people’s foreheads. Others said to me, “I sure hope you don’t do the thing with the ashes … I hate that.” And of course, I heard “I volunteer to give up cleaning out closets … running ten miles a day … or eating brussels sprouts.”

So what’s with the ashes? Sometimes the ashes for an Ash Wednesday service are actually made from burning dried up palms from the previous Palm Sunday. These ashes symbolize fickle human nature by evoking the crises of “Hosanna” that so quickly became derision when the same people shouted “Crucify”. In other traditions worshipers write down obstacles that keep them separate from God, and then burn the slips of paper to symbolize the removal of those barriers.

Before the reformation, the celebration of Ash Wednesday and Lent focused on individual sin, personal penitence, and the individual’s hope for salvation. That tradition brought prayers of confession, fasting, and self denial, all aimed at somehow atoning for sins and making oneself “worthy” to celebrate the Resurrection. The church used ashes – the Old Testament symbol of humility and self-mortification – to drive home the point smack between the eyes.

But it is hard to square that public sign of sinfulness with Jesus’ admonition in Matthew to do our praying, fasting, and alms-giving in secret.

The Calvinist reformation focused not on individuals, but on the sinful nature of all humanity. Reformers argued that old-fashioned sackcloth ‘n’ ashes penitence didn’t get you salvation: it was God’s generous intervention. So where does Lent fit into our reformed tradition? If the nature of the world is sinful, what is the value in a seasonal reflection on sin? Of fasts and penitence? Of anything to do with ashes?

The Calvinists’ perspective on Lent actually mirrored some earlier Christian traditions. In the early Church, Lent was a time when the emphasis was on the Church and not the individual. It was a time for intense study of scripture for the strengthening and development of the faith. It was a time for reconciling and reaching out to those who had become estranged in some way from the fellowship of the Church. And it was a time for instructing new converts seeking baptism. Individual prayer and study was aimed, not at evaluating the success or failure of individual behavior, but rather at seeking ways to praise God by ministering to the community rather than to the self.

Sound familiar? Rend your heart and not your garments (Joel). Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but in heaven. ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew). Like the early Cristians and our Calvinist forebears, perhaps Lent can be a time for us to rededicate our energies to sharing God’s remarkable love with others in our community.

Prayer: Loving, forgiving God, help us see the obstacles we place between us and your love. We know that – despite our flaws – you did choose us to bear your good news. Help us to use Lent to leave behind the burdens of our sinfulness, and to turn instead to building your love in our community. Amen

Carl Lingenfelter
A day doesn’t come and go that we aren’t bombarded with reports of significant human suffering, natural disasters, disease and conditions of our modern society that make each of us wonder why have we strayed? ... where are we headed? ... what is your plan for me in all of this? Some of us have probably even yearned for a return to another time in history when life was somehow easier ... safer ... and less complex. Surely that would be a time without all the troubles that swirl around us now?

Students of history, and those of us who read the Bible whether religiously or just from time to time, know that such a time and place has passed from us long ago. Our lectionary passages for today’s consideration tell of conditions and troubles in the times of the biblical writers that surely rival those we find ourselves in today. And it was their strong faith and trust in God that served them well then, and very much the fidelity and trustworthiness that will see us through our own times as well.

Was it not this same faith that Jesus held as his strength, comfort and shield during his 40 days of wandering in the wilderness when temptation and doubt tried unsuccessfully to overtake him ... derail him ... destroy him?

Faith is not an intellectual assent, nor a sympathetic sentiment. It is the absolute surrender of self to the will of a being who has the right to command this surrender. It is this faith which places us humans in personal relation to God, which, in St. Paul’s language, justifies us before our creator.

It is a faith, still for today, that will see us through even unto victory!

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, give me the faith to trust your plan for me.

Jim and Ann Davidson
As Christians of the Reformed tradition, we have been inclined to follow a common perception of Paul and dismiss law as a part of God’s providence for salvation. We piously quote Paul who quoted the prophet Habbakuk: “The just shall live by faith.” (Gal. 3:11, Rom 1:17, Hab 2:4). English translation cannot justly render either the Hebrew or Greek words translated by “just” or “righteous” (NRSV) because the words mean both.

Being a just person requires faith, but I think better translated for our age as faithfulness. We might write that “faith-full-ness” Jesus never condemned the Pharisees for following the laws of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, a gracious gift of God to a people seeking the freedom of living safely in community. That’s what law is supposed to do – protect us from the worst instincts of our neighbors and them from our worst instincts. Laws establish appropriate living standards.

Yet, like the Pharisees, we burden ourselves with a new rule, bureaucratic or office policy that all have to follow because one of us does not reach up to righteousness but down to wickedness. Such response to every breach leads us to law that enslaves instead of liberates. Thus we become inundated by policies.

The calling of faithfulness is higher than good law, not contrary to it. The truly just live by faithfulness because they do not need the law to live righteously. They understand what it means to love the neighbor as one’s self.

That is why Habbakuk and Paul can juxtapose Faith and Justice in a slogan so easily adopted by almost all of American Christianity. Yet, we have perverted the means of this saying because it carries a double meaning, one of which we ignore. The truly just shall live by faith-full-ness to God’s ways, which is why the lesson from Leviticus cannot be dismissed. Living that way is the way to true prosperity. Yet, faith-full-ness leads to a way that exceeds the keeping of the law. It leads to a life of courageous transcendence of the law to seeking justice in the community when law fails – as law almost always does – to bring justice.

That is why the prophets are always committed to public advocacy. To whom do you speak when the laws are unjust or when a part of the community does not have an adequate share of the communal prosperity? And until the Powers are moved, that is why the church, whether liberal or conservative, feels called to social ministries to meet the needs of those we perceive as “in need”.

Jesus met the immediate need of Peter’s mother and other sick persons brought to him, thereby meeting the immediate need. But when it came to his mission, he called for uncommon and transcendent value. There is no other “first”. First has to be faith-full-ness to the mission – the calling he gives.

Prayer: God of Justice, help us in these trying times to be full of faith so that we may stand for justice even when it is not popular or easy. Give us the faith to transcend human expectation to walk beside Jesus in ministry to the sick, the lame, the blind, the imprisoned, and the captive, that we all may be set free for love. Amen.

Parrish Jones
“They Begged Him to Leave”

Leviticus 26:27-42  Saturday, February 29, 2020
Galatians 3:15-20
Matthew 8:23-34

In Matthew, the people of the town of Gadara beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. I imagine that they were used to the demoniacs outside their gates. They could come and go – roll their eyes and whisper about the crazy people – and go on with their lives. Sometimes they wished those fellows would move on to another town. Sometimes they tried to help them. Then Jesus comes.

The demoniacs challenge him; they probably challenged everyone in some way or another. But this time they go too far. “What have you to do with us, Son of God?” they demand. “If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.” Jesus does, and the entire herd is lost in the sea. So the people beg Jesus to leave. He’d done enough damage; he’d disturbed enough.

We often hark back to the Jesus of our Sunday school years. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” But Jesus is a lot more complex than that. Jesus isn’t always so nice! Was he surprised that the herd died? Wouldn’t he have known that such a thing might happen? What happens next? How does the town overcome its food shortage? Right before this passage in Matthew, Jesus scolds his disciples for being afraid during a storm at sea, asking, “What are you afraid, you of little faith?” Why shouldn’t they be afraid? Storms at sea can spell disaster.

The Leviticus passage is all about disaster. According to the Interpreter’s Commentary, Leviticus was written during a time when “the possibility of conquest and exile was never very remote.” The passage is about vengeance. “If [Israel] disobey[s] me … I will continue hostile to you in fury. … I will abhor you,” says God. Cities will be destroyed, and the people of Israel will be captured. How can Israel avoid such disaster? “If they confess ...; if then the uncircumcised heart is humbled and they will make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant.”

In Galatians, Paul argues that this covenant, this promise from God that God’s people will be blessed, is fulfilled in Christ. He argues that faith is paramount, that arguments over the law are futile because the law did not nullify God’s covenant with Abraham. Paul asks the Galatians to change, to move from something they know (the law) to something new (Christ).

What we know is often what we believe, whether it be a law or, in the case of the disciples in Matthew, a storm. When we change, there’s often something to lose, even if there’s something great to gain. The Gadarenes gain a more peaceful town in exchange for a herd of swine. The Galatians must give up the security of the known for the unknown. Change is hard, so hard that sometimes we beg Jesus to leave.

Prayer – Dear God, Help us to accept Jesus as a “change-agent” in our lives, even when we don’t want him to be. Help us to look beyond the storms and disasters in front of us to a constant faith in you. Amen

Meg House
March 1st: pulled from The Message by Eugene Peterson

Genesis 2:5-9 Adam and Eve
Genesis 3: 1-7 The Serpent. Eating From Tree of Good and Evil
Psalm 25 David’s Prayer to God
Matthew 4: 1-11 The Test after 40 days of fasting
Romans 5: 12-19 The Death-Dealing Sin, the Life-Giving Gift

12-14 You know the story of how Adam landed us in the dilemma we’re in—first sin, then death, and no one exempt from either sin or death. That sin disturbed relations with God in everything and everyone, but the extent of the disturbance was not clear until God spelled it out in detail to Moses. So death, this huge abyss separating us from God, dominated the landscape from Adam to Moses. Even those who didn’t sin precisely as Adam did by disobeying a specific command of God still had to experience this termination of life, this separation from God. But Adam, who got us into this, also points ahead to the One who will get us out of it.

15-17 Yet the rescuing gift is not exactly parallel to the death-dealing sin. If one man’s sin put crowds of people at the dead-end abyss of separation from God, just think what God’s gift poured through one man, Jesus Christ, will do! There’s no comparison between that death-dealing sin and this generous, life-giving gift. The verdict on that one sin was the death sentence; the verdict on the many sins that followed was this wonderful life sentence. If death got the upper hand through one man’s wrongdoing, can you imagine the breathtaking recovery life makes, sovereign life, in those who grasp with both hands this wildly extravagant life-gift, this grand setting-everything-right, that the one man Jesus Christ provides?

18-19 Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right.

I was so excited when Miriam said I could have a Romans text for writing at Lenten. Man was I confused when I started reading Romans 5. Darn! If only I had Romans 12 or 13...
This was a confusing passage to read, so I’ve included Eugene Peterson’s version in The Message instead. Paul is spelling out the timeline in large chunks, first Adam, he sinned, everyone then had to die to pay for that sin; then Moses, who brought the laws [confusing since sin happened before law...] But NOW, Jesus! He has overcome it all. And even more so than Adam sinned for us all. Jesus is even more.

Eugene Peterson writes this for us. He gives us the exclamation of Jesus! Life!
Today, we are given the second story of creation from Genesis. The tree of knowledge. Adam and Eve. Sin. Then we are given a song from King David. God’s beloved King David, asking God for God’s love. Then Jesus being tempted in the wild by the Devil. And lastly, Paul’s justification that Jesus is greater than the sum of all of the parts. Hence the exclamation point.
Overcoming death. The most powerful message of Jesus. In order to overcome sin for us all. Thank God. Take comfort in that today. Take comfort in Jesus, our Lord.

Karen Milam Feret
“Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

“Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (NRSV)

This multilayered Scripture informs and illuminates the bedrock of our faith. What could be a more appropriate subject for reflection during Lent? The unqualified love God has for us was manifested in the gift of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice to forgive our sins and bestow upon us the gift of eternal life.

According to the Scripture, the law and the constraints it placed on us were intended to protect us until “Christ came that we might be justified by faith.” Through baptism, we clothe ourselves with Christ, we all become one with Christ. We move into God’s marvelous light.

Dear God, through the reality and power of the resurrected Christ, we have moved from darkness into Your marvelous light. Thank You for love that knows no measure. Ignite our hearts with the excitement of the empty tomb, so that we might live holy lives and joyfully share the message of Easter and the risen Christ. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Beth Law
Prayer by Kenneth Law, Sr.
Here we are again in the season of Lent, the annual time of preparation for God’s divine intervention into the affairs of the world. There will be a crucifixion and then a resurrection, a miracle! God has triumphed over evil and erected a signpost for the rest of us to follow.

And yet the world we live in seems to little notice. The world goes on with what seems to be even more turmoil than usual. A President is being impeached. Disasters, human and natural, surround us. There are idols everywhere clothed in the trappings of power and possessions. What do we really believe about all of this? What do we say?

I was reminded once again as I read today’s readings that many of the most profound messages in the Bible were written in times of chaos and turmoil. In all ages, faith does not exist in a vacuum, it must live in the midst of the real world. That was certainly true for Jeremiah over 2,500 years ago. His world was a mess! Israel was caught in the middle as rival empires struggled for primacy. Nothing was certain except perhaps continuing uncertainty, disruption, suffering. And yet God can say through Jeremiah, 'Tell them this, “The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth, will vanish from the earth and from under the heavens”.'

Can we say this? Do we believe it? For us, is it a promise or a threat? In today’s reading from Matthew, the Pharisees certainly seem troubled by Jesus message, and even more by his choice of audience – tax collectors! sinners! – people for whom God’s message may in fact be a promise of better things. Where are we in all of this? Perspective is important and for me that is what Lent is all about – getting our perspective right so that we can see God’s work and announce it to the world.

Steve Dewhurst
I recently attended a conference in Denver, Colorado, where I stayed at a hotel some distance from that City’s Convention Center, the anchor site of the meeting. Bounded by short walks to and from the hotel and the Convention Center, all-electric shuttle buses travelling up and down the 16th Street Mall offered the most convenient means of transportation. The bus had the added advantage that it was “free” to riders, paid for through Colorado’s Regional Transportation District.

“Free” meant that people from all walks of life, a range of races, and likely a variety of religious beliefs rode the bus—from visitors like me to those with mental illness who had something to say to fellow passengers—often about God. In the course of a week, I saw young parents commuting to daycare and work with babies in arms, students with colorful tattoos and heavy backpacks on their way to class, an elderly couple coming home from a trip to Bed, Bath and Beyond with a loaded shopping cart, men and women using walkers to get to grocery and drug stores, and a grandmother on an outing with her young granddaughter in search of “pink” (strawberry) ice cream.

In the course of several trips, I observed many acts of kindness—people offering their seats to mothers and fathers with children and the elderly, reaching out to steady those who failed to grab a handrail or strap before the bus lurched into motion, and conversing quietly with each other—strangers until they boarded the bus. Most—though not all—of the bus riders appeared to be individuals of modest means at best. Yet, they seemed to exhibit the right relationship with God urged in today’s verses from Deuteronomy. In the ways they interacted, the people on the Free MallRide Bus were keeping God’s commandments “by walking in [God’s] ways” and acting with generosity out of what God had given them.

I also witnessed one act of significant verbal abuse on my last bus ride that, for me, ties to the stories in the scripture from Matthew of Jesus healing the woman and restoring the girl to life. It was late in the evening when my colleagues and I boarded the bus for our hotel. At one stop, the driver unfolded the ramp that enabled a man in a wheelchair to enter the vehicle. Once on the bus, he complained loudly that the driver had failed to help him board. “She would not touch me!” he yelled, escalating the situation with a series of increasingly aggressive invectives aimed at her until the driver stopped the bus and said she would not continue unless the man left it.

In Matthew 9:18-26, Jesus allows the touch of the woman who suffers from hemorrhages and takes the hand of a girl who has just died, restoring her to life. In doing so, he accepts ritual impurity under the law of the time, risking uncleanness. To the woman, Jesus says, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” Of the child, he tells the crowd gathering for her funeral, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” Jesus touches each in her brokenness that she may be made whole.

The white man on the bus said he was a Vietnam veteran and argued that his double-wide wheelchair required more assistance than he received. The driver was an African American woman who did her job by lowering the ramp for him and surely did not deserve the crude language and threats he hurled at her. His repeated complaint that the driver would not touch him suggested that what he really wanted was to have his brokenness acknowledged. Ultimately, another man on the bus did so, urging him quietly to leave and offering to go with him. The two left together, the man in the wheelchair standing to push it off the bus, and we continued down 16th Street.

A prayer: Dear God, in Christ you recognized our brokenness and touched us that we might be made whole. Help us to see and have the courage to respond to the brokenness in others and to reach out to others harmed and broken because of it. Above all, help us accept with humility our often-desperate dependence on your grace.

Amen.

~Edith Holmes Snyder
If ever there was a passage that spoke to me during this season of Lent, Deuteronomy 8:11-20 reminds me of our place here in Washington, DC among friends and community living our best lives.

“Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God ...” (Deuteronomy 8:11-14)

How will we not forget God during Lent and beyond? Where can I, where can we, remember where we are from in our current place of comfort. Is it through volunteering and financially supporting of NYAPC’s Day Center, where we support our near neighbors with Franklin Square closing and other downtown services few and far between? Is it through welcoming visitors in our Sanctuary, in Community Club, and in our neighborhoods as DC races into Cherry Blossom season? Yes, all of this and more.

This Lenten season will be one of leaning into gratefulness, knowing that what I have and that who I am hasn’t come from me alone. When life is good, when the challenges are chosen instead of forced, I feel the separation from the Spirit. My hope will be for this separation to not translate into forgetfulness or neglect but as another chosen challenge to remember.

Matt Webster
“He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to cure every kind of disease and sickness. ... Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” Matthew 10:1, 8 (NIV)

As Presbyterians, we talk a lot about “call.” We ask people to serve on church boards, for instance, and hope that they experience these invitations as calls. I’m serving as Moderator of National Capital Presbytery this year, another call. One of the best parts of the position is participating in the ordination and installation of men and women called to be Ministers of Word and Sacrament. There are questions asked of people on these occasions, the same questions that are asked of those called to be elders and deacons. None of the questions involves healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers or driving out demons, however.

I’m trying to imagine myself as one of the disciples.

Is it such a stretch, though? The disciples were sent out to continue Jesus’ work of demonstrating that the Kingdom of God was at hand. They were sent out to do the things Jesus was doing. They were sent out to encounter other people, some of them sorely afflicted, and bring healing to them and a message of hope. How do we at New York Avenue translate such a mission to our time and place? Community Club, 7-2-9, and the Radcliffe Room ministry are concrete ways of witnessing to God’s Kingdom; places where people in need are encountered and welcomed, places where relationships are established and nurtured. We don’t all participate in these ministries, however. What about the rest of us? We also have stories to tell, from our lives outside of our church: of meaningful encounters, of new and surprising relationships established, of glimpses of the Kingdom. We need to hear one another’s stories.

One thing we must not miss is that Jesus gave the disciples authority to do the things he sent them out to do. I think that is one of the most important things that the church is called to be – a place for helping people identify and grow into their gifts and callings; a community where we are known and nurtured and our individual ministries validated.

Jesus called the twelve to himself and then sent them out to directly engage with the ills of his world. We believe that we are sent out to engage the ills of ours. Daunting, to say the least. But Jesus gave them authority, a measure of his own God-given authority and they believed him. They went out and did it. We can, too, and at our best, we do.

Miriam Dewhurst
Who Is in Charge Here?

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

Indeed, today’s scripture passages squarely ask us, what standards should govern our thinking, our attitudes and our behavior. Ultimately, who is in charge?

Moses proposed one answer to the question: “Israel, listen! Our God is the Lord! Only the Lord! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6: 4-5 CEB)

Aaron and the people had another idea: Moses returns to the community from his retreat and discovers that his trusted co-leader Aaron has succumbed to community pressure and supported the collection of gold from the people and the design and construction of a golden calf, as the object of worship, no less. It is obvious that the people have flagrantly violated the Great Commandment. But how is Moses to respond if he is to follow his own understanding of God’s will, loving the Lord with all his heart, all his being and all his strength? We are told that he fell before the Lord, fasting without bread or water for 40 days and 40 nights, then he burned the golden calf and smashed it, grinding it thoroughly and dumped the dust into a stream to carry it far away.

It does not require a rich imagination to apply this ancient story to the circumstances and world in which we live today. How should we respond to the worship by so many of so many golden calves? Alas, is it conceivable that we – you and or I – might believe that a golden calf is ultimately in charge of the world in which we are living?

Jesus teaches his disciples that they will encounter coercive threats and even create divisiveness as they go about their assigned or called tasks – because they will be challenging the conventional wisdom about who is in charge. He tells them: (1) “be wise as snakes and innocent as doves;” (2) “don’t worry about how to speak or what you will say because what you can say will be given to you at that moment;” and lastly, move on to a more welcoming community. He concludes, “Therefore, don’t be afraid of those people …. In short, “the Spirit of my Father” is in charge. (Matthew 10:16-26 CEB)

It does not require a rich imagination to apply this ancient story to the circumstances and world in which we live today. How should we respond to the power abuses and bitter divisiveness so present among us today? Is it conceivable that we can put our trust and confidence in the Spirit of our Father to help us answer that question wisely, effectively and lovingly?

Perhaps it does require a rich imagination to understand and apply Paul’s teaching to the Galatians: “Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don’t submit to the bondage of slavery again.” (Galatians 5:1 CEB) Is Paul not calling us fearlessly to resist worshiping false gods and to combat power abuses, social division and injustice?

Is that the purpose of the 40-day Lenten period – to give us the opportunity to wonder, listen, read, pray and freely live into the remaining days that are given to us – and at last, to surrender to the One who is in charge.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, empower us daily to claim your promises to love and protect us and to resist the temptation to cling to fears that keep us from loving you and others. Amen.

-- John H. Quinn, Jr.
How Can This Be?

I’ve often thought of Nicodemus as walking away from his talk with Jesus shaking his head. He begins by saying that he knows Jesus is a teacher who has come from God. But as Jesus talks about being born again, about flesh and spirit, Nicodemus is puzzled. How? He asks. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” And more broadly, “How can these things be?”

The question resonates with what Diana Butler Bass says in her book, Christianity After Religion. In our culture today, we are more likely to ask “how” belief questions than “what” questions. Doctrine and dogma are no longer entry points to faith, says Bass. Rather, we tend to ask: “How can you believe that?” I love that Nicodemus asks “how” thousands of years ago!

Nicodemus has often been characterized as an unbeliever. In the dualism of John’s gospel, likely written for a community facing expulsion from their synagogue, John’s characters can be seen as in or out, believers or unbelievers. But in her book, Imperfect Believers, scholar Susan Hylen argues that characters like Nicodemus are neither. Instead, they add nuance to the dualist language. In/out, believer/unbeliever? Those bright lines were useful to a community finding its new identity outside the local synagogue. But if those bright lines are solid walls, there’s no way in. Characters like Nicodemus provide that way in.

The other two passages for today have an expansive view of faith, as much more than a “who’s in/who’s out” enterprise. In Genesis, God’s promise to make Abram a great nation has a greater purpose: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” And in Romans, Paul’s faith/works argument supports his belief that both Jews and gentiles can be Christ followers.

The wonderful thing about the character of Nicodemus is that he appears two more times in John. He pops up in chapter 7 with a group of Pharisees who want to arrest Jesus, asking “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing … does it?” Then he reappears with a secret believer, Joseph of Arimathea, carrying 100 pounds (yikes!) of myrrh and aloes for Jesus’ burial.

The rest of Nicodemus’ faith journey is left to our imaginations, but I think we can learn from his “how” questions. Asking “how” leads to possibilities, while “what” questions can lead to pat answers. Nicodemus’ other two appearances in John have more to do with exploration and experience than with figuring it all out. He speaks up, if tentatively, to the Pharisees, exploring an idea. And he carries an enormous amount of herbs (imagine the weight, and the aroma!) to Jesus’ tomb. Exploration and experience are how Nicodemus begins to answer to his “how” questions.

In her book, Diana Butler Bass also writes about the importance of experiential faith in our culture today. What does this mean for the church? For me? At one of our Congregational Sundays, the responses to the question, “Where do you see God?” were all about experience:

We see God in the gestures of others and in caring during times of struggle. We find God in worship, in practical examples of what we can do day-to-day in sermons, and when Sundays are a time to get focused on the upcoming week. We see God in the Diaconal Ministers, the music, the Radcliffe Room, and the friendliness of members.

How can you believe? How can this be? How can we tell the stories of our experience, the stories that strengthen us? The stories that lead us to love, to hope and to action? How can we tell them to one another? How can we tell them to the world? How can I?  

Meg Hanna House
Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5  
Matthew 10:24-33  
Galatians 5:7-12

Monday  
March 9, 2020

For many of us, there is a line from a movie that sticks in our brain like ink on paper. For the seventeen-year-old me, I heard the instructions, “stay on target,” repeated three times in the final battle sequence of the original “Star Wars” movie, and it has stayed with me for 43 years. I suspect most daydreamers in America recognize those words. For me, they never lose their freshness. Those three words mean so many things: don’t change course, stick to the chosen route, follow the plan. At its most basic, the message is: “you’re doing the right thing, it may be hard but you have got to keep on doing it.”

Each of today’s Bible passages contains a variation on this theme. In Galatians, we hear Paul reprimand the early Christian community — You were doing so well. Who caused you to stop following the truth? It certainly wasn’t the one who chose you. Be careful! “Just a little yeast makes the whole batch of dough rise.” I trust in the Lord that you will not believe those different ideas. Someone is trying to confuse you. Paul is saying — Stay on target.

In Matthew, Jesus gives his followers encouragement when they are insulted and belittled. ...don’t be afraid of those people. ...If you stand before others and are willing to say you believe in me, then I will tell my Father in heaven that you belong to me. But if you stand before others and say you do not believe in me, then I will tell my Father in heaven that you do not belong to me. Jesus is saying — Stay on target.

In Deuteronomy, Moses makes a second set of stone tablets for the Ten Commandments after he convinces God that his people will not rebel again, that they will stay the course and be God’s chosen people and follow his instructions.

During Lent, these passages remind us that staying on target, that is, staying true to Jesus and his message, is not the easy path. Far from it. Following God’s plan is the most challenging, and potentially dangerous, course. It may even come at the cost of one’s own life.

Go out into the world in peace. Have courage! Hold fast to what is good.  
You are doing well – the course is difficult – stay on target.

Paul and Gwenn Gebhard
Fourteen days ago, many of us began this penitential season by receiving the imposition of ashes. The ashes are a mixture of anointing oil and the burnt palm fronds used as part of the celebration of last year’s Passion Sunday, when we commemorate the Triumphant Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem bringing peace, while riding on a borrowed donkey. Jesus’ leading a procession in this way is itself a caricature of the pomp of a war-mongering King riding into town on a white steed, bringing with him legions of soldiers, a clear enactment of power and hegemony, and in Jesus’ day clearly pointing to Rome. Jesus turned that symbol on its head, demonstrating the humility of the upside down reign he proclaimed. “You are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Today’s texts move from law to Gospel to epistolary exposition on the theme that God is the author and finisher of our faith and that right relationship with that God, one of humility, mercy, and generosity, is the sole end of our devotion. That devotion can and will bring suffering and upheaval into our lives and even into the relationships dearest to us. Still, God holds us accountable to act as servants of his program of love for all.

The Old Testament text reminds us that what God requires is . . . “only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in God’s ways, to love God, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. . . .” The passage then summarizes God’s salvific actions on behalf of God’s chosen people, who began as only 70 in bondage in the land of Egypt and who now are as numerous as the stars.

The hard Gospel pericope recounts the cost of discipleship, while ending with the gentle assurance that so much as giving a cup of cold water to a child earns an eternal reward for the disciple fixed on following Jesus.

St. Paul promises that loving one’s neighbor as one’s self is the actualization of the freedom inherent in living by the Spirit.

It is not for nothing that the root of humility is “humus” or earth, dirt, dust. From dust we come, to dust we return. The way of the pilgrim is living into the ever-constant reminder that right relationship with God and all others is the path of humility where we find grace upon grace and mercy upon mercy. Thanks be to God.

Prayer—

Almighty and ever living God, we believe, help our unbelief. In this penitential season and always, help us enact for our benefit, the benefit of others, and for your glory, the humus from which we come and to which we will go.

Jonathan Lauer
Wednesday, March 11

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

What is a True “Fast”?

As we think about Lent and the idea of fasting in some way, Isaiah points to the hypocrisy and hubris we can so easily succumb to. In Isaiah 58:3, the people complain to God:

“Why have we fasted and thou seest it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it?” Even lying in sackcloth and ashes for full effect does not seem to impress Isaiah – “will you call this a fast (really?)”

One commentator termed these attempts at fasting as “ritual without reality.” And indeed, Isaiah goes on in verses 6-10 to list the rather daunting examples of a true fast, e.g. Undo the thongs of the yoke and let the oppressed go free. Bring the homeless poor into your house. Pour yourself out for the hungry. Wow.

In my day to day life, it is easier to be like the people of Israel above and engage in rituals of worship rather than deeply examine my spiritual condition. Easier to click on email petitions of concern rather than looking inward at how fully I live to fight today’s forms of oppression. How much do I ‘pour myself out’?

Roger Gench used to preach on Ash Wednesday that the best way to fast might be to “take on” something rather than give up something. This might be the best way to avoid the pitfalls of the ritual fasting we (and the people of Israel) attempt. And “taking on” something takes a dedication of my time – maybe to work more at inreach or outreach, or both.

I think of hospitality, for instance. Hospitality is a central value in Christian life, as reflected in the NYA Vision statement. Maybe that is a worthy and available work to “take on” as my fast. Dorothy Bass writes about many facets of the intersection of time and Christian practices, and she writes in “Receiving the Day”:

In an era when many of us feel that time is our scarcest resource, hospitality falters. A wise Benedictine monk said: ‘In a fast-food culture, you have to remind yourself that some things cannot be done quickly – hospitality takes time.’

I hope (by the time you read this around March 11) I am examining my use of time this Lenten season, and finding ways to enrich my spirit through greater exercise of Christian hospitality. I am throwing out my sackcloth and ashes!

Martha Davis
An Easy Yoke, A Light Burden

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

Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light. Matthew 11: 28-30

“His yoke is easy and His burden is light.” So claims Jesus, and Handel embraces the claim in his light and shimmering chorus in The Messiah. The joyous words rebound from voice to voice, springing from easy to light and back again. But it all comes to an end in a stately final repetition – and suddenly everything doesn’t seem so very easy and light. In fact, in other Gospel passages, Jesus seems to make a very different claim, for His way will cleave mother from father, parent from child, the most basic of human connections. How can that be so very easy?

Maybe we should begin to address that question by considering the yoke in the Biblical record. The word for yoke in Hebrew is OL, which means burden and is used both literally and metaphorically. [“Yoke” in the Encyclopedia Judaica] The circular wooden halter placed around an animal’s neck and then harnessed to a plow or vehicle is an instrument of burden. It constrains the ox to work, and the ox has no say in the matter. The yoke thus becomes a major symbol of slavery. The rabbinic literature contrasts the “yoke of the kingdom of man” and the “yoke of the kingdom of God”. The yoke of the kingdom of man is the burden of earthly concerns, that of the kingdom of God is the burden of proclaiming the unity of God and observing the Law. The first is sheer slavery. The second demands a choice, and in that choice to submit comes an ineffable freedom. Jesus’ call to freedom mirrors Isaiah’s call: “Is this not the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break all yokes?” [Isaiah 58: 6] Freedom becomes submission to the right thing. And Jesus affirms that you are not alone in living out that choice.

In her autobiography, The Long Loneliness, Dorothy Day describes why she left the bohemian world in which she had in many ways prospered for the Catholic Church, which became her home, her fortress, her prison. The birth of her daughter, Tamar, incited Day’s decision: “We all crave order, and in the Book of Job, hell is described as a place where no order is. I felt that ‘belonging’ to a Church would bring that order to her [Tamar’s] life which I felt my own had lacked.” So Dorothy Day chose a form of submission that yielded a genuine freedom. Or, in the words of the Apostle Paul: “Carry each other’s burdens; that is how to keep the Law of Christ.” [Galatians 6: 2]

Paul B Dornan
Friday, March 13, 2020

Scripture:  
Ezekiel 28:1-10  
John 6:1-15  
Galatians 6:7-18

“Jesus said, ‘Have the people sit down.’ There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they want. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, ‘Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.’ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.”  

John 6:10-13

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”  

Galatians 6:9

Reflection:
I have recently had a confluence of experiences in my life here in Northern Michigan, which bring these verses into stark clarity, and the insight that I have recently received is the importance of personal responsibility in the context of a community which makes people response-able. How did Jesus feed the people? He created an environment of love and friendship that emboldened and empowered people to share the blessings that they already had, and then miraculously, there was enough for all.

The experiences included not only this bible study assignment, but also the film “Just Mercy” and an opportunity to meet Nick Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, authors of the bestselling books Tightrope (about poverty in America) and Half the Sky (about poverty in the developing world), and it was fascinating to hear how this prominent husband-and-wife team, a journalist and a successful investment fund manager, describe the deaths of despair and need for grace in both worlds.

I listened to a recording of Half the Sky ten years ago in my car, as I drove across a frozen, snowy, and breathtakingly cold Michigan, and as I pulled up to my destination, fingers tingling in my gloves because my car still wasn’t warm enough, I thought to myself, “I’m really not too sure how much more of this I can listen to.” The response I got thundered in my head, “Who are you to despair at their misfortune?”

I believe God speaks to me every day. Some days I hear him. Fewer days, I think, I listen. And what I heard then, and hear again today, is that we must not grow weary in our efforts to speak the truth, stand in the gap, share our blessings, change the narrative, do our part to change structural injustices and poverty, and above all, remain hopeful in the truth that in Christ all things—all things—are possible.

Prayer (St. Francis of Assisi)
"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” Amen.

Laura Asiala
Ezekiel 28: 11-19

March 14, 2020

“Walk Humbly with Your God”
or
How Far We Fall

Ezekiel’s passages are a bit of a bummer because they so clearly point out the failings of us humans—maybe not always as grand a scale as portrayed, but we all probably have a little of each going for us. Ezekiel does not mince words: “Your commerce grew so great, lawlessness filled your heart and you went wrong...Your beauty made you arrogant, you misused your wisdom to increase your dignity...” We all have so much grace and beauty from God. We are a clean slate at birth to do His will, to walk humbly with Him. We have a choice, many choices actually, as to how we live our life, whether we fail in large or small ways, or whether we strive to be God’s servant, to walk humbly with God with love for our fellows.

Sadly, the results of these bad behaviors cited in Ezekiel say that “your iniquity came to light...I kindled a fire within you and it devoured you...you came to a fearful end and shall be no more for ever.” Alas, our iniquities do all seem to come to light. The behaviors Ezekiel lays out are for the ages as we witness them today in our nation and world as power, commerce, lawlessness, and arrogance scream across our news headlines. Iniquities do come to light. The powerful and corrupt do fall. But God’s love shows us that all can be redeemed, all can be forgiven of transgressions, if we are willing and dare to repent and walk humbly with our God.

Jesus shows us the way in John’s story of Jesus’s disciples and the boat and the crowds following Jesus to Capernaum. [Sidebar: And what about that boat? The disciples rowed 3-4 miles in heavy wind and reached the other side? That is a huge distance!] Jesus said we must work for the food that lasts, the food of eternal life. If we eat the bread of faith, our hunger will be satisfied, for inner peace will fill our souls.

Our faith in God, our following Christ, is what will feed our souls. Through this we are not alone. As Paul writes in Corinthians, God is with us. Life is not easy, and troubles, challenges, disasters, untold pain befall us. We are not alone. Paul writes,” He comforts us in all our troubles, so that we in turn may be able to comfort others in any trouble of theirs.” We have God’s consolation and the instruction to console others. And we have prayer. Paul says prayer is the answer for deliverance, that we must pray for each other as well as console.

So in this Lenten Season, let us pray for ourselves and others; let us comfort others when needed and allow them to comfort us through God’s love and comfort; let us try every day to reject those all-too-human instincts for power and wealth, and to choose instead to walk humbly with our God.

Prayer: God of love, be with us as we try to do your Will and to love one another.

Marilyn J. Seiber
“So Moses cried out to the Lord: ‘What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.’” Exodus 17:4

Lessons from a Complaining Congregation

In reading the Exodus account of Israel again, I can’t help but conclude that the major reason God kept them wandering in the wilderness was their propensity to grumble and complain. For 40 years, they wandered with Moses as their leader, finally entering the promise land with Joshua, his successor.

One writer estimated that collectively, the people of Israel complained at least 14 times, starting when they were still in Egypt. In this part of the Exodus story, the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea, escaping Egypt where they lived for 430 years. They complained that the water at Marah was bitter. God made it potable and led them to Elim, where there were good springs. In the desert before Sinai, they complained that they had no food. God gave them manna.

The verse today deals with the third post-liberation complaint: when they were at Rephidim, they complained of thirst. God responded by making water flow out of the rocks of Horeb.

With three complaints – all answered by God – one could conclude that becoming a squeaky wheel will eventually resolve complaints. However, I am not advocating that we become a congregation of complainers to solve our problems. (God punished the Israelites in subsequent complaints).

I have seen that happen several times at work; in the process the complainer gained a reputation as someone who whines and does nothing to help solve the problem. Now, I have a strict management rule: do not complain to me if you have no solutions to present.

This was obviously not a rule imposed by Moses. But at this point in the Exodus story, two lessons on the nature of complaints become evident:

When we complain, we become ungrateful for what God has done for us in the past. All too often, we cannot think beyond our immediate need. In this case, the Israelites’ need for food and water. How quickly they forgot that God rescued them from 430 years of bondage in Egypt.

When we complain, we minimize God’s ability to perform miracles. When we become too focused on complaining as a solution, we are unable to think outside the box. The conventional solution for Israelites may have been to dig a well. Instead, God provided water out of a rock. Trust God, always!

Moses was a wise leader of his congregation. He listened to the Israelites complain and he prayed to God for guidance.

Let us pray as Jesus did to God while in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Father, not my will, but Thine, be done”

Amen.

Adlai Amor
In Him It Is Always Yes

Many of you know that my faith is building anew after some 50 years away from church, any church, a large part of that time in the grip of one or another psychiatric disorder. The last 40 of those years focused on building family and career under predominantly secular influences but never far removed from the Christian teachings of my youth. As an in-large-part secularist, I like others searched for truth across intellectual disciplines and among thoughtful individuals from diverse groups spanning multiple social strata—the well and the diseased, the educated and the uneducated, persons with and without means, the powerful and the disenfranchised. And, although I learned a great deal that remains true, I never found a single truth to explain or significantly ameliorate the pain and injustices inherent in human experience.

That which I have learned or relearned since finding NYAPC filters obligatorily through the lens of past lives, what poet Stanley Kunitz characterized as “The Layers” (The Poems of Stanley Kunitz 1928-1978). I have walked through many lives, he wrote, some of them my own, though some principle of being abides from which I struggle not to stray. As my journey proceeds, I am honored to report progress to you with straighter trajectories and greater spiritual grounding. Again this Lenten season, I hope that my milestones recall if they cannot hope to guide your own.

Like the unraveling of our democracy, gun violence, voter suppression, climate change, immigrant detentions, and emergent white nationalism, the passage from Ezekiel assaults sensibilities. It is difficult to study war, even one perceived as holy or necessary. It is still more difficult to imagine John’s beautiful rendering of the promise of eternal life. More and newly true to the trajectory of my building faith is Second (not Two) Corinthians wherein we are reminded that God always says yes. Sometimes yes but later. Often yes that requires translation. Sometimes yes all but inaudibly. But ever and unfailingly yes, I am with you.

Recent conversation with one of the DDSC clients exemplifies progress beyond past reliance on democracy and its institutions. I had arrived sleepless for the regular volunteer stint and quickly (kindly) was discharged to self-care. Ascending with me toward the street was a woman disgruntled because she had been unable to locate a basement exit. “It’s a fire hazard,” she complained. “Barack and I climbed all those stairs for so many years at the ______ Street shelter. It took forever to persuade them simply to open a door, but Barack and I kept at it and eventually a door was opened.” As we emerged on to New York Avenue, I hesitated, uncertain how to allay her concern. After a pause came the only solution I could muster: “You know, I find that Barack cannot help me much anymore. When I have a problem like the one you describe, these days I turn more often to God.” Perhaps that would work, she acknowledged.

I felt a bit guilty as I headed for the Metro, worried that I had failed to ease her anxiety. I resolved to examine the fire plan and get back to her, hoped fleetingly that some better informed or rested NYAPC member would do so in the interim. Weeks later, I do not yet know whether that woman prays to God or Obama, but I do know to Whom I turn as I make my way through what Pastor Heather described as a liminal season of swirling anxiety between the known and unknown (see sermon of February 2, 2020).
We do not stand in this messy middle by ourselves, she assured. Rather, God walks alongside, whistling a tune we do not yet recognize.”

In a long-ago liminal time, Paul assured the Second Corinthians, “. . . it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.” And Jesus urged his followers in Capernaum, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life. . .” and comforted them with the words, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Stanley Kunitz similarly urges us to live in the layers, not on the litter. And when this spiritual sojourner asks, how shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses, I nevertheless . . . turn . . . turn, exulting somewhat, with my will intact to go wherever I need to go . . . because, although the path forward is obscure, the answer in Him is ever and unfailingly, yes.

Though I lack the art to decipher it, no doubt the next chapter in my book of transformations is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

Ann Bradley
Evangelicals rub me the wrong way. Like many I don’t care to be made out to be wrong in my faith. Or anything really. Yet their numbers are great. I’ve often wondered why so much success given my experience. I ask myself what evangelicalism would look like on me. Ezekiel tells the story of a lofty cedar of Lebanon he calls “Assyria” that, much as Icarus of Greek legend did when he had the temerity to fly too high and close to the sun, grew so tall as to reach the clouds. The denizens of earth looked to it for their nurture and protection, the source of all good. Ezekiel writes, “Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I gave it into the hand of the prince of the nations; he has dealt with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out.” The lesson is humility. It’s directed at Egypt’s Pharaoh.

And at us. The story is also one about faith misdirected.

John writes of the faithlessness of the Jews in Jesus’ claims of origin and nature. “They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”. Jesus’ response to this disbelief is a simple but titanic evangelism. “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” An invitation to and promise of permanent spiritual communion with God through the Christ Spirit. Good news indeed.

Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth, “Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ”. As well “so now instead you [I/we] should forgive and console him [myself/each other], so that he [I/we] may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him [myself/each other]. “I am personally extremely grateful that his evangelistic promise includes forgiveness for my failures. Paul also writes, “When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing God.”

And finally, “Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God’s word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in God’s presence.”

"Not the stranger, not my neighbor, but it’s me O Lord. Standin' in the need of prayer”

Nathan Moon
Lifting the Veil

Ezekiel 33: 1-11  
John 6: 52-59  
2 Corinthians 3: 1-18  

Sunday March 18, 2020

“This is a hard saying. Who can understand it?” John 6: 60. This question from the disciples could well apply to all three of today’s scripture readings.

What ties these three scriptures together? What is the message for us today?

The words of Ezekiel to the Israelites in exile in Babylon (593-571 BC) are classic old covenant warnings of condemnation for sin unless there is repentance. Ezekiel is called by God to serve as a “watchman” and referred to as the “son of man.” He is burdened with delivering the message of obedience and self-discipline, or else the people’s blood will be on his hands. Yet God’s wish is not for death and condemnation, but instead “that the wicked turn from [their] way[s] and live.” However, the old rule-based covenant didn’t seem to work so well.

In the Gospel passage (the “hard saying” referred to above), Jesus speaks emphatically about the need to “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood.” The disciples, focusing on the literal words, are completely grossed out by this concept (and of course, Jews were forbidden to taste blood). Is Jesus suggesting cannibalism? Yet Jesus keeps reinforcing this image, insisting that eating his flesh is the key to eternal life. Clearly there is something deeper here, but what?

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians offers a means to understand the “hard saying,” through its message for Christians then and now. Paul contrasts the Old Testament ministry of laws, written and engraved on tablets and stones -- a message of condemnation -- with the New Testament ministry of the Spirit, engraved on our hearts -- a message of affirmation, grace, righteousness, and liberty. The Old Testament rules have always been an imperfect means of understanding and relating to God. Now that Christ has come and has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within us, the “veil” has been lifted. “Even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” vv. 15-17. Now, we need not rely only on the old rules engraved on stones and tablets, which can be misinterpreted, or can themselves become idols. Instead, we have an example in “flesh and blood” and Spirit of what God is like and how God intends for us to live our lives and to love one another. And we are reminded of this each time we take communion together.

Help us, God, to come face to face with you, and to feel the presence of your spirit engraved on our hearts. Inspire us to serve as witnesses every day to your eternal love and reconciliation.

Jim Bird & Betsy Merritt
Quaecumque sunt vera

Thursday, March 19, 2020

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

Ezekiel was told to warn the people: “The righteousness of the righteous shall not save them when they transgress; and as for the wickedness of the wicked, it shall not make them stumble when they turn from their wickedness.”

Jesus said to his disciples: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.”

Paul’s letter at 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 teaches: “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. … For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord … For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

How can we follow today’s teachings in these days, when the very idea of truth is questioned, denied, or ignored in so many situations, and justice assailed in so many ways? How can we avoid doing wickedness and betraying Jesus, hold fast to the beliefs we profess, follow the Spirit that gives life, engage in ministry by open statement of the truth, and let the light that has shone in our hearts give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ?

I take inspiration from Paul’s letter to the Philippians 4:8-9: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are noble, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”

The first phrase of this passage appears in Latin on the official seal of my alma mater: Quaecumque sunt vera ("Whatsoever things are true"). A phrase in Greek inscribed on the pages of an open book was added to the official seal, taken from the Gospel of John 1:14: “The Word full of grace and truth”. More fully: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Dear God, We thank You for Jesus, Your Word made flesh to dwell among us—speaking truth and doing justice and showing us Your way. For doing this, Jesus was condemned unjustly for blasphemy and sedition, was crucified, and suffered the depths of human pain, giving his life for the sins of the world. We confess for those situations in which we rebel against You, or seek to hide from You—ignoring Your commandments, accepting lies presented as truth, and failing to seek justice. Though we deserve Your condemnation, we ask for Your mercy. Give us strength and courage to keep our minds, hearts, and wills focused on whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, and to suffer in this life if we must, the consequences of speaking truth and doing justice, as Jesus did, to be faithful to You. As we reflect and commit ourselves afresh, let us be, like Jesus, a light to Your world. And give us Your peace. Amen

Karen Mills
God’s Wrath and Love

Lent is time for reflecting on one’s faith, and an issue in the Bible that often puzzles me is: how can God seem so wrathful in some places and so merciful and loving in others? We don’t often discuss the passages in which God endorses violence, such as against those who have sinned. Have you ever noticed that our lectionary readings from the Psalms sometimes skip over the verses in which God’s wrath is expressed?

This issue came to mind as I read the passages for today. God’s wrath is vividly expressed in the passage from Ezekiel. The prophet explains that those left in Israel believe that God has given them the land as their possession. Yet, they forget why God cast out the Canaanites before them. They eat meat with blood, worship idols, rely on the sword, defile one another’s wives, and commit other abominations. This leads God to declare judgment on them: those in the ruins shall die by the sword; those in open fields will be devoured by beasts; and those in caves shall die by pestilence.

In contrast, passages from 2 Corinthians reveals God’s love despite our weaknesses. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; struck down, but not destroyed.” 2 Corinthians 4:8-9.

Are God’s wrath and love irreconcilable? One might think that the wrathful God of the Old Testament is different from the loving God of the New Testament. But, God’s wrath is also expressed in the New Testament. For example, in Romans, Paul writes “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” Romans 1:18.

Perhaps we can see God’s wrath not as contradictory to God’s love, but as an expression of God’s love. Through God’s wrath, we see how deep and powerfully God loves us. Thus, to minimize God’s wrath is to minimize God’s love for us and the great mercy of God’s forgiveness. Further, God’s wrath deeply reveals God’s concern for justice and righteousness. God’s wrath against injustice and sin show God’s love in action. Then, when we are forgiven for sin, we can appreciate what a great gift God has given us.

God’s redeeming gift of love – even despite our sins that raise God’s wrath – is revealed to us through Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.” 2 Corinthians 4:11-12. During Lent we can remember God’s great passion for us, sometimes expressed in anger, but ultimately expressed in the greatest gift possible: a human death and resurrection in Jesus Christ.

Adam Bain
The path of life is an interesting concept. We all have our own individual path yet our path is connected with so many others. Some have a great impact on our path, you could even say we closely share a path a times.

Sometimes another person controls your path more than you do. As an infant your path is largely dictated by your parents. As you grow, you slowly go on a more independent path, sharing it at times with a spouse or your own children but it is still uniquely yours. Even those you share it with don’t have the same history and story you do.

Along the way your path crosses with others consistently. From friends and family, teachers and co-workers, pastors and doctors, your path will cross with a number of people who will make a major impact.

You will also cross paths with people whose impact may not be as long lasting but still can alter your path even if just for a limited time; the bus driver, stranger on the street, the dog you stopped to pet on your run.

Some people like to schedule their path. They know where they’re going to be every hour after they wake up. People have plans for where they’re going to be next year and in ten years. Others enjoy having a more open path. Some people's circumstances dictate how much they can or can’t control their path.

The truth, though, is as much as we might like to think that we are in complete control of our path, in the end our path is not ours alone to dictate.

Some of the most basic elements of our path we have no control of. No one knows how long their path is. The end could be coming soon or decades from now. There could be smooth sailing for miles or roadblocks just around the next bend.

By fate or random chance there are things along your path that you can’t control. Setbacks that come because of no fault of your own. Lucky breaks that you didn’t see coming.

Scripture however teaches there is one constant along our path. From baptism until we leave this earth God is there with us.

In Ezekiel chapter 36 the Lord tell the Israelites:

“25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”
God knows we will all make mistakes and stray off the ideal path from time to time. But even when we stray, God is still there with us to help us get back to the path he wants for us.

In the Gospel of John (8:12) Jesus says “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

While we may not know the direction, duration or challenges that lie before us on our path we do know if we keep the faith God will lead us through whatever may come because while we don’t always know the next step in our path the Lord knows his path.

“I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going,” Jesus says. (John 8:14)

We don’t know our path or the path of God, but we do know he knows what he is doing and that he is there with us as we go down our path.

In 2 Corinthians Paul references back to what God said in Isaiah 49:8:

“In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people.”

While our path may not always be how we planned it, while there may be dark days and while we may not know what’s around the next bend, we do know wherever it leads the Lord has made a covenant to walk with us and light the way forward.

Melanie Dann
Today’s passages from Scripture are all about light and darkness, what it means to truly see God and to have God’s spirit. To me, the reading hum with energy, movement and action.

In 1 Samuel, in a surprise twist, David, the youngest son of Jesse, is anointed as king, finding God’s favor and displacing Saul. God’s spirit is at work in powerful ways. When God picks David, the Scripture tells us “the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” I love the idea of the spirit of God coming mightily... not just that David has been chosen or that God has set out a special path for him, but there’s vigor, strength, and robustness to this blessing.

Meanwhile, in the gospel of John, we learn about Jesus healing a blind man, telling him “I am the light of the world.” Jesus restored his sight on the Sabbath, provoking the ire of the legalistic Pharisees. But despite intense social pressure and his parents’ refusal to stand with him, the man immediately believes. Not only does he believe, he actively engages with the doubters and the skeptics in his community, including those with far more social and religious authority than he. He is actively stepping into relationship with God now that the way has been made clear. He embodies what the Message version of the Ephesians passage reminds us: “No more stumbling around… get on with it!”

There’s a tactile trend in the passages, along with a healthy dose of mixed metaphors. What in the world is “fruit of the light”? Apparently “fruit” is karpoß, or karpos, Greek for “that which originates or comes from something, an effect, or result,” and can be used in either a literal sense (i.e. fruit of the vine) or a figurative sense (as in today’s passage). While this feels a little jumbled, there’s also something so dynamic about the phrase. Usually when I think about light, I imagine a lamp casting light, rather passively. The flickering flame of a candle or a 40-watt bulb beneath a lampshade perhaps. But fruit of the light certainly doesn’t seem passive or quiet. I have this mental picture of a juicy peach, just oozing God’s light with every bite. Plus, in Psalm 34:8, we’re told: “Taste and see that the Lord is good...”

In this season of Lent, more associated with fastidiousness or deprivation, can we think about the overflowing abundance of God’s love and bite down into it, savoring all of God’s goodness – all that is good and right and true – like a juicy peach? We were in darkness, but are now in light… thanks be to God! 

Kristin Ford
Ezekiel 34:17-31

The Sovereign Lord sent his servant David to tend his flock, to protect the muddied water, the trampled pasture and save them from self destruction. The Sovereign Lord sends rain, the trees bear fruit, my people, the sheep of my pasture, will no longer fear, or suffer famine, and will live in safety.

John 7:37-52

Jesus offered the people the Holy Spirit, rivers of living water flowing through them and from them. But some said he could be the Messiah, because they thought he was from Galilee, and the scriptures prophesied that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem and the house of David.

2 Corinthians 5:6-15

This passage evokes the two worlds where we live. The world of the body and what is seen, and the world of what is in the heart and of Christ’s love.

Dog eat dog. Survival of the fittest. Raw nature in its brutalities. Only the strong survive! God has lifted mankind above the savagery of beasts in brutal competition. He sent David to protect the land, the environment, from destruction and turn the seasons, the rain, the crops, the wilderness and forests into refuges of safety. God will deliver Israel from fear, famine, and plunder by other nations. God brings the safety and blessings of righteous civilization to his chosen people. God will protect the weak and his flock shall be saved.

In these passages I see this promise from God, freely given. But I believe God has given us all free will, and sent Jesus Christ from the house of David as a living example for a free people who can embrace or reject our faith, for life or even minute by minute.

The great challenge of Christianity is to embrace the faith in a sometimes-brutal world. Often we pray for faith and joy and hope, and lose them in stressful times. We hope and pray for the faith of Christ to come to us, and we wonder, wonder, wonder what is it all about?

But it can be easier than that, thank God. God has made us free souls, and we can simply decide ourselves to grab Christ’s offer, his love, our faith, and hold it. Not to wait for divine intervention or be knocked head over heels by the glory of Christ, but just walk over and pick it up. Faith can be light as a feather. Just pick it up and start working for Christ, decide that almost casually ourselves, and then we don’t have to wait for faith to find us.

Will Christian faith chosen with free will take us completely to the world of what is in the heart and the world of Christ’s love, and out of the world of the body and what is seen? Probably not but as Sin-Full humans it might be enough to be reaching for it.

Justice is in our hearts, in the world of the soul, but the world of trampled pastures and muddied waters, what is seen, is where we live in the body every day. The faith of Christ is our guide and example, we can choose to pick it up easily and even pick it up again and again and again.

David Powell
Ezekiel 36: 8-21

8 But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot out your branches, and yield your fruit to my people Israel; for they shall soon come home. 9 See now, I am for you; I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown; 10 and I will multiply your population, the whole house of Israel, all of it; the towns shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt; 11 and I will multiply human beings and animals upon you. They shall increase and be fruitful; and I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. 12 I will lead people upon you—my people Israel—and they shall possess you, and you shall be their inheritance. No longer shall you bereave them of children.

13 Thus says the Lord God: Because they say to you, “You devour people, and you bereave your nation of children,” 14 therefore you shall no longer devour people and no longer bereave your nation of children, says the Lord God; 15 and no longer will I let you hear the insults of the nations, no longer shall you bear the disgrace of the peoples; and no longer shall you cause your nation to stumble, says the Lord God.

The Renewal of Israel

16 The word of the Lord came to me: 17 Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their conduct in my sight was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period. 18 So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it. 19 I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them. 20 But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, “These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land.” 21 But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

John 8:1-11

8 1 while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4 they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” 6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” 8 And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11 She said, “No one, sir.” 12 And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view,[a] even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,[b] we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,[c] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Meditation:
Taken together these passages had several themes that stood out to me. Things like:
- Renewal/tilling/new creation
- Everyone sins and God forgives us – even if he punishes us, he always forgives
- Self-righteousness – how many times have we said, “there’s a special place in hell for that person…”
- Being ambassadors – being aware of how we talk about God as we move through “the nations” and talk to others.

These are important lessons at any time, but especially now in these turbulent times we need to remember that we all have sinned and all need to ask forgiveness and can be renewed. I liked the idea of being God’s ambassadors, that we must share and show the love of God – without self-righteousness – to all of his creations. Diplomacy isn’t always easy and isn’t always used (sometimes abandoned altogether). We all have the opportunity to show the love and peace that God can bring and share it with others, in small ways and in large ways. We must show our leaders that love is the way and that hate, self-righteousness and destruction do not help anyone. It is through God’s love that we all heal and become renewed.

Stacey Gagosian
The beginning of the passage from John has the words of Jesus using light as a metaphor for the indescribable power of God:

I am the light of the world;
anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark
but will have the light of life.

In the time of Jesus, natural light was the same as today: sunlight, moonlight and starlight. The sun, moon and stars followed the same cycles then as now, rising and setting, waxing and waning and providing warmth and illumination. Days grow shorter, then longer. While we have more detailed scientific knowledge of the heavens, we are still inspired by the beauty of stars against a dark sky, the amazing size, brightness and detail of the full moon, and the power of sunlight to warm the earth and bring forth the green shoots of spring.

Today we have much more artificial light than in the time of Jesus. Then there were fires, lamps and candles; all required care and effort to keep them going. We have light at the flip of a switch, and artificial light on earth can be seen from space. Even in abundance, light captivates us: the flicker of a flame, a lighted window, twinkling lights on a tree. Is it the light? Perhaps more it is the contrast between the light and lack of light.

Light is fundamental to our existence, and it represents the presence of God’s love in our lives. Today, at the very beginning of spring, our days are balanced with almost equal light and dark and we are moving into the time of greater light. It’s a time of optimism, of renewed energy and hope. As we move through Lent, reflecting on our place in the universe and relationship with God, we can appreciate both light and darkness.

Dear God, thank you for the new season, thank you for all the forms of light, help us to see your presence in it, and to share the light of life with others. Amen

Sam Obermyer
God made the world.
God so loved the world that He sent his only Son, because
Something was wrong with the world.
It was not what it was meant to be.

We live in the world.
We love the world, but we realize that
Something is wrong with the world, because
We are not what we were meant to be.

Jesus came to earth with the cure.
He came to show us how to be free from sin.
If we believe in Him, we can truly live.
Otherwise, we die in our selfishness and sin.

Jesus said, “I am not of this world.”
But He was here, wasn’t He?
We feel that we are very much of this world.
But are we? Need we be?

We have an opportunity to accept Christ Jesus.
Believe in Him.
Be His disciples, live free from sin. Serve others.
Live somewhere between the world and Heaven.

So, believe and live in the thin places,
Locales where the distance between Heaven and Earth collapses.
There we are able to catch glimpses of the Divine, the infinite.

Prayer: Creator God, please help us to love and respect your creation, believe in your Son and the power of salvation, and live in the thin places, where Your kingdom is.

Ella Cleveland
In this text, Jesus addresses the Jews who believed in him, they called themselves Christians, Abraham's descendants except they did not act as children of God and continued to live in sin. They were therefore slaves to sin.

Reason why Jesus tells them, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

Jesus, having seen in their intention to eliminate him, said to them: if you are the sons of Abraham, you must act like Abraham but you don't like me and you are doing the works of your father. Abraham did not do such things and if, therefore, you are children of God, you will have to love me because I come from God. I do not come on my own but it is God who sent me. You cannot understand my word, you are therefore the son of the devil, your father. You like to do his bad works. He himself is bad from the beginning, he does nothing good coming from his heart, he is a liar, the father of lies, lying is for him. I speak to you in truth and you do not believe me. Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?

Here Jesus complains as a man and a son of God.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us not be slaves to sin so that Christ does not complain about us. I therefore urge you to repent, do good works so that we will become children of God from the Abraham's.

Love in Christ!

Marie Meka
Who Do You Say That I Am?

Ezekiel 39:21-29
John 8:47-59
2 Corinthians 11:1-6

Sometimes, it doesn’t take much to ruin a person’s good reputation. A single allegation emerges, additional accusations are made, and soon there is a resignation or an arrest and a good reputation has been tarnished. There are some cases in which the good reputation is restored, but, in most cases, it seems that the good reputation was not deserved.

In the passage from Ezekiel, God makes sure to get ahead of the rumors and conspiracy theories about what he can do and demonstrates God’s glory among the nations. God delivered the Israelites to their enemies, not because of the power of those enemies or God’s inability to save the Israelites, but because God was punishing the Israelites for their lack of faithfulness. He backs up this statement by eventually delivering the Israelites from their enemies and gathering them “to their own land, not leaving any behind.”

*Then they will know that I am the LORD their God,*
*for though I sent them into exile among the nations,*
*I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind.*

•

In the verses from John, Jesus is the one who must address issues about who he is and what he has said to those gathered around him. The enemies of Jesus call him a Samaritan (not a term of endearment by any stretch of the imagination), demon-possessed, and a self-promoter who claims greatness far beyond what they believe is appropriate. When Jesus states that “whoever obeys my word will never see death,” his tormentors do not understand what he means (how many times is the idea of eternal life misunderstood by both the followers and enemies of Jesus?) and become more antagonistic. In the end, Jesus must escape before being stoned for his perceived blasphemous teachings.

*Jesus replied, “If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing.*
*My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me.*

•

The third passage, a few verses from 2 Corinthians, shows Paul raising red flags about the “eminent apostles” (one translation refers to them as “super-apostles”) who may be preaching a false gospel. Paul admits that he may not be a great speaker, but he warns the people about golden-toned salesmen who might lead them astray from a pure devotion to Christ.

*I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge.*
*We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.*

Daniel Stokes
I had seen this Japanese print many times before I noticed that Mt. Fuji is standing in the background. In the midst of all this flux and surf, there is snow-topped Mt. Fuji standing permanent and calm. Adding to the contrast are the two delicate boats slicing through the waves. The sailors seem fearless amid these huge waves.

A similar contrast is found in Psalm 46:

\[
\text{God is our refuge and strength,} \\
\text{an ever-present help in trouble.} \\
\text{Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way,} \\
\text{though its waters roar and foam...}
\]

Believers are surrounded by flux, confusion, dangers, but we take courage knowing that God is ever-present. The great waves, the tsunamis, will come, will roar, but God endures and empowers us. As God loves and has nurtured us, we are called to love and aid the victims of the Sumatra earthquake.

Natural disasters will happen; there is no sense in trying to find theological judgment in an underwater earthquake. Clearly "the Lord Almighty is with us." And we will use our God-given talents and resources to rebuild the lives broken by the waves.

In the midst of suffering, ours and others', there is always, always the righteousness of God. If God is our refuge, our hope, our allegiance, then we will "be more than conquerors" and will know the love of God which protects all life, all creation.

**Prayer:** 0 Lord, waves, disasters, grave dangers, will come and go, but Your love will endure forever. And nothing can separate us from Your love.

Tom Dunlap
“Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” John 9: 14-15

Seeing Comes from Within

This was not the first time that Jesus restored the sight of blind people. In fact, he healed a total of six people – in four miracles – as mentioned in the Gospels. However, this is the only one where he restores the sight of a man born blind from birth. This congenitally Blind Man did not seek out Jesus to be healed – indeed, he did not know who Jesus was.

The disciples asked Jesus whether he was blind because of his sins. Jesus answered no, but that the Blind Man is a fitting example of what God can do. He gave him the gift of sight.

But while Jesus restored the Blind Man’s sight, all the Pharisees were concerned primarily that he did it during Sabbath. They saw it as a violation of the law and one more threat to their religious power.

When the Pharisees heard about it, they interrogated the ex-Blind Man and his family – twice. He simply told them: I was blind but now I see. When the ex-Blind Man stood his ground and would not deny that Jesus restored his sight, the Pharisees cast him out of the community.

The man’s story, however, does not end there. Jesus sought him out and the ex-Blind Man became a believer.

Thus, comes into full cycle Jesus’ lesson for us from this miracle, which is the focal point of this chapter in John. If we wish to see God, life, and others as they really are, we must pay attention to what is going on within us. True seeing begins in the heart not the eyes.

What fears cripple and blind us from seeing beyond our problems, our needs? What prejudices prevent us from seeing other points of view? What is that inside of us that refuses to recognize that of God in other people?

As we journey through Lent, let us examine ourselves deeply and free our vision to see God among people, within people, and throughout all people.

Open my eyes, that I may see, Glimpses of truth thou hast for me; Place in my hands the wonderful key That shall unclasp and set me free. Silently now I wait for thee, Ready, my God, thy will to see. Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine! Amen.

Adlai Amor
Ezekiel’s prophetic vision has many comforting images to contemplate in these conflicted times. A deepening river flows through a desert and nourishes it with fish and fruit trees that bring forth a crop every month. An abundance of water alone would be a luxury to the Middle East. The life-giving husbandry that the water brings seems miraculous. These were the prophetic visions that came later in life to Ezekiel who had already accurately predicted hardship for the Hebrews and their loss of Jerusalem. The editors of my bible labeled this passage “The River of Healing.”

It’s a welcome image in these times, and indeed a contrasting one with a lot of the Lenten scriptures that are filled with conflict, misunderstanding of Jesus and that hearken to self reflection and atonement – whether we are ready for these things or not.

John’s gospel passage is typical in describing the stubborn folks (Pharisees) who are unable, or unwilling, to accept a messenger from God even after he restores sight to someone blind since birth. The onlookers interrogate the healed man, and his parents, and seem to be expecting to find a “trick” somehow. Trust in something so miraculous was difficult in those times – as it is in our own.

Paul recounts his own suffering from repeated beatings in order to spread the message of Jesus. That kind of religious martyrdom seems unknown in modern America. But yet, recent press reports tell us of people who were attacked and beaten in Brooklyn for wearing identifiable religious clothing.

It would be nice to remain with Ezekiel in a mental reverie by the healing river. I think he experienced this as a revelation of the “end times,” and it would be wonderful to get there – some day. But I will try to draw some spiritual refreshment from these images now and continue on.

Prayer: God, let us draw both direction and endurance from the message of your scriptures.

Jim Turner
“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” (John 10:3)

I know a little, not a lot, about sheep. They were semi-annual visitors passing by my childhood home in California. Led by their Basque shepherds and propelled by clever dogs, they went up into the hills of the coastal mountain range in the spring and back down to the San Joaquin Valley in the fall. The shepherds had ruddy faces set off by long, colorful stocking caps with big tassels at the end. Ponies pulled their small cabins set on automobile wheels. Mother said they must lead a lonely life.

The Biblical metaphor of shepherds and sheep always brings back those childhood memories of real shepherds and real sheep in flocks so big the shepherds couldn’t possibly have known them by name.

I’m awed by passages like this one in John – by the very idea of a shepherd so good he lays down his very life for the sheep – and by knowing that Jesus did. I want the good shepherd but struggle with the thought of being a sheep, just one bleating part of a milling flock – of being indistinguishable from all the others.

For me, the revelation of God’s grace in this passage is in verse 3, “he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” We are not part of some dusty herd, coursing by dogs, but are called by name – and led.

A prayer: Gracious and loving God, we give you thanks for your Son who was the good shepherd, who laid down his life for the flock, yet was raised to call us by name and to lead us. May we answer the call and follow.

Bruce Davie
Talking To Hard-heads

Ezekiel 3:4-11  
John 10:19-42  
II Corinthians 12:7-11

Thursday, April 2, 2020

The passage in Ezekiel seems to me to one of the most practical commissions ever given to a Prophet. God is sending Ezekiel not to strangers with strange tongues who He knows would be more receptive to His words, but to hard-headed Israelites. In your own spiritual journey have you ever come across wise words from another faith only to be surprised at some later date that the same wisdom existed in your own tradition? I know I have. The point is not to denigrate the search or the source, but to remember that at some point the hard work of bearing witness and spreading the word must be undertaken. One of Roger’s sermons years ago reminded me there is something sacred about my work as a federal employee. So I thought that would entail working with vigor, doing a good job on a task no one notices and – everyone’s favorite – working with a difficult co-worker without hardening my heart. But, I wonder what if I had to speak truth to power. Remember, God told Ezekiel, “Mortal, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears; 11 then go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them. Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God’: whether they hear or refuse to hear.” I believe it is clear to me that as a Christian I am called to be ready to do just that.

In John, the crowd at the temple presses Jesus to tell them straight out if he is the Messiah and Jesus replies that his works on behalf of the Father should be enough to prove to them straight out that the Father and Jesus are one. “Blasphemy,” cries the crowd and Jesus escapes. It appears the people at the temple want Jesus to be the Messiah, a leader of the first rank whom they have strong preconceived ideas about. When Jesus turns their expectations inside out by claiming to be one with the Father, they cannot abide that answer because most of their faith is in their idea of who the Messiah must be. Rather than being interested in the possibility that Jesus offers a direct relationship with God, they focus on Jesus not being their idea of a Messiah. Unmet expectations are the quickest route to irrational anger as we can all attest. It seems to me this is a call to shedding preconceived ideas that limit our ability to respond to Jesus’ call. Examples of those ideas include: The idea that we are not worthy of God’s grace, irrational fear of the other, the idea that we are above certain work or those that do such work, the idea that my color makes me superior or my candidate is morally superior to yours. These ideas, and many others we create and put a good deal of faith in, make God small in our lives and in turn limit our ability to do what we know is closer to right.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Help us open our ears to your call. Help us shed our ideas of You that limit our ability to respond to Your call. We pray for the courage to let You change us.

Fred Dann
“This is what the Lord says:
  “Restrain your voice from weeping
  and your eyes from tears,
  for your work will be rewarded,”
declares the Lord.
  “They will return from the land of the enemy.
  So there is hope for your descendants,”
declares the Lord.
  “Your children will return to their own land.” -- Jeremiah 31:16-17

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days... “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died... Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

-- John 11:17, 21-22, 25-27

Today’s passages from Jeremiah and John exemplify the importance of faith and perseverance in life’s most difficult times.

In our Jeremiah passage, Rachel has lost her children in the chaos of exile, and is uncertain if her children are still alive. In the midst of this devoted mother’s trauma, God assures her that her child rearing will not be in vain. There is still hope for the future of her descendants and God will be with her.

In our John passage, Martha mourns the loss of her brother, Lazarus, and is angry with Jesus for not arriving sooner to save him. Biblical scholars note that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days upon Jesus’ arrival, which is significant because Jewish belief at the time was that the soul lingered near the body for three days after death. On the fourth day, Lazarus would have been considered completely deceased, making his return to life even more doubtful. This detail makes Jesus’ miracle even more significant. It reminds us that God shows up even when all hope seems lost.

It’s often difficult to remove doubt from our minds when we experience life’s toughest moments, but today’s passages remind us of two very important lessons: (1) It’s okay to be angry, upset, and even doubtful in life’s difficult moments, and (2) we are called to keep our faith, regardless of the circumstances. Whether we believe it in the moment or not, John Lennon’s famous quote holds true: “Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end.”

Abby Rosenson
**Jeremiah 31:27-37**

**Anticipation –**

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

We do know the Lord, if we know love.

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

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

**John 11:28-44**

**God is with us –**

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

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

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

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

**Expect miracles –**

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

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

**2 Corinthians 13:1-14**

**Christ’s power in you** -

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

Test yourselves. Do what is right.

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

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

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

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

- Susan V. Grooters
Our Bible celebrates many deliverance stories: Noah and his family saved from the flood; Isaac spared from Abraham’s raised knife; Moses frees the 12 tribes from slavery, gives them the 10 Commandments and shares the once secret Name of God to worship. They become a nation and enter the Promised Land with proof of their covenant with God. An epic celebration follows: God’s promise had come true through God’s love.

Likewise worthy of celebration is Jesus’ bold entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He is a renowned teacher and a Messianic prophet. Excited crowds fill the streets. The whole city is “shaken” by the celebration, as if a king has arrived. The crowds call out, “Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord!” They see this is no ordinary king, but one who comes humbly and in the Name (with the power) of the Lord. One who could deliver and fully free them.

Who is this King of Glory?

With the crowd’s excited attention, he proceeds up to the Temple, the center of all Jewish worship. He sees how far religious practice has fallen: there are money-changers making great profits on exchange rates. He calls it “a den of thieves,” upsets their tables and drives them outside. His followers call this “the cleansing of the Temple.”

He stays there, cures the lame, gives sight to the blind. Now the chief priests have their turn to be outraged. Even worse, the next day he returns to teach, to foil the priests’ questions and to denounce them as “hypocrites and blind guides!” Their great sin is to have blocked believers from knowing the Kingdom of God. They have locked the doors and will let no one else in. They stand in the way of God’s grace and deliverance meant for all people of faith. On the steps of the Temple, in front of a devout crowd, Jesus proclaims a list of the priests’ and scribes’ deadly sins against God. (See his sermon: The Seven Woes [Matt: 23]). It’s a doozy.

Is it any wonder that the high priests immediately plot to silence this dangerous man? Within four days, Jesus is arrested and accused of blasphemy by paid liars. They race through a trial, condemn and execute him. He had come to liberate his people from their sins and to teach a better way to the Lord. Instead the authorities execute him and try to obliterate his message of forgiveness and grace. All the dangers of Jerusalem engulf him.

Who may stand in the Lord’s holy place?

The celebration with palms turns to mourning; the promise of liberation is broken before the crowd’s eyes at Golgotha. The disciples scatter and hide in fear. Then the much larger deliverance happens. Jesus rises from the dead and re-asserts that by following him and his Way, all people can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This is not a one-time deliverance, but one for all time and for all people. Much beyond what Israel had ever seen.

Matthew is proving to us that all of Jesus’ words are true, and if we follow him, even through the dangers embodied in Jerusalem, we will find eternal life just as Jesus said and did. Now there’s no limit to the celebration. This Good News lasts forever. Blessed is He who comes to us in the Name of the Lord!

Tom Dunlap
A Candle in the Darkness

I continue my quest to find my way out of the spiritual forest in which I find myself. My reflections on the three lectionary readings today remind me that the season of Advent lights a candle in the darkness in which we find ourselves, hopefully bringing us closer to the light that is Easter and the resurrection. The Isaiah passage, one of four “servant songs”, declares that Israel will be the Light to the nations. It “…will not grow faint or be crushed until (it) has established justice in the earth.” (Isaiah 12:4) It promises that “new things shall spring forth. “How long, oh God, how long?” is my soulful response. Today’s news brings forth an indictment of the Prime Minister of Israel for corruption and an announcement that the U.S. is working yet another way to allow Israel to permanently occupy even more Palestinian territories.

The New Testament reading from John narrates the familiar story of Jesus’ meal at the home of Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. As Martha prepares the food, Mary proceeds to bathe Jesus’ feet with nard, an extremely expensive substance derived from the underground stems of a variety of honeysuckle grown in Nepal and Bhutan and used as a perfume and in religious rituals. This provokes an argument with Judas regarding the legitimacy of using much needed money in this way, when it could be sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus’ rebuke of Judas is “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” (John 12: 7-8) This event is occurring the day before Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem which will be followed by his arrest, beating and crucifixion. This story is seen as a foreshadowing of the horrors of Good Friday. The jubilant crowds will transform into a blood thirsty mob. The foretold event of resurrection is still only a flicker of light on the horizon, unseen even by the apostles.

My Harper Collins Study Bible suggests that the letter to the Hebrews was probably not written by Paul and that the audience for it was probably a group of Christians in Rome! The writer discusses the role of sacrifice as it occurs in pagan and Jewish rituals (blood of goats, bulls and a heifer) which seek to purify or to atone for one’s sins. “…how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works (sins) to worship the living God.” (Hebrews 9: 14) This serves as a reminder for me that in order to reach the resurrection, one must experience the despair and pain of the sacrifice. “…without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin.” (Hebrews 9: 22) One must experience Good Friday before one achieves the hope and joy Easter and the resurrection brings.

Currently I feel stuck in an endless succession of Good Fridays. My task is, therefore, to rekindle, constantly, the flicker of hope that leads to the Light of Christ’s resurrection and the forgiveness of my sins resulting from Jesus’ sacrifice, even my sins of despair and disbelief.

God of the Universe, help me see the image of God in all my fellow creatures. Bring us together in love and help us respect one another. Help me keep my candle burning and share the triumphal hymn “Up from the grave he arose…” with those I meet, and keep it in my daily thoughts. Amen

Spencer Gibbins
Today, as we find ourselves in the midst of Holy Week between Palm Sunday and Easter, it is worth thinking about Lent and what it means for the Christian community. Lent is a season in the Christian calendar when we step out of ordinary time to reflect and reorient. It is during this season that we find ourselves walking with Jesus towards Jerusalem, the cross, and, ultimately, a life anew.

In Lent, we are afforded an opportunity to ask ourselves, “Who are we?” and “Whose are we?” We are given that space to think about “Where have we been? Where are we going? And how might we actively work to help usher in the reign of God?” Yes, in our hectic—often over-programed—lives, Lent allows for a pause; a pause to listen and then ultimately to respond.

In this day’s reading from the Hebrew scriptures, the prophet Isaiah reminds us that God has called us … even before we were ever born. As children of God, we need to listen to the small still voice deep within our inner most being. Each of us is fully-valued and holy in our own unique way. Even when we do not feel worthy of such, God says to each of us, “You are my beloved. Listen and follow me.”

As we listen, we seek to discern our true calling: to be completely authentic — to God, to others, and even to our self. Each of us has an authenticity that is uniquely our own. As such, while seeking to follow Jesus, we should not try to be Jesus. Or Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Martin Luther King, Jr. for that matter. Indeed, as the Jesuit James Martin reminds us, Thomas Merton once wrote, “To be saint means to be myself.”¹ So may each of us ask ourselves this day, “Who has God called me to be? How might I be a saint, by being myself?”

But it is not enough to deeply listen to only ourselves. For to fully comprehend what is means to follow Jesus and to understand what the reign of God is all about, we need to look to others — to others whom we might least expect. In today’s epistle, Paul suggests that God often calls the foolish, the lowly, and the despised rather than the wise, the powerful, and the well-heeled to explicitly spell out God’s intents. Jesus’ interactions with others along with his words and deeds confirm this. So may each of us ask ourselves this day “How may I openly and attentively listen to the other in my midst? How might I recognize their wisdom, role, and place in bringing about the reign of God?”

Finally, during Lent, along with listening, we also are called to respond. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus says, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will be my servant also.” And, yet, we all know that is not easy following Jesus. For to follow Jesus means to lose one’s life in order to gain it; to reorient oneself to a life anew. When we walk along the Way, we affirm that the ways of the world often run counter to the ways of God. We admit that society’s expectations often belie God’s desires. So may each of us ask ourselves this day, “How might I respond to God’s call and to be a catalyst of love — in my own unique way? How might I further God’s reign here and in the days to come?

 Loving and gracious God, on this day, may I listen … may I listen to that small voice deep within me; may I listen to others, including the lowly, in my midst; and may I listen to you. And, then, may I find the strength and the wisdom to respond … to respond to your call to be myself and to be a follower of Jesus helping to ensure that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

- M. A. Zaineddin

Isaiah 50:4a - The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary.

Hebrews 12:1-3 (parts) - Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...Consider [Jesus] who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

When asked the question, "Whose life do you admire; to whom do you look as an example of a life well lived?", what faces pop into your mind? While many people spend their lives striving for earthly treasures - fame and fortune - rarely are the "rich and famous" held up as exemplars of a life well lived. In our heart of hearts we know that the cloud of saints is made up of those who "ran the race with perseverance", who did not "grow weary or fainthearted", who used their "educated tongue to sustain the weary".

When I think about those whom I admire, in every case the person would probably be surprised to be on my list. They are ordinary people with extraordinary ability to look away from self towards the needy others. They instinctively know that what they try to hoard they will lose and that only what they give of themselves will remain in the end. Their purpose is not for personal recognition, but rather just to be about the work of God here on earth. They continue to inspire me even after their deaths. They have taught me the lesson that character is what you do when no one is watching. They do and were able to embody the prayer of St. Francis:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.} \\
\text{Where there is hatred, let me sow love.} \\
\text{Where there is injury, pardon.} \\
\text{Where there is doubt, faith.} \\
\text{Where there is despair, hope.} \\
\text{Where there is darkness, light.} \\
\text{Where there is sadness, joy.} \\
\text{O Divine Master,} \\
\text{grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;} \\
\text{to be understood, as to understand;} \\
\text{to be loved, as to love.} \\
\text{For it is in giving that we receive.} \\
\text{It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,} \\
\text{and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.}
\end{align*}
\]

May we all strive to live out this prayer.  
Sally Molenkamp
For me this passage of scripture, John 13:1-15 is the heart of our faith. Twice Jesus has told us in the Gospels that the two most important commandments are to love God and love neighbor. Once in the gospel of Matthew when the Pharisee had heard that he had silenced the Saducees and he wanted to test Jesus by asking which is the most important law out of all 613 laws in the Torah. (Matthew 22:34-40) The other incident was when again a lawyer wanted to test Jesus, so asked Jesus how one inherits eternal life? Then Jesus tells a story illustrating the law of neighborly love -- the familiar Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25-37)

But here in the Gospel of John on the night before his arrest and crucifixion, before Jesus leaves them, he shows them the love he has been talking about and telling stories about for three years.

Jesus gets up from the special Passover table, takes a basin of water and a towel and moves from disciple to disciple, taking those dusty, dirty hardened corned feet into his own hands and pours refreshing water over them and massages them and cleans them. It is a personal, intimate demonstration of the love he wants his disciples to share with the world. It is not just talk, not just preaching, not just story-telling; it is action! It is servant love!

Yes, love is a verb according to Jesus! The small band of disciples did not have servants; Jesus showed them how to be servants to one another. Jesus saw something deeply practical that they needed to have done, and he did it. They are to attend to one another’s practical needs. Jesus also came near, into their physical personal space. He cared for them in an intimate way. They are called to that kind of love too.

When Jesus, like our own family members might do, steps close, holds the feet of his friends, bathes them and gently dries them, he shows us how he loves us. Jesus commands us to love each other as he loved us that day. That’s the “maundy” of Maundy Thursday. The word “maundy” is derived from the Latin word for command, and refers to Jesus command to love one another. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (verses 34-35)

PRAYER: O God of love -- love that creates, blesses, forgives, hopes, and yes - serves, empower us with the grace of Your Holy Spirit that we might love this world and each other and our enemies as you have loved us. Amen!

Rev. Beth Braxton
This is an appropriate assignment from Miriam. I’m in a Good Friday state of mind. You see, one of my closest friends just died.

She was the kind of friend who knew my flaws and was my friend anyway. She could tell me when I was out of hand.

We went to Y Camp together and were the designated cabin script writers. On one occasion the Senior counselors were concerned when we featured a sleazy woman in a script. They thought we were dangerously precocious when we were actually ridiculously innocent...if overly imaginative.

I was close to her entire family. When she and her husband were out of the country, her parents invited me to meals.

When David and I became serious, we went to their house where we spent time with her husband and children. David got down on the floor and played with the youngsters.

Years passed, and in spite of both families spending time overseas, the friendship continued.

We were invited to their home for their 50th anniversary party.

I can’t count the number of times Mary Ann and I got together for coffee and catch-up usually at her place. I must have drunk 1,000 cups of her good brew. We talked politics, on which we regularly agreed, hashed over old stories, recalled mutual friends, shared favorite books, etc.

I want to cry out, to turn back time. I want her back now! Yet this is a time to grieve, to weep, to mourn.

We all have our Good Fridays.

Awaiting Easter,
Helen Williams
WHERE AWAY

Exodus 14:10-15:18  Saturday, April 11, 2020
Matthew 28:1-10
Romans 6:3-11

“Where away” is an old query from a ship’s captain up to a lookout, who’s has just reported the sighting of another ship. The query seems appropriate for this day between Good Friday and Easter. Today we are preparing to celebrate the rising of Jesus. But right after his crucifixion, his followers must have been wondering: “What are we going to do now?” Sure, they remember his telling them he was going to prepare a place for them. But after the horror of his death and his burial in a stone cold tomb, could they have believed it?

This uncertainty is in all the readings for today. In Exodus, the people of Israel fleeing from Egypt found themselves apparently just wandering in the desert. They cried out to Moses: “It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” In Matthew, the women left the empty tomb, mixed with fear and joy, certainly wondering what really had happened to the missing body. And Paul, in his letter to the Romans, tries to straighten out their confusion about the meaning of salvation. Should they continue in sin so that grace may abound? If there was more sin to forgive, wouldn’t the amount of grace be greater?

And this uncertainty is in our lives today. If Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us, too, where can this place be? We currently believe that the universe we know started with a Big Bang. From a point of nothingness all matter was created and exploded out and is still flying into — into what? We don’t know what was before. We know of no boundary. So where is heaven? Paul doesn’t try to point out a place. He talks about our condition as a result of Jesus: “The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Perhaps heaven is still a journey. As Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote in “Crossing the Bar:"

Sunset and evening star
   And one clear call for me!
   And may there be no moaning of the bar
      When I put out to sea.
   But such a tide as moving seems asleep.
   Too full for sound and foam,
   When that which drew from out the boundless deep
      Turns again home.
   Twilight and evening bell.
   And after that the dark!
   And may there be no sadness of farewell
      When I embark;
   For though from out our bourne of time and place
      The flood may bear me far,
   I hope to meet my Pilot face to face
      When I have crossed the bar.

Phil Hanna
It’s all true, you know. Really true. The tomb was empty. Jesus lives. In a day filled with lilies and trumpets and joyous hymns and a larger congregation, can we take some time and sit with this reality?

We live in a very troubling time. We are watching the norms of our public life being eroded at an almost unbelievable rate. We are experiencing the early effects of climate change and know that worse is coming. Intolerance and hate seem to be on the rise, within our borders and internationally. The voices of reason are increasingly drowned out by the voices of fear and rage. The coronavirus is just the latest global threat to health. Even at New York Avenue, the waters have become choppy. We are in a time of transition and it is uncomfortable. What will the church look like in five years? In ten? Do we have what it takes to meet the challenges?

“He is not here,” the angel said to the women, “for he has been raised, as he said. ... tell the disciples that he has been raised, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

What does this reality mean for us? It means that God’s word can be trusted, God’s promises can be claimed. It means that God’s Spirit is present in the world with us, with us and for us. It means that Jesus is always going ahead of us. Do we believe it?

Prayer: Holy God, we are grateful for this blessed Easter day, grateful to be reminded that Jesus lives, that your word is true, that 2,000 years later, these things are true. Help us to live into this reality anew. Amen

Miriam Dewhurst