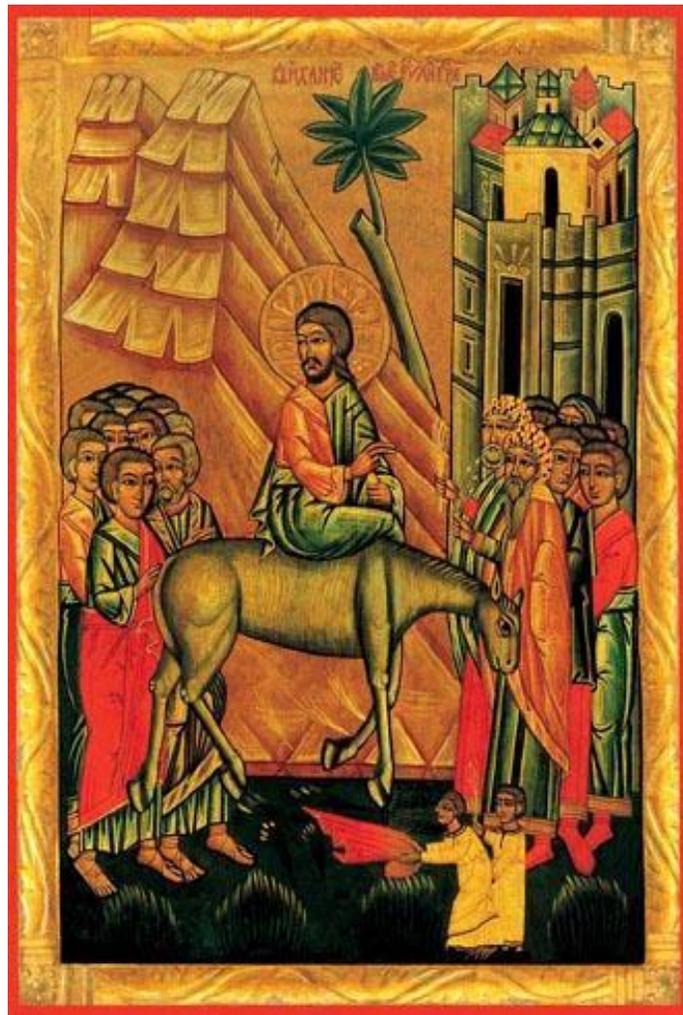




The

# NEW YORK AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## 2022 Lenten Booklet





Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Joel 2:1-2,12-17; Isaiah 58:1-12;  
Psalm 51 (backstory in 2 Samuel chapters 11-12);  
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

## On Becoming A Christian

*Ella Cleveland*

If A Roman Catholic priest once said to me, "I think Hans Kung's On Being a Christian should be called On Becoming a Christian. After all, we have not arrived at being Christians; we are constantly in the process of becoming Christians."

How true. All the readings today affirm that. They provide us models for fasting, repentance, prayer, and giving.

Joel 2: 13: "rend your hearts, not your garments..."

Isaiah 58: "is not this the fast I have chosen, to deal bread to the hungry..."

Psalms 51: "have mercy on me...create in me a pure heart..."

Matthew 6: "so when you give... and when you pray... and when you fast..."

As we begin Lent 2022, let us first read each passage in its entirety and promise to improve our spiritual practices quantitatively and qualitatively. Can I get an "Amen?"

Keep in mind that we are co-workers with God (2 Corinthians 6:1). We are not on our own in this. And as a result of our prayer, repentance, fasting, and giving, we will eventually reach the end goals. They may seem upside-down in this crazy world, but they are true:

...we are sorrowful, yet always rejoicing  
poor, yet making many rich  
having nothing, yet possessing everything (2 Corinthians 6:10)

**Prayer:** Loving and Creator God, please help us to become Christians.

*The United Church of Christ has a fund for refugees and immigrants called "The Second Corinthians 6:10 Endowment Fund". To give money, send an email to Rev. Andy DeBraber at <debrabera@ucc.org>*

Thursday, March 3, 2022

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Exodus 5:10-23; Acts 7:30-34

## You Have a Reservation in the Inn

*Miriam Dewhurst*

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.  
I will say to the LORD, "he is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.  
If you make the Most High your dwelling – even the LORD, who is my refuge – then no harm will  
befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.*

*For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;  
they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.  
You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.  
'Because he loves me,' says the LORD, 'I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my  
name.*

*He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor  
him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.' —Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16*

I don't know about you, but whenever I read this psalm, my heart sort of leaps. This is wonderful news! And then my brain kicks in and says, "Wait a minute. Is this true?" And immediately all the threats of the present day come to mind: war in Ukraine, climate change, political divides, a seemingly unrelenting pandemic, gun violence on a daily basis, racial hatred. How do we get to the shelter of the Most High? And if we do, how do we sit there in safety while so many other people are suffering?

I have found a commentary by George A. F. Knight to be helpful here. He suggests that this psalm is written by a temple minister giving advice to an enquirer. He points out that the word "dwell" in verse 1 means to spend the night as though in an inn. "Keep on coming back into the care of the Almighty each evening", this minister recommends, and "you will find yourself saying to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.' For you will have discovered that God has delivered you from what is threatening your life." Fear is so debilitating. We know from experience – ours and others' – that bad things happen. To live is to experience grief as well as joy, pain as well as pleasure. To live in fear is a kind of suffering and it makes us selfish, anxious and small.

This psalm witnesses to the truth that the opposite of fear is not courage, but faith. If we know God at all, even in our very limited ways, we know that we are loved, that our lives are ultimately guaranteed by the One who created us and daily gives us breath. When we acknowledge God, we remind ourselves that God is here, is with us when trouble comes. By returning to the inn of the Most High each evening, we are reminded that whatever happens, we have a refuge, a place where we are welcome, a dwelling place.

**Prayer:** Holy God, because we love you, you will rescue us; you will protect us, for we acknowledge your name. We will call upon you, and you will answer us; you will be with us in trouble. You will deliver us and honor us. With long life you will satisfy us and show us your salvation. May it be so. Amen.

Friday, March 4, 2022

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Exodus 6:1-13; Acts 7:35-42

## **In the Shadow of the Almighty**

*Ann Bradley*

Like that of the Israelites, my personal wilderness lasted about 40 years—a slow journey from grief and loss through alcoholism (i.e., anesthesia to the pain of the human condition), through recovery when the psychiatrist proposed that his office doorknob serve as my Higher Power, through secularism, to now. In truth, parts of that odyssey were less than grim. No “broken spirit” or “cruel slavery” (I was anesthetized, remember) for me. And, fresh out of the gutter, I found useful work. Friendships, even love, found me almost as soon as I was restored to social function. In important ways, however, I remained alone except for those ideas and individuals in whom I transitorily vested fleeting faith or merely hope. Inevitably, in the end, they fell short.

After two years of illness, I arose in 2016 from my sickbed to a diminishingly civil society where Donald Trump profaned the temples of democracy while William Barber walked the toxic backroads of the rural south—former strongholds salvageable only by those of greater energy or stronger faith than my own. It was time, I concluded, to go in search of that Higher Power to whom I tacitly had ascribed 40 years earlier. Accumulated life lessons and their prophets lighted the path out of wilderness. But it was, finally, I in the company of this fellowship who embraced a different God from that of my childhood.

Recently, I learned the term panentheism, Marcus Borg’s understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent or omnipresent. Panentheism contrasts with pantheism, an alternative construct that places God somewhere else, a supernatural being apart from this world. In the shorter term, I recognize the God I abandoned all those years ago. In the longer term, I recognized the God into whom I entered five years ago.

Here, in the “shelter of the Most High . . . the shadow of the Almighty, I fear neither the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday” (Psalm 91:1-2). Rather, every action is “companioned” and comforted by the assurance that, “Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them and show them my salvation” (Psalm 92:14-16).

Hence comes strength for the work that remains. As former pastor Roger Gench admonished every Sunday, we “go into the world to lift up the broken-hearted, stand with the oppressed, and let all that we do—all of it—be done in love.” May we go from pandemic into the work—all of it—to which we are called.

Saturday, March 5, 2022

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; John 12:27-36

## Navigating Life's Waters

*Marilyn J. Seiber*

Today's passages seem to slide from uplifting and safe haven to good times-bad times to darkness and choices. How are we to incorporate these words and wisdom into our lives and daily decisions and outlook?

The Psalms verses assure us that we live in the "shelter of the Most High" and "lodge under the shadow of the Almighty" where we will find a safe retreat. No disaster will befall, angels will guard, and long life with the fullness of salvation will ensue. Not being hit with life's calamities, disappointments, or crises feels unrealistic and over-promising. We know that life is not always easy, that we are challenged personally with what befalls us, and as a society and world with conflicts of war and natural disasters. How are we to navigate the waters of life that so often rock the boat? How do we find a safe haven in God that the Psalms promises when circumstances arise to make us feel that all is lost?

Rather than wish for the always-rosy world, the Ecclesiastes verses, so familiar, remind us that life encompasses both the wonderful and tough experiences – life and death, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, love and hate, peace and war. Ecclesiastes reminds us that life has ups and downs and we must navigate the best way we can, dealing with loss and heartache, but also joy and happiness, recognizing that no one can escape the trials of life as we forge forward. We all meet life's challenges and heartache differently—in action, approach, attitude, time. But I think the Psalms are telling us that if we turn to God, it will help calm our soul, provide more peace and direction than if we turned away.

John's Gospel shows angst when Jesus says, "Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? Father save me from this hour." Jesus says that the answer is to follow the light, trust the light, become the light. Follow him.

Perhaps the answer to navigating life's waters is to understand that there will be both strong currents and calm waters, that we should recognize the ebb and flow of life in order to accept what we confront and experience. With God's grace, and understanding the peace we can enjoy in Christ, we will have the capacity to weather the rough storms but also to feel and appreciate the joys of life and the love all around us.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, be our shelter and strength as we travers life's passages, knowing that love and joy can bring us into life's goodness.

Sunday, March 6, 2022

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; Romans 10:8b-13

*Helen Williams*

The scripture reading that I found interesting came from Luke 4. This scripture deals with the devil's tempting Christ. He offers Jesus all of his kingdoms if Jesus will worship him. However, Jesus will only worship the Lord God.

The devil asks Jesus to test his faith by jumping off the highest pinnacle. Jesus refuses, saying he will not tempt the Lord God. The devil says if God is all powerful, then Jesus can turn stone into bread. Jesus does not do as the devil asks.

This last request reminds me of the story of stone soup. People can't believe it when a man says he can make soup out of a stone. The man just needs a few other ingredients. His friends do as he asks and bring carrots, celery, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, salt and pepper, etc. And in a short time he has a tasty soup.

Just as it takes many ingredients to make a tasty soup, it takes many hands to do God's work. Some people are good at visiting the sick. Other people are good at preaching. Others sing songs of praise.

**Prayer:** Help us to find the best way we can show the Love that Jesus brought to the world. Amen.

Monday, March 7, 2022

Psalm 17; 1 Chronicles 21:1-7; 1 John 2:1-6

## Walking the Walk

*Spencer Gibbins*

*Hear a just cause, O Lord: attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. —Psalm 17:1-2*  
*Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to count the people of Israel. —1 Chronicles 21:1*  
*But God was displeased with this thing, and he struck Israel. —1 Chronicle 21:7*  
*...whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked. —1 John 2:6*

The first thing I learned in reading and attempting to decipher these passages, was that my childhood Baptist training in finding scripture verses as fast as possible ("sword drills") has faded from my repertoire. I had to use the Table of Contents in my Bible (!) to find 1 Chronicles (in the Old Testament?) and 1 John (brief letters or essays in the last section of the New Testament near Revelations, which may have been written by the same author of the Book of John, the disciple). In the Psalm, a righteous and innocent person is being persecuted and pleads for the destruction of enemies. While in 1 Chronicles, David is misled by Satan to rely upon strength in numbers for Israel's survival rather than faith in God, thereby incurring God's wrath. John's essay seems the original "If you talk the talk, you need to walk the walk" in following the teachings of Jesus. How should these connect, or do they connect? Each reading makes a point, but weaving these together into a cogent whole is difficult. I have to admit that I don't have that ability. I hope and pray that others have more discernment in this than do I. I was, however, struck by the passage in Psalm 17 about an innocent person pleading for mercy.

Early in the morning of February 5, Paul Ethridge, a loved family member under my husband Cleveland's guardianship for the past 32 years, died at Ingleside Home. Paul was born 84 years ago with spastic cerebral palsy, moderate retardation and a progressive visual problem which left him totally blind as an adult. His mobility began as a child with heavy long leg braces and crutches, to a wheelchair as an adult and to being confined to bed the last few years of his life. The last years also included his becoming hard of hearing, socially isolating him. To my mind, he was an innocent person beset by major difficulties at every turn. Yet, there was no call for some sort of revenge or even anger at his fate. Only once, did he turn to Cleveland and say, "You know, I didn't ask to be like this."

Unlike Dale Evans (Cowboy Roy Rogers' wife—ask your grandparent) who wrote a book "Angel Unaware" about her Down Syndrome child, Paul was no angel at times. He has, however, always been an inspiration in patience, endurance, and cheerful acceptance of his limitations. His glass was always more than full, rather than empty. He loved interacting with people as best he could. Although his life was not framed by theological understanding or Biblical study, he lived as he was able and "walked the walk" to the best of his ability. He blessed our lives. May God bless him.

**Prayer:** Eternal God, please let these jumbled thoughts and the life of Paul Ethridge come together in some way to help us walk the walk with Jesus, Savior of us All. May it be so.

Tuesday, March 8, 2022

Psalm 17; Zechariah 3:1-10; 2Peter 2:4-21

## Cry of the People

*Paul and Gwenn Gebhard*

As we are sitting to write our Lenten Passage on February 26th, the news from Ukraine is overwhelming: air raid sirens, tanks rolling along streets, missiles raining down on cities, women and children rushing into exile. A people who suffered for centuries under Russian and Soviet rule, including a devastating Moscow-imposed famine, the Holodomor, that killed more than 6 million in the 1930's, are being invaded by Moscow again. President Putin's twisted propaganda, that Russia is "denazifying" Ukraine, is Orwellian coming from one of the most ruthless, authoritarian leaders. It is no wonder that the flood of Ukrainian refugee families exiting the country is met by a line of men coming in to defend their homeland, again.

In this context, the passages for today, of calling for God's judgment on one's foes, of imagining God raising up the just, and God punishing those who have strayed from His message, have a heartrendingly modern tone. They reflect the fear of people who are oppressed. They pray for rescue by the Lord and ask that the Lord smite their oppressors. One can easily imagine Ukrainian families, as they huddle underground in subway stations away from the bombing overhead, reciting Psalm 17:

*I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.  
Show me the wonders of your great love, you who save by your right hand  
those who take refuge in you from their foes.  
Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings  
from the wicked who are out to destroy me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.*

*They close up their callous hearts, and their mouths speak with arrogance.  
They have tracked me down, they now surround me, with eyes alert, to throw me to the ground.  
They are like a lion hungry for prey, like a fierce lion crouching in cover.*

*Rise up, Lord, confront them, bring them down; with your sword rescue me from the wicked.  
By your hand save me from such people, Lord, from those of this world whose reward is in this life.*

Babylon conquered Israel 2600 years ago and the Jewish people went into exile for 60 years before returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding their city. In 1945, hundreds of millions of people found themselves under Soviet rule that lasted 56 years until 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. For 30 years Ukrainians have lived in their own country with their own government and chartered their own destiny.

How the conflict will turn out in the near term and how it will turn out in the long term is to be seen. Whether or not Ukraine has fallen by March 8th, we need to keep the people of Ukraine in our prayers, now and for the years to come.

Wednesday, March 9, 2022

Psalm 17; Job 1:1-22; Luke 21:34-22:6

*Steve Dewhurst*

Lately I have been reminded of a poem entitled “The Right Must Win” which was written by an English priest during the 1840’s but which became popular in this country during the Civil War. After lamenting the apparent disappearance of God during times of trouble, the poet concludes:

*Thrice bless’d is he to whom is given  
The instinct that can tell  
That God is on the field when He  
Is most invisible.*

*Bless’d too is he who can divine  
Where real right doth lie,  
And dares to take the side that seems  
Wrong to man’s blindfold eye.*

*For right is right, since God is God;  
And right the day must win;  
To doubt would be disloyalty,  
To falter would be sin.*

Clearly, this is 19th-century language. Pretty masculine stuff. Perhaps too much so for our 21st-century eyes. And yet the sentiment sticks with me. We live in a world which seems to be awash in huge issues – threats of war, a public health crisis, racism, crime, etc., etc. – and equally awash in waves of untruths and uncertainties. I suppose this has always been true for the human race in times of crisis, but modern technology permits these waves to be spread far and wide in the blink of an eye. Miriam and I like to say that we scan through the A section of the Washington Post looking for good news, and seldom finding anything that qualifies as “good”.

Today’s scripture readings certainly remind us that times of trouble are nothing new for the human race. The psalmist is assailed from every direction by enemies and dreams of revenge. God empowers Satan to afflict Job with every sort of catastrophe. Even Jesus as he nears betrayal and crucifixion advises his followers to, “Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen....”

Yes, troubles abound, but we have a faith in a God who came to be with us, who rose from the dead, and is with us today even in the darkest times. This is the God who according to the psalmist has “eyes that are fixed on what is right”. It seems to me that Easter is a time for us to celebrate that God and renew our faith that “right the day must win”.

Thursday, March 10, 2022

Genesis 13:1-7, 14-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:2-12

## Back to Square One

*Margaret Sheppard-Kelly*

The reading from Genesis is the story of Abram’s return to Bethel. After years in Egypt, he returns to Bethel with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and his and Lot’s households. After Lot leaves with his belongings and his household, God speaks again to Abram, repeating God’s divine promises to give Abram all the land he can see and offspring as countless and plentiful as the dust. In response, Abram again builds an altar at Bethel.

In Psalm 27, David sings of his trust in God. “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?... I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”

In Philippians, Paul begins by complaining about some Jewish people who were insisting on circumcision as part of the new Christian faith. Paul clearly disapproves. He brags about his own Jewish background and his past righteousness from following the law. Paul then says that he considers all that rubbish and a complete loss, compared to the new righteousness he gains from faith in Jesus Christ.

Today’s readings talk about returning to what really matters—a relationship with God. Abram had already built an altar at Bethel. There he was again, after journeying to Egypt and back. Back to square one. Back to the altar he had built to honor God. Back also to God’s amazing promises. Paul also talks about coming back to God after abandoning parts of his cultural and religious upbringing. He counted his heritage as a loss to come closer to God through Jesus.

All three of these passages also speak to the goodness of God. God, who gave a land and endless descendants to Abraham. The Lord, who supports and saves us. The Divine One, who brings us closer through faith and not by our own will or our attempts to be good.

Our experience during the pandemic years has been our own time of trial, of wandering in the wilderness. I don’t know about you, but I am both looking forward to and fearing a return to normalcy, and perhaps, a more hectic lifestyle. This time of transition can be a chance to remember both the importance of our relationship with God and of God’s goodness. Will we remember to keep our eyes on what really matters?

**Prayer:** Dear God, bring us closer as we seek you. Amen.

Friday, March 11, 2022

Psalm 27:1-14

## A Song of Trust and Light!

*Rev. Beth Braxton*

*“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” AMEN! (This verse is enough of a message for this day – is it not?)*

But let me say that this Old Testament light is mirrored in the New Testament light of Christ. Jesus said, *“I am the light of the world whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life”* (John 8:12). He also announced in the sermon on the mount that *“you are the light of the world...”* (Matthew 5:14) and the Apostle Paul says. *“you are all children of light”* (I Thessalonians 5:5).

As we ponder the strength of God’s light and the life of Christ as the light we follow in this season of Lent, let us remember that the Christian faith is not an intellectual exercise, it is not an emotional response to a piece of music or a sermon; our faith, at its maturity is living the Gospel, yes, being the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Letting the light of Christ’s love and peace shine in our lives!

I am reminded of the story in *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* that author, Robert Fulghum tells about the picture of Mother Teresa that hangs over the wash basin where he works. He says he is confronted by her life several times a day. It is a photo of her receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. He writes, *“to cut through the smog of helpless cynicism, to take only the tool of uncompromising love; to make manifest the capacity for healing humanity’s wounds; to make the story of the Good Samaritan a living reality; and to live so true a life as to shine out from the back streets of Calcutta takes courage and faith... If ever there is truly peace on earth, goodwill to men (all), it will be because of women like Mother Teresa. Peace is not something you wish for; it’s something you make, something you do, something you are, and something you give away!”*

Our strength is the light of God’s Word, Jesus’ Word that brings wholeness and courage. Let us shine out from the streets where we live as “children of light” who are called daily to reflect the light of Christ in this world. The chorus we learned in Kenya says it all:

*“I’m going to shine; I’m going to shine;  
I’m going to shine; I’m going to shine,  
so when people see me, they see you Jesus.  
I’m going to shine; O my Lord, I’m going to shine!”*

**Prayer:** Oh God of Light, in a climate of division and in the struggles with racial injustice and a new normal of living with the corona virus in our communities, be our strength and stronghold in the living of these days. Take our fears and transform them into energies of Your light! In the name of the light for the world – Jesus, we pray, Amen!

Saturday, March 12, 2022

Psalm 27; Matthew 23, especially 37-39;  
Psalm 118, especially 26-29

## Hearing the Word

*Tom Dunlap*

*As I grow older, I've developed a new skill. I find that I no longer hear what I really don't want to hear. It keeps my head clear and avoids all sorts of cognitive dissonance or confusion. And it seems many folks today have developed this same deaf defense. God help us.*

“Blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord!” This is shouted by Jesus’ followers as he makes his way into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This is the welcome for a conquering hero, a king or a Messiah. They proclaim he is the messenger of God and is anointed with God’s authority. This news creates a great stir all over Jerusalem, especially in the Temple where it is not good news. The chief priests and rabbis have heard of Jesus and desperately want to silence him, as they did John, the Baptist. They are jealous of his miracles of healing, deaf to his teaching and blind to his spiritual authority.

Coming directly into the Temple’s courts, Jesus accuses them of being “prophet killers.” Jesus prefaces this accusation with a list of seven woes or afflictions that “the teachers of the Law and Pharisees” have created as hypocrites, “blind guides” and obstacles to God’s Way. In modern, Wi-Fi terms they have created a “dead zone” where none of God’s messengers or prophets can be heard. The center of Jewish religious power, teaching and wealth has become a spiritual dead zone.

Jesus is furious with these leaders who are silencing God. That’s why God no longer speaks to them as God once did with Moses, Isaiah, Daniel, even Jonah. Their crime is that in the name of their power and many rules, they are keeping the Word of God and his messengers from ever being heard.

Jesus concludes, “Look, your house is desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me (Son of God) again until you say, “Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord.” This famous line from Psalm 118 is what his followers have been proclaiming all day. If the Temple leaders would only hear this, they would be able to save themselves. They could leave their center of power and woes and be able to humbly reconnect with God. The path open to all is to honor the Name of the Lord and to humbly follow the Lord as your true guide. This is the Way of the Spirit and a return to the spiritual life that Jesus preached and embodied. This is the way into the Kingdom.

**Prayer:** O, Lord, we need Your Spirit of love and peace which “endures forever” (Psalm 118). Lent comes with our hope for this renewal and new life, if we listen and pay attention.

Sunday, March 13, 2022

Luke 9: 28-36; Exodus 34: 29-35;  
1 Kings 19: 9-18

## Cast Down Eyes and Shining Faces

*Paul B. Dornan*

*"... Moses did not know that the skin of his face was radiant because he had been talking to him."  
Exodus 34: 29b*

*"And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave." 1 Kings 19: 13*

*"And it happened that, as he was praying, the aspect of his face was changed and his clothing became sparkling white." Luke 9: 29*

The Roman Catholic church in the town in which I grew up was the Church of the Transfiguration. It was located on Main Street two blocks from our house, and we walked past it to attend our Presbyterian Church further up the street. Many of my neighborhood friends attended Transfiguration, and in my child's mind, what went on in that sanctuary was saturated with mystery and the exotic. And that mixture of mystery and exoticism forever attends the Transfiguration event in my child and adult mind. What is this strange story about? Three of his disciples accompany Jesus up a mountain, and there in a cloud the disciples witness the appearance of Moses and Elijah, two of the titans of the Hebrew tradition, who with Jesus form a holy and glowing triumvirate; and God's voice arises from the cloud and announces to them and the bystanders that Jesus is His son and chosen one. The disciples naturally know it's a big deal, but, like us, are flummoxed by its meaning.

Perhaps a clue to one possible meaning is that the Biblical record testifies that all three of the holy triumvirate had at some point gone up on a mountain, experienced a direct encounter with God and come back down the mountain physically changed. Moses brings down the tablets from Mt. Sinai, and his face shone. Elijah hears a still small voice outside a cave on Mt. Horeb and covers his face with his cloak in that encounter with God. Jesus goes up the mountain, prays and his very aspect is transformed. It sounds as if, when you have an encounter with God, *you will be changed*. Perhaps your face won't glow from the experience, but sometimes I swear I see shining faces throughout the New York Avenue community – not just among our members but among those who find themselves entering our doors. May it be so!

**Prayer:** Gracious God, meet us wherever we are and change us, and, if it be your will, meet our downcast eyes and give us glowing faces. In Jesus name, Amen

Monday, March 14, 2022

Matthew 5:27-37; Romans 4:1-8; Nehemiah 9:1-15

## Everyday Miracles

*Helen Williams*

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

The verses in Romans speak of God's forgiveness.

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

### Everyday Miracles

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

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

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

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

Praise the Lord.

Tuesday, March 15, 2022

Psalm 105:1-42; Numbers 14:10b-24; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

*Jessica Gebhard*

I'll be honest. When I first looked up this passage from First Corinthians, I was pretty dismayed. Specifically, with verse 13, which in the NRSV I grew up with reads, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

I've always disliked this verse. Though there are multiple meanings of the word "test," in combination with the word "endure" my mind goes to the big tests, the important ones with have life- or life-path altering consequences: bouts of severe illness, final exams, court judgements, and so on. Things you need to prepare for and need help getting through and will leave you changed in some way. First Corinthians 13 then becomes the Biblical corollary of the No True Scotsman fallacy: if you did not endure, it shows that you are not truly faithful, because if you were faithful, you would have endured. On an individual level I can see what Paul is getting at – I'm imagining an inspirational poster that says "you have survived 100% of your hardest days" – but when applied on any scale beyond the individual, it feels cruel and dismissive of those who did not endure, and of their friends and family and loved ones. It's the flipside of the "survivor" narrative – if those who fought hard enough, wanted it badly enough, tried hard enough, survived, what does that say about those who didn't? That they didn't want it badly enough, didn't try hard enough? I've always felt that that was a terrible thing to say, and did not at all fit with my understanding of a kind of loving Lord, so I dismissed the entire verse, along with Leviticus 21:18-21, 1 Timothy 2:11, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, and all sorts of other verses that get ignored or need very large amounts of context to make any sense of in the modern day.

When I sat down to write this grumpy screed about this verse, though, I plugged it into a search engine rather than digging out my copy of the Bible again, and found something that probably should have surprised me less than it did: that there are several translations of the concept that the NRSV renders as "test," and one of the more common translations is "temptation". The verse then becomes "no *temptation* has overtaken you [...] He will not let you be *tempted* beyond your strength." With that reframing, the verse came into better focus for me and became not about bringing someone to their breaking point, but about giving them the opportunity to re-affirm their commitment to their faith and providing the opportunity to do so at more than a single point. That's a concept that makes more sense to me: not a life-shattering test, but a recurring temptation that allows for both failure and improvement. Which brings me to my meditation, which is upon the concept of "temptation" rather than "test," but also upon the importance of revisiting difficult things, and allowing for the possibility of new and different interpretations. I do not regret my anger with the original verse, but with this new information I can see another side of its intent.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, teach me to re-examine my understanding, give me the grace to admit my mistakes, and allow me the opportunity to learn from them, so that I may improve myself and widen my faith. Amen.

Wednesday, March 16, 2022

Psalm 105:1-42; Luke 13:22-31; 2 Chronicles 20:1-22

*Gina Kim*

*“Give thanks to the Lord,  
For his steadfast love endures forever.” - 2 Chronicles 20:21*

Although I grew up in the Presbyterian church, my family has never really observed Lent. What I knew of Lent as a child was that it was a time of sacrifice. As an adult, I’ve come to realize that Lent can be a spiritual period of reflection. For me, it’s become a time of preparation to properly celebrate Easter, and the sacrifice of Jesus.

When reading Psalm 105 and 2 Chronicles 20 I was reminded of God’s steadfast love. In a season of waiting for God, these passages serve as reminders of how God has been faithful to his people and how God has blessed them. For me, Psalm 105 is joyful, but at the same time it is a reminder that God is faithful even when we are not. Even when God summoned a famine on the land, he still sent a man ahead of the famine to protect his people. Despite the apostasy of Israel, God continues to love his people and his covenant is forever. This March is not only Lent, but the second anniversary of our living with COVID-19. In a time that has required a lot of patience and faith, Psalm 105 depicts that we are not alone. That across the history of Israel, God has been there for his people despite difficulties and challenges, and he will be forever. That God’s love is truly abundant.

In 2 Chronicles 20:1-22, we hear of the struggles of Jehoshaphat as he prays to the Lord. This is after Judah has been split from the rest of the kingdom, and Israel is divided. This passage reminds us that it is through prayer that there is strength. Although we may feel weak, God often has other plans. In his desperation Jehoshaphat prays and cries to the Lord, and the Lord sends Jahaziel to tell him that “the battle is not yours but God’s.” This passage also reminds me of how it is not only Jehoshaphat that is faithful to the Lord, but all of Judah. That all fall down and worship the Lord and with that there is victory. In a time of trial and tribulation, God is faithful but it is through a community of those who are faithful that victory can truly be won. Jehoshaphat’s faithfulness is also felt across the rest of his kingdom.

Although I could see the clear connections across Psalm 105 and 2 Chronicles, Luke 13:22 - 31 stands out to me amongst these three passages. It is a familiar and often quoted story describing “the narrow door.” A person asks Jesus, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” and Jesus responds that “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” The question that is asked reflects a scarcity mindset. It implies that salvation is limited and that if my neighbor gets in, then I may not. Jesus reminds this person of the abundance of God’s love, but does so in such a way where he also admonishes the mindset of scarcity. Belief is not a contest, but rather an act of continued individual faith. And during the season of Lent, I thank God for the continued reminders of his abundant faithfulness.

Thursday, March 17, 2022

Psalm 63:1-8; Daniel 12:1-4; Revelation 3:1-6

Laura Asiala

**Scripture:**

*Oh God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;  
My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you,  
In a dry and weary land where there is not water.*  
Psalm 63:1

*To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of the Lord.”*

Revelation 3:1-2

**Reflection:**

I laughed out loud at the line, “you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. (But it was a rueful laugh.) As we come on the second anniversary of this global pandemic, in which we have retreated to our homes and ever-smaller circles, I find that we have continued to emphasize smaller, known ‘pods’, to protect ourselves and those for whom we have responsibility. There is a season for that, but this passage reminds me that the point of ‘sanctuary’ is not to secure ourselves, but to open it to others. It reminds me in the quiet to seek my God, for whom I thirst and to do that in the company of other seekers.

Virtual worship is a miracle and allows our reach to be much longer and wider than if we were only to worship in person, but these verses also remind me that our emphasis should be on engagement, not (merely) ‘production’. What dangers exist for churches—and the Christians within them—who rely on an image instead of nurturing our own spiritual life and shared connections?

I love this quote by Ruth Haley Barton: “The purpose of journeying together in spiritual friendship and spiritual community (whether there are just two of you or whether you are in a small group) is to listen to one another’s desire for God, to nurture that desire in each other and to support one another in seeking a way of life that is consistent with that desire.”

**Prayer:** Lord, we await you like spring after a long winter. Awaken our curiosity, quell our fear, strengthen our resolve to emerge and engage with fellow spiritual travelers and invite others on the journey. Amen

Friday, March 18, 2022

Psalm 63:1-8; Daniel 12:1-4; Revelation 3:1-6

## Apocalyptic Visions

*Adam Bain*

The readings for today started me thinking about the Bible's apocalyptic visions. There are apocalyptic elements in the prophecies of Joel, Zechariah, and Isaiah. Daniel provides the Old Testament's most fully developed apocalyptic vision. Then, of course, Revelation, as the concluding book of the New Testament, is an apocalyptic prophecy of God's ultimate plan for judgment and salvation. The apocalyptic prophets despair of the present circumstances and foresee a future which stands in dramatic opposition to the world. The prophecies recount dramatic events which lead to the vindication of God's truth and goodness and a salvation for God's people.

When I looked a little more in-depth into the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation (thanks Google!), I found that both writings were in response to concrete historical and political circumstances that drove the need to look for a mode and time for deliverance from God. Daniel was responding to the political crisis of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Greek king of the Seleucid Empire, who threatened to destroy traditional Jewish worship in Jerusalem, in particular through the defilement of the altar there. The historical context for Revelation appears to be the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Domitian at the end of the first century. At that time, Christian converts who would not profess loyalty to pagan gods were subjected to trials, exile, and occasionally execution.

Apocalyptic visions persist to this day. I recently watched a documentary on the Heaven's Gate cult. The group was driven by an apocalyptic vision that a UFO would arrive to transport them to a "next level" to be with God. In 1997, with the millennium on the horizon and Halley's comet approaching earth, the group believed their time had come and 39 members committed suicide. It's easy to dismiss the members of the Heaven's Gate cult as crackpots, but the documentary showed that they were just regular people who had been caught up in the apocalyptic vision of their leaders and convinced of their own uniqueness. In other words, they were human. I have relatives who have read the "Left Behind" books on the rapture. And, one has repeatedly told me that she's convinced we're near the "end times." How else can you explain the pandemic, climate change, hurricanes, wildfires, nuclear weapons, and Donald Trump?

So, I wondered to myself: why do these apocalyptic writings show up in the lectionary during Lent? For me, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus give me assurance that God is with the world in whatever suffering there may be, but God does not leave us to that suffering. Jesus shows us the way to cope with suffering in patient endurance, love, and ultimately hope. The apocalyptic visions also provide hope for deliverance from suffering, but that doesn't mean we should just wait around for the rapture or a UFO to come get us. The world has endured Antiochus IV Epiphanes and Domitian, and the world will endure the present times. I really believe that history bends toward justice. So, for me, the crucifixion and resurrection show that God has not given up on the world; indeed, the resurrection gives us hope in overcoming the world's crucifixions (the "crosses that litter the landscape" to quote our former senior pastor) through the love of Jesus. There is no reason we can't strive with love towards a New Jerusalem

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here on earth, rather than passively wait for it to come through some future apocalypse. I believe the New Jerusalem we seek is what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis called the “Beloved Community,” where people live in harmony with the earth and each other, free from hate and want, and where justice reigns supreme.

**Saturday, March 19, 2022**

Psalm 63:1-8; Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 6:43-45

*Stacey Gagosian*

In reading the passages for today, I was first thinking about the passage in Luke that says that “bad trees bear bad fruit” and that “the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart,”. Living just 4 blocks from the Russian embassy and given the awful news out of Ukraine, I thought of Vladimir Putin. I do hope that perhaps he will run out of evil stored in his heart and get to the good in his heart. This passage makes it seem very black and white – that people are either good or evil - and leaves no room for bad people to have any good in them or good people to have evil in their hearts, but I believe we all have a little of both and we must all work to bring the good out into the world. I pray that Putin – and all our world leaders – find the good in their hearts.

However, when I took the three passages together, I saw a theme of good fruit, good land and growth vs. dry land, bad fruit, and withering. I am currently reading, but have not finished, a novel called *The Four Winds* about a woman who led a life of ease, but without love. Not finding the love and affection she longs for at home, she goes looking for it elsewhere. She “gets in trouble” as they say and is cast out from a family who showed no love for her anyway, and is forced to marry into a family that works the land and loves the land. She works hard and despite a rough start, comes to love this family and they her. She also comes to love the land and wants to see her children grow up on it and carry on tending it. This is in the good times where the land is good and produces plentiful crops. However, soon the Dust Bowl dashes the entire family’s hopes, nothing will grow and they are barely surviving. Her husband can’t take it and up and leaves his parents, his wife, and children in these dire straits. She and her in-laws struggle on, determined to hang on until the rains come again. But her son’s health deteriorates so badly, she is forced to move to California – she must leave the land of the Great Plains that she loves but has turned bad and try her luck in the land of milk and honey. She soon discovers that despite the land being verdant and good, there are not enough jobs for everyone, and she and her family must live in a shanty town, endure unkindness and even danger from those who were already in California. People are starving – she and her children do not have enough to eat. Despite her own family’s poverty and hunger, she always shares what she can with friends who have even less than she does.

I found this to be very touching and inspiring – that despite everything: growing up without love and affection, her husband leaving her, and having to work herself practically to death just to give her kids a little bit of food, she is still sharing with others. I hope that I would do the same thing if I were in the same position. However too often, we do not do that. We act as the native Californians of the story do

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and steer clear, refuse to help, and even blame those who are suffering and say they brought it on themselves. These passages in Psalms, Isaiah, and Luke reminded me that we all find ourselves in bad times and that during those times, it can seem very bleak and hopeless. However, God's love can sustain us and nurture us. We must remember that in good and in bad times we must praise God. We must look for justice and righteousness despite bloodshed and distress and find the good in all our hearts and act on it.

Sunday, March 20, 2022

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8;  
Luke 13:1-9; I Corinthians 10:1-13

Miguel Petrosky

**Reflection:**

Rarely will a person of faith associate the words "repentance" with "food" unless one, to convey an internal moral shift and reflection, abstains from it through the practice of "fasting." However, each passage in today's readings, to one degree or another, utilizes food and drink imagery, coupled with calls for repentance, to convey not just an "abstaining from" but a "desire towards."

A common practice during the forty-day season of Lent—akin to Jesus abstaining from food while he was in the desert—is to relinquish an item, a practice, a luxurious food or beverage or any self-cognizant vice in preparation for the glorious triumph that Easter Sunday represents. But Lent provides followers of Jesus another aspect of repentance: As Jesus turned from the temptations in the desert, he also was turning toward the Spirit's leading. For us, this means that repentance goes beyond "not this" or "not that" negations to affirmations—what are you saying "yes" to?

As you continue your Lenten journey, ponder the things in your life that you want to turn towards to, and not just turn away from. Where do you feel the Spirit is orienting you towards? What desire(s) have you discerned to be God beckoning you to somewhere different from where you are now? What are you saying "yes" to?

**Prayer:** Holy One, deserts can be dry and desolate geographic areas defined more by its negations—what they "lack"—than anything else. We're thankful, nevertheless, for Your Spirit's guidance in shifting us toward You. Orient us toward where You are calling us to be. In Christ's name, Amen.

Monday, March 21, 2022

Psalm 39; Matthew 6:25-34

## The Birds of the Air and a Wisp of Wind

*Paul Dornan*

Psalm 39: 5-6a: *“Look, you have given me but a hand’s breath or two of life, the length of my life is as nothing to you. Every human being that stands on earth is a mere puff of wind, every human being that walks only a shadow.”*

Matthew 6: 26-27: *“Look at the birds of the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are? Can any of you, however much you worry, add one single cubit to your span of life?”*

Say the word “evanescence”. Let it dance on your tongue. It’s a wonderful, musical word that I don’t have much opportunity to use. It’s what these two passages are about. Our span of life is fleeting, evanescent. But in truth, there are two realities at play here. On the one hand, we are fragile creatures, everywhere and at all times facing the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. On the other hand, we are creatures made in the image of God; we, like all creatures, have been created good – and, by that act of creation, we are precious in God’s eyes. We are both evanescent and priceless.

But how do we live out that double legacy of fragility and worth? What’s a life look like that accepts its brittleness yet proclaims its value? What’s a life of a people that seeks to address the ills to which humanity is heir and affirms the God-created value of each being? James Agee, poet, novelist, social analyst, states wonderfully the challenge: “All that every person is, and experiences, and shall never experience, in body and mind, all these things are differing expressions of himself and of one root and are identical: and not one of these things nor one of these persons is ever quite to be duplicated, nor replaced, nor has it ever quite had precedent: but each is a new and incommunicably tender life, wounded in every breath and almost as hardly killed as easily wounded, sustaining, for a while, without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe.”

But Agee doesn’t stop there: “In every child who is born, no matter what circumstance, the potentiality of the human race is born again, and in him, too, once more, and of each of us, our terrific responsibility toward human life; toward the utmost idea of goodness, of the horror of terror and of God.” Jesus draws frailty and worth together in his glorious injunction, “Set your hearts on the kingdom first, and on God’s saving justice, and all these other things will be given to you as well.” Amen.

Tuesday, March 22, 2022

Psalm 39; Ezekiel 17:1-10; Romans 2:12-16

*Mike and Dena DeBonis*

As we prepare our hearts and our homes for a third pandemic Easter, we are grateful that many of us will be able to celebrate the resurrection in person. These past few months of omicron have been particularly challenging for all of us, and the feelings we have all felt can certainly resemble the fury that David relates feeling in Psalm 39 at the wickedness and iniquities around him. In seeking to “*guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue,*” he identifies with that eternal advice: “*If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.*” But he also acknowledges that is only a recipe for further outrage and hatred. Instead, David appeals to God not for retribution on his enemies but for something more profound: perspective. “*Let me know how fleeting my life is,*” he pleads, adding that “*surely everyone is a mere breath.*”

That prayer mirrors our own recent prayers of confession. Low temperatures, low amounts of daylight and an only half-vaccinated household have led to an abundance of short tempers and sharp tongues. We pray for perspective, that we understand that despite the historic nature of this pandemic our trials pale in comparison to others’ throughout our time and our world, nevermind God’s eternal realm. We pray also for grace – to give it to others who inspire our sharp tongue and uncharitable thoughts and for ourselves as we fall short of our own standards as parents, partners, public servants and servants of God, not to mention the others who struggle alongside us either in our own household or in the greater world.

Meanwhile, Ezekiel offers a bit of a warning in the rather abstruse parable of the two eagles, a tale with roots in ancient Hebrew politics, explaining why God frowned on the Jews who sought to escape Babylonian captivity by cozying up to Egypt. Do not seek relief from your woes in worldly powers, the lesson goes, when it is God’s will that is paramount. In Romans, Paul gives us another reminder that righteous living is not simply about knowing God’s rules or even following those rules, necessarily. Rather, it’s about following the rules for the right reasons – about being accountable to one’s own conscience.

Those are added challenges we face in these trying times, where we might seek to ease our frustrations with a new purchase or an indulgent meal. Meanwhile, bombarded with ever-changing and sometimes contradictory medical guidance, we resist the urge to throw our hands up and say “enough.” We must remember to do the right thing, not only out of social pressure or expediency but because we must do right by our neighbors whose lives and well-being remain at risk.

**Prayer:** O Lord, to help us bear witness and temper our private thoughts, giving us true perspective so that we might truly live the Gospel. Help us look beyond our own myopic challenges, and the easy worldly solutions, to develop our conscience to live Christ’s message through our actions every day.

Wednesday, March 23, 2022

Psalm 39; Num 13.17-27; Luke 13.18-21

## Title

*Kyle Cristofalo*

*“Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.”*

*“Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” Luke 13.18-21*

Do you ever miss something that is right in front of you? Maybe you're like me and you've torn up a room in your house searching for your glasses only for them to be resting on the top of your head, above your eyes? Right where you left them. How much time do we spend looking for an item or putting a hold on a project until we can locate the perfect ingredients, only to later realize what we were seeking was right in front of us the whole time, hiding in plain sight?

In today's Gospel reading Jesus shares, seemingly unprompted, that the Kingdom of God is like that of a mustard seed and yeast, two ordinary items common to residents of first century Palestine. So common, perhaps, that one would not naturally make a comparison between the two without Jesus' words. They are hidden in plain sight, right under our noses, and yet as they take shape reveal something much greater than we might initially imagine.

What does it mean that the Kingdom of God is like two items that start off small, that are not particularly unique--ordinary enough that they don't get studied very closely? What starts out small, though, does not stay that way. I'm not a baker myself, but I trust what I've been told and read--that yeast plays an important role in making sure bread rises. And, a quick google image search confirms that a mustard seed will eventually grow into a large tree. What starts out small, does not stay that way. The Kingdom of God expands, and we are invited to play a role in that expansion. It is not our work alone. We are not called to extravagant actions or asked to solve every problem. Seemingly small acts of compassion can have a profound impact well beyond anything we could have imagined. Just some small talk with a fellow passenger on the metro, or someone on the checkout line at the grocery store, might feel minor but could be precisely what that person needed. Something that starts out small, but through God's grace, expands.

As I reflected on these two parables, and how seemingly minuscule actions can help bring about God's kingdom, I was reminded of a prayer written in honor of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, assassinated due to his criticism of a corrupt government that overlooked the needs of the people. One section, in particular, came to mind: “This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to

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do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

In the Psalm reading for today, the Psalmist speaks to the temporal nature of our time on this planet. *"Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is."* However, fleeting, though, there is a role for us. We might not see every mustard seed transform into a large tree. We might not see the result of the yeast mixing with sixty pounds of flour. But I'm not sure that is the point. We are invited to participate in the work of helping right relationships and bringing about God's justice and peace to a world yearning for both. We are not ultimately the ones who will deliver it, but like the man who plants the mustard seed and the woman who mixes the yeast into the dough, we can play a part in moving it closer to reality.

Thursday, March 24, 2022

Psalm 32; Joshua 4:1-13; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5

*Alison Nowak*

Did you give something up for Lent this year? I must admit that after growing up in a tradition that viewed faith as primarily a spiritual or intellectual exercise, I've only attempted this physical discipline a couple of times in my life and mostly unsuccessfully.

If there is a liturgical season when it makes sense to think about the connection between our spirit and our body, however, it's Lent. It's not only because so many of the traditional practices of this season of repentance involve physical aspects – fasting, ashes on foreheads, washing of feet – but also because we feel the connection between our spirits and our bodies acutely when we acknowledge our sin. It's the knot in our stomachs when our actions have hurt others or our relationship with God. It's the tightening of our shoulders when we see injustice but turn our heads. These physical feelings make it hard for us to ignore our sin even when we try our best to do so.

Today's readings remind us that God's promised redemption from sin is both spiritual and physical. The psalmist speaks of a body wasting away until he confessed his sin and felt the Lord's forgiveness. In the passage from Corinthians, Paul writes of our outer nature wasting away, of our groaning as we yearn to enter a heavenly home. Yet, he does not say that we will shed our mortal bodies. Instead, he asserts that we will be *"further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."* How this will work, I have no idea, but maybe as beings made in God's image our bodies are worthy of redemption too. If God's promised redemption from our sin is spiritual and physical, then perhaps taking on practices of faith that embrace both is important as well. In today's passage from Joshua, God provides a miracle that allows the Israelites to cross into the promised land after forty years of less-than-stellar obedience in the desert. The people don't just mark this miracle through prayer or praise, they answer God's call to hoist heavy stones up onto their shoulders to create a monument at the crossing. It's a monument to God's

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might to be sure, but I also imagine it standing as a corporate acknowledgment of sin and an assurance to future generations of God's promise to redeem.

I keep coming back to what Stephanie Paulsell points out in her contribution to *Practicing Our Faith*. Paulsell writes that as Christians we view the world through the lens of Jesus' wounded and resurrected body. It's not just a spiritual resurrection, but a physical one too. We are embodied beings, Paulsell asserts. Our bodies are worthy of care, respect, and redemption and it's through our bodies that we participate in God's activity in the world (14-15).

I've not been very successful at adopting physical practices of faith in the past, but, after wrestling with today's passages, I think I might be ready to try again this Lent.

**Prayer:** God, we are beings with bodies and spirits broken by sin. We bring ourselves to you through both our physical practices and our personal and corporate confessions this season. Untangle our knots and drop our shoulders so that we can use our whole selves to glorify you. Amen.

**Friday, March 25, 2022**

32nd Psalm; Joshua 4:14-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-15

*Marsha E. Renwanz*

Themes of recognition, remembrance and reconciliation run through the scriptural verses referenced above. Of the three texts, the 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm speaks to me most directly this Lenten season. The 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm focuses on the joys of forgiveness and relief akin to liberation felt by those whose sins have been absolved. It emphasizes the importance of acknowledging one's transgressions, which sets the stage for admitting them to God. The Psalm cautions against stubborn attitudes which may preclude the act of confession, reminding us that God offers protection and shelter from trouble. Moreover, the Psalm shines a spotlight on the promise of steadfast love, which surrounds all those who trust the Lord. Contrasting God's unending love for the righteous with the manifold torments facing the wicked, the psalmist encourages us to rejoice and be glad in our deliverance.

Our collective failure to curb racial injustice ranks at the top of my list of severe transgressions separating us from God. During my elementary school years, I became keenly aware of the concept of "otherness" and identifying "the other" as someone who is 'less than' and not an equal. Having emigrated from Spain, my mother's father spoke fluent English but with a "foreign accent." The fact that he spoke six other languages – Catalan, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, and German-made no difference. He was easy to pigeonhole as "the other" every time he spoke aloud. Popular culture in New Jersey during my childhood further honed my awareness of racial and ethnic discrimination. I can remember singing a song from "West Side Story" during our fifth-grade school concert. I carefully considered the lyrics to "*I Want to Be in America*," especially the refrain that "*Things are all right in America if you're **all white** in America.*" I also have vivid memories of a photo essay published in Reader's Digest. Beautiful black and

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white photos illustrated things all children love, such as taffy apples and inviting piles of fallen autumn leaves where children can jump and frolic. The last page of that essay featured a photo of an African American girl who was ages with me, and the caption asked: “Why don’t people like me?” I remember the pain and confusion reflected on the girl’s face every time I recall the photographs.

When he spoke to a packed sanctuary at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church as part of the McClendon Scholar in Residence program, Bryan Stevenson reminded us that the first step to combatting racial injustice is acknowledging the scope of the problem. As founder of the ***Equal Justice Initiative***, he counseled that we had to get “proximate” to this very thorny issue. In his book *Just Mercy*, Stevenson encouraged us to get outside our respective “comfort zones” and confront the history and legacy of slavery, Black codes, lynching, Jim Crow suppression of African American civil rights including voting, fatal shootings of unarmed African American youth and adults by the police, the use of chokeholds on African American men and women targeted for arrests, and many other acts of violence and discrimination against people of color in our cities, towns, and suburbs.

Following Mr. Stevenson’s advice, I will be exploring a new collection of Lenten devotions entitled: *Lent of Liberation: Confronting the Legacy of American Slavery* by Cheri L. Mills. Published last year by Westminster John Knox Press, this book draws upon historic accounts of slaves who escaped via the Underground Railroad, as documented by William Still. Mr. Still’s mother carried him as a young child when she herself ran away from a plantation where she had been held in bondage. Once he grew up, William Still dedicated his life to assisting other enslaved people to escape to freedom in Canada and the northern U.S. He compiled and published testimony from the hundreds of enslaved people he had assisted in *The Underground Railroad: A Record*, published in 1871 (Philadelphia: People’s Publishing Company).

In her book, Cheri Mills pairs each of forty selected accounts of the lives of escaped slaves with a parallel passage of Scripture. In turn, she poses questions for reflection and discussion. Having served in full-time ministry for close to three decades at St. Stephen Baptist Church in Louisville, KY, Rev. Mills is qualified to compose such devotions. In her role as Prayer Director at Simmons College of Kentucky – a renowned Historically Black College and University (HBCU) – Rev. Mills has also garnered considerable expertise in African American history.

At a time when thirteen states, including Virginia and Florida, are imposing restrictions on teaching of African American history in our public schools, it is more important than ever to promote the use of primary resources in examining slavery and its aftermath in the United States. I look forward to examining in-depth the real-life accounts of individuals who escaped from forced labor on American plantations. I also expect to read stories of deep gratitude to God and resounding joy experienced by those liberated from the scourge of enslavement. Having skimmed two or three accounts already, I know of a former slave named Elizabeth who experienced frostbite as she hid in the woods. She and her fellow runaways were unable to make a fire for fear of detection. Once she reached Philadelphia, the frostbite cost her all her toes. Amputation was required to stop a life-threatening case of gangrene. Although she was unable to walk for half a year, she expressed gratitude for her freedom and said she would do it all

(Continued)

over again. I hope to share more about Elizabeth's story when drafting a Lenten meditation for 2023. Thus, I end this brief reflection as I began it, with images of deliverance and liberation as evoked by the 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm.

**Saturday, March 26, 2022**

Psalm 32; Exodus 32:7 – 14; Luke 15:1 – 10

*Abby Rosenson*

**The Parable of the Lost Sheep**

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."*

**The Parable of the Lost Coin**

*"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* Luke 15:1 – 10

One observation many of us have undoubtedly made about life is that it has many seasons. Not just in the sense of changing weather, but also in our priorities, our habits, and the people around us. Combined, these changes can sway where we spend our time and energy. Some seasons may have a strong focus on school and extra curriculars while others may focus on careers, friends and family, or finding our passions.

God is fully present in all of life's seasons, but some of us may lose sight of Him while we're distracted by other things. Sometimes we may realize we've lost our way after the fact (or even in the moment) and feel a little guilty. Other times we may not realize it at all.

Today's parables from Luke use the example of a lone sheep that has strayed away from the flock and a single coin that has been lost from a group of ten. In both cases, the "lost" one is only a small part of the group, yet both the shepherd and the woman put their energy into bringing it back. In the same way, God cares for all of us, including those who have strayed from the path – so much that He will put energy into guiding us back, even when we're only a small part of the whole. This example of God's amazing love can bring reassurance and peace when we lose our way. No matter our actions, God still cares for us and will always help to bring us home.

Sunday, March 27, 2022

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

*Mike Smith*

The gospel reading is the familiar parable of the prodigal son, and, influenced by Henri Nouwen’s book “The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming,” I cannot focus on the parable without my mind’s eye recalling Rembrandt’s masterwork painting. Like the parable, the painting carries layers of depth that enable meditation and interpretive exploration. (For anyone unfamiliar with the artwork, you can search for “Rembrandt Return of the Prodigal Son” at [ArtsAndCulture.google.com](https://www.ArtsAndCulture.google.com) to view a very detailed image that can be zoomed into enough to make out individual brushstrokes.)

The other readings focus my meditation on the painting’s portrayal of the son. He appears emaciated. One shoe is torn, and the other has fallen off, together suggesting that he can walk no further; he takes the final step of his journey on his knees. His head is shorn, and his face leans to his father’s waist, silently accepting his fate. His clothes are tattered, and a hole on the shoulder of his tunic shows the raw edges of a wound. The image of the son evokes need, dependence, and humility. It evokes the pain of separation from God. It evokes the separation that, like the son, we often choose for ourselves. It reminds us how often our shame keeps us from God’s love.

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer (Ps. 32:3–4).*

*But the painting does not leave the son to suffer. Instead, the son’s weakness is enveloped in the father’s embrace. The father bends to comfort his suffering child. One hand covers—heals—the wound, the other presses the child’s body against the father, placing him at home.*

*. . . I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’, and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. . . . Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord (Ps. 32:5–7, 10).*

The father’s forgiveness reminds us of the boundless, unconditional love of God, its constant transformative power, and its model for us.

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! . . . that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ . . . (2 Cor. 5:17–20)*

**Prayer:** Let us model the son’s humility and our father’s forgiveness. Let us remember their embrace and share that love. Let us carry the message of reconciliation as ambassadors for Christ.

Monday, March 28, 2022

Psalm 53; Leviticus 23:26-41; Revelation 19:1-8

*Miriam Dewhurst*

What do you think of when you see/hear the word “Leviticus”? I think of outdated rules with an overlying layer of dust. I don’t think I have ever in my life heard a sermon based on a passage of this third book of the Bible. Thanks to a college course on the Old Testament, I have read it. I am particularly acquainted with Lev. 18:22, one of a handful of verses in the whole of the Bible that are used against LGBTQIA+ folks. In short, I do not have a particularly positive attitude toward this book. There it sits, though, in the middle of the Pentateuch.

I think I need to repent of this attitude. There is much to appreciate in these 27 chapters. For one thing, it is a window into ancient Israel. Wikipedia tells us the general consensus of scholars is that Leviticus developed over a long period of time and came to its present form between 538 and 332 BCE. It is between 2,300 and 2,500 years old and had been in the works for centuries before that.

Perhaps we can imagine a people who have had extraordinary experiences of God – the escape from Egypt, the giving of the Law at Sinai, God’s providence during the years of wandering – manna, quail and water from a rock. This God who rescues and provides is unimaginably holy – other, powerful, luminous, transcendent. This God has chosen them as a people to travel with, to dwell among. How does one live in safety with a holy God? One must strive to be as holy as possible oneself. How does one do that? Follow these rules, observe these rituals. Try not to sin. Try to obey God’s law. If you fail, make these offerings. How can one remember all these rules? They have been written down and entrusted to the priests, the Levites.

The passage from Leviticus for today is part of a series of instructions about prescribed festivals and holy days. Leviticus 23:26-41 lays out how the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles are to be observed.

*“The Lord said to Moses, ‘The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the Lord by fire. Do no work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the Lord your God. Anyone who does not deny himself on that day must be cut off from his people. I will destroy from among his people anyone who does any work on that day. You shall do no work at all. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live. It is a sabbath of rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your sabbath.’” (Lev. 23:26-32)*

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the holiest day of the Jewish year. As Christians we are inclined to think that we don’t need a day of atonement because Jesus has already made atonement for us through his death on the cross. What we’re missing, though, is a consecrated time of confession and serious attention to where we are out of relationship with God. And when was the last time any of us did no work for 24 hours? Leviticus – the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Tuesday, March 29, 2022

Leviticus 25:1-19; Psalm 53; Revelation 19:9-10

## A Sabbath Rest

*Ella Cleveland*

Leviticus 25: 4: *“But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord.”* (NIV)

Hebrews 4: 9: *“There remains, then, a sabbath rest for the people of God...”* (NIV)

I have heard that it is a wise practice to not only rotate crops, but to let the ground rest for a time, even a year. The Israelites observed this custom for the land. Moreover, they observe the sabbath weekly and rest and dedicate themselves to God for that day.

There is a tombstone in North Sumatra, Indonesia that has Hebrews 4: 9 inscribed on it. It is the final resting place of Ludwig Nommensen, a German Lutheran missionary to the Batak tribe of Sumatra. Born in 1834 in Germany, Rev. Nommensen boarded a ship in 1861 that sailed for 142 days from Amsterdam to Sumatra. He arrived on the shores just a few years after two American missionaries were eaten by cannibals.

Nommensen narrowly escaped becoming the entree himself at a dinner. He was mocked and called “goat eyes,” because his eyes were blue. Nevertheless, he learned the Batak language, translated the New Testament into Batak, and converted thousands of animists and ancestor worshipers to Christianity by presenting Christ as Christ the King. He built an indigenous Batak Lutheran church, appointing local bishops. Today, in a country that is 9/10 Islam, there is the 5th largest Lutheran Church body in the world, owed to this amazing man.

Nommensen never returned to Europe. He buried two mail-order brides and six children in Indonesia, but lived to age 84 himself and chose to be buried on Indonesian soil as he journeyed to his final sabbath rest.

Dave and I taught at Nommensen University in North Sumatra from 1986-1989. When we visited Nommensen’s gravesite, I was struck by the Hebrews 4: 9 inscription on the tombstone and looked it up. Since then, I have been inspired to take a sabbath rest on many Sundays, and I look forward, as Rev. Nommensen did, to an eternal sabbath rest in the arms of our God.

**Prayer:** Loving God, please be with us as we rest in your arms, on sabbaths here on earth and in the eternal rest promised to us.

Wednesday, March 30, 2022

Psalm 53; 2 Kings 4:1-7; Luke 9:10-17

*Linda Kelly*

As a junior in high school, I am becoming intimately familiar with standardized testing— including the horrors of AP multiple-choice. Looking at a word, I think, *well, obviously I know what this word means. Everybody knows what this word means.* But in the context of the given piece, the word might mean something completely different, because the College Board enjoys tripping me up. Reading these verses, I felt like I was taking a test and being asked to define a familiar word in the provided text.

Today’s passages were meant to be about divine providence. A woman’s husband dies and she is left with nothing, so God gives her some oil to sell and take care of her family. Five thousand people are hungry, so Jesus feeds them. God’s people are in a land ruled by vice, so God restores the world to holiness. The prevailing theme is that God can fix the problem. If you lack something, God will ensure you receive it. This was the right answer, the answer that the College Board graders wanted me to give. But I could not help agreeing with the sentiments expressed in Psalm 53: yes, there is a lot of corruption. Yes, it sometimes feels like there is nobody who does good. Things go wrong and social sin persists. The unconquerable pessimist in me, it seemed, had prevailed again, managing to turn a verse about hope into one of despairing condemnation.

Psalm 53 is known as the contemplation of David, and it was written during a time when Israel was not an independent power, but dominated and oppressed by another. David, the king of a once-powerful nation, laments his people’s loss of sovereignty, but also believes that God will one day deliver them— as, indeed, God later does. Israel is suffering, and David has complete faith that God will intervene. Unlike in the case of the widow and the 5,000 people Jesus feeds, we know what David thought while his people struggled in bondage: something along the lines of, “this is really bad.” (This, at least, we can all relate to.) The widow in 2 Kings also would likely have been on the verge of panic; she owned virtually nothing and had children, and most jobs were inaccessible to women at the time. These situations were dire, but they also were solved. The message, then, is that God sees us through difficult times, even when things seem like they couldn’t get worse, and our instinct is to focus on all the negative aspects of a situation. These biblical characters did not respond to their respective plights with simple acceptance born of the knowledge that one day, eventually, God would deliver them. The contemplation of David is twofold. The king accepts that his situation is not ideal, and he isn’t in denial about its severity or its consequences. However, acknowledgement of this reality does not stop him from believing that God will continue to provide for the people of Israel.

Thursday, March 31, 2022

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 126; Philippians 2:19-24

## Extravagant Love

*Martha Davis*

Today's lectionary verses are uniformly upbeat, conveying joy, restoration, and encouragement under the banner of God's love for me. I felt a little surprised! I often approach writing one of these devotions with some trepidation, expecting some soul searching and parsing of words needed to find a genuine meaning in the verses. Not so today, and I feel a certain relief!

As Pastor Sarah said in a recent sermon, God's love and mercy are extravagant and wander outside our expectations. These verses in this Psalm and Isaiah passage pour it on.

The Psalm – a Song of Ascents – is most poignant at this juncture when I hope we are near the end of the Covid era, not quite sure if I can believe it's over:

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy... restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the (arid) Negeb. May those who sow in tears (now) reap with shouts of joy.*

God's assurances in Isaiah are more personal:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.*

Isaiah's God piles on so many assurances and ransoms in my honor that it's almost overwhelming. Can I believe that God really loves me so much?

I hope so. Whether I am looking ahead to restore more watercourses in my life after Covid, or trying to formulate dreams of my longer future, these verses shout out God's extravagant love for me. Let me take that love at face value, and use it as inspiration for a hopeful optimism and ambitious course for the future.

**Prayer:** God help me to truly believe how loved I am by you, and by doing so enable me to live into your full promise for me. Help, Thanks, Wow!

Friday, April 1, 2022

Psalm 126; Isaiah 43:8-15; Philippians 2:25-3:1

## Rejoice ... We Are Never Alone!

*Mark A. Zaineddin*

The road to Jerusalem for Jesus and his early followers was fraught with peril. Not only were they subjected to dangers of the natural surroundings and climatic conditions, but also they needed to pay attention to bandits and other potential hazards along the way. And if that wasn't enough, the anti-empire message of Jesus — a message of repentance and reorientation of oneself and one's community to the Kingdom of God rather than to the subjugations and desires of the powers that be — was a danger and death sentence in and of itself. The road to Jerusalem for Jesus and his early followers was fraught with peril.

It would have been easy as they made their way from the Galilee to Jerusalem with this Kingdom of God proclamation — as they continued to associate with the vulnerable and the undesirable in their midst — to become subsumed with fear and trepidation. It would have been easy to resign themselves to a realization that the powerful and the wealthy, that the empiric elite and the well-heeled, that the dark shadows and that death would have final say. It would have been easy to recall with anxiety and unease the exile of their Jewish ancestors. It would have been easy to disquietly dwell upon an all but certain future outcome for their words and actions. And it would have been easy to feel alone.

But, perhaps, Jesus and his early followers — on this road to Jerusalem, a road fraught with peril — recalled the Psalms ... Psalms like 126 reminding them of how the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion; how God brought them out of exile. And how their forefathers and foremothers were full joy and laughter. Perhaps, too, Jesus and his early followers held high the words of the Prophet Isaiah, never forgetting — even in their darkest hour — that God was by their side, a God that created and redeemed ... that liberated and delivered. A God that did not abandon and a God that ensured that death did not have the last word. A generation later, Paul reminds the community at Philippi that they too are not alone. He exhorts them to welcome Epaphroditus into their community; and to rejoice as he comes to minister and to walk beside them, bearing the work and the message of Christ.

Friends, during this season of Lent, we too have been making our way to Jerusalem and to the cross. Perhaps on our way, we have found this season to be filled with pain and apprehension and with doubt and despair; and perhaps on our way, we have found this season to be encompassed by the trials and tribulations, and the realities and realizations, of an all too often broken and uncertain world. And, yet, as we make our way through the season of Lent — as we acknowledge and recall our individual and corporate failings and as we surrender ourselves to a new life in Christ — may we rejoice. May we rejoice knowing that we are not alone. May we rejoice knowing that God is in our midst. And may we rejoice while we live into our faith and while we recommit ourselves to be followers of the Way, the Way of Jesus.

**Prayer:** Loving God ... on this day during the season of Lent, we find ourselves on the journey to

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Jerusalem and the cross. We know and have experienced the trials and tribulations and the realities of this world. May we rejoice knowing that we are not alone, that you are in our midst. And may we rejoice as we take the call to follow Jesus beyond the cross ... to a new life, a new community, and a new way. Amen.

**Saturday, April 2, 2022**

Psalm 126; Exodus 12:21-27; John 11:45-57

*Annie Wong*

I find that the discomfort of being in a liminal space, the yearning for deliverance, and, indeed, the whole weight of the Lenten season is much more acutely and deeply felt during these difficult times as we continue to confront the challenges of yet another year of COVID. Undoubtedly, we all know the Passover story from Exodus and the account of the condemnation of Jesus in the hands of the high priest, Caiaphas, and the Sanhedrin as a result of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead in the Gospel of John, but how do we sustain our faith in the Easter promise so that our hope for the Psalmist's joy of God's deliverance and redemption not wear thin?

In the story of the first Passover, Moses tells all the elders of Israel to slay the Passover lamb and apply its blood to the lintel and the two doorposts so that God will pass over their doors and spare the lives of their first-borns. In this story, we see that the first-borns are saved not by fasting, prayers, or other acts of good deeds on the part of the Israelites but rather through the sacrifice of another life, the Pascal Lamb. The first-borns are rescued from the claws of the angel of death only through the death of the lambs slaughtered by their families. The Passover story is a powerful foreshadow of, a greater story, that of the crucifixion of Jesus and our redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ. Just as the lamb dies in order to save the first-borns during that first Passover, Christ dies on the cross for us so that we may be saved and attain everlasting life. In both instances, a life is given so that multitudes may be saved in exchange.

The Gospel of John tells us that, in the aftermath of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead, the Sanhedrin, or the council, debates Jesus' fate out of their fear that His miracle might lead to the belief of all men in His message. During their discourse, Caiaphas, the high priest, unwittingly declares the glory of God by saying, "...You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish" (John 11:49-50). Even though Caiaphas does not believe in the gospel of Jesus and wants Him dead, God, nonetheless, speaks to us through Caiaphas' unintentional prophesy that Jesus' death on the cross would save all nations. The life of one, the Son of God, is exchanged for the salvation of many so that the whole nation will not perish. Indeed, the good news of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross for the salvation of sins of the world are always there for the taking. We just have to hang, in that liminal space, a bit longer to our faith in the Easter promise and claim, for ourselves, the everlasting life made possible through the blood of Jesus Christ.

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**Prayer:** Lord, we pray that we hold fast to our faith in Your promise of deliverance and redemption while we wait for the dawn of Easter morn. May our mouth be filled with laughter; and our tongue with joyful shouting; and we say among the nations: the Lord has done great for us; we are glad.

Sunday, April 3, 2022

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126;  
John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4b-14

## **Title Don't Look Back**

*Jonathan Lauer*

These Scriptures hold in common a call to forward-looking, faith-filled perseverance. In the Isaiah passage, the prophet proclaims the word of the Lord, the word of the same God who parted the Red Sea waters to make a way for the Israelites during their flight from Egypt and then commanded the waters to engulf the pursuing Egyptian army, so that horse and chariot were “snuffed out like the wick,” never to rise again. Yet what is God’s prophetic word here? Don’t look back, don’t think about “earlier things!” God is doing a new thing. Water will flow in the desert and God’s chosen people will drink of it and proclaim the glory of God.

My natural inclination is to remember God’s past graces in my life as foundational assurances, glimmers of hope in the present and in the veiled, uncertain future. In Psalm 126, jubilant pilgrims celebrate a turning of fortune, something I would also love to celebrate in these fraught times. They revel in the promise of the future. As if dreaming, they praise God for the coming return to a lost shalom. Those who sowed with tears will harvest with joy. Even the heathen acknowledge the great goodness God has bestowed upon God’s people. God is doing great things now and that is the reason for unrestrained joy.

The Gospel and epistle readings are marked by the heavier reality of suffering. John 12 recounts the story of Martha preparing a meal for Jesus in Bethany six days before the Passover and after Jesus had raised her brother Lazarus. Lazarus is at table and Mary washes Jesus’s feet with costly perfume. Judas is revealed to be a thieving treasurer who postures a concern for the poor. Jesus rebukes Judas for complaining about Mary’s lavish anointing and directly states that Mary is preparing him for his imminent death and burial. God is again doing a new thing, though great suffering will follow as the Reign of God breaks through.

In Philippians, St. Paul recounts his stellar Jewish pedigree, a position that by birth, tradition, and education few could match. Yet he counts that all as so much rubbish in light of the righteousness he finds in knowing and following Christ. By sharing in Christ’s suffering, Paul hopes one day to share in Christ’s marvelous resurrection. “I forget what is behind me and strive for what is before me, with my eyes on the goal, pondering the prize of the calling from above, through God in Christ Jesus.” Again we see the forward gaze. Don’t look back.

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**Prayer:** Loving God, in this penitential season, may we answer your call to shake the dust from our feet, not looking back, but believing that nothing can hold us down because your grace is sufficient. You are creating a new thing that we can see unfolding in our forward look of faith. Amen.

**Monday, April 4, 2022**

Exodus 40:1-15; Psalm 20; Hebrews 10:19-25

*Rebecca Davis*

A few years ago, I started to read the Bible from the beginning. (I made it only to Numbers). Despite many years reading Old Testament stories, I found myself surprised at the frequency and centrality of burnt offerings in our earliest texts. Subsistence farmers burning animal flesh as a prescribed show of devotion to God reminded me how different our culture is from the culture of the Israelites six thousand years ago. It's hard for me to imagine what is described as a "soothing aroma to the Lord."

Yet there it is, "sacrifice," a violent act at the absolute core of our tradition. I found descriptions of the exact technique, how to prepare the animal, what to do with the blood that is let, how to perform the burning, and who gets to keep the skins afterwards. After so many passages, I grew to appreciate how essential those animals were to those nomads. How they had raised them with their hands, with water that was so hard to come by in some places. How these animals ate scarce grain and grew fat, only to be laid onto the altar. This is the nature of sacrifice, to "make sacred" through this process. Preciousness is a measure of devotion. The most important, elemental bits of life laid down on the altar for consumption by fire. The futility, anguish and even waste are inherent to the import. And the preciousness reinforces belief that our sacrifice is only rational if it is made to a worthwhile cause.

I visited friends in Kenya a few years ago who run a non-profit that helps women learn how to farm healthy crops on the land around their homes. I spent a day with one of these families, learning about their crops, cooking and lives. My visit brought about the slaughter of one of their five chickens (which, you can believe, I ate with gusto, vegetarianism notwithstanding). It was an honor to share that chicken, the dearest kind of offering to friendship.

What is precious to us, and what might we lay down to mark our intimate relationship with God? What can we order to remove distraction from serving the goodness at the center of the universe? I've come closer in these last years to appreciating how much our siblings have had to lay down for justice, in the hopes that by their example the rest of us will find ways to reorganize our lives and priorities to bring about what Jesus called the "kingdom of God."

And it has caused me to contemplate what is scarcest for us, in this modern construct. For some of us, it is not even money. It is time. Time is the gift we give to each other, to God. This is what the writer of Hebrews describes. I am awestruck at how many of our NYAPC family have dedicated this most precious resource to "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess."

**Prayer:** Reorder my priorities today, God, and help me make sacrifices to draw closer to you. Amen.

Tuesday, April 5, 2022

Psalm 20; Judges 9:7-15; I John 2:18-28

*Sam Obermeyer*

*“Now this I know: The Lord gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand.” - Psalm 20:6*

We are all lucky because we are children of God who provides us with the greatest gift of all, unconditional love. We know that if we live up to the example he has taught us, we will live a life that we can be proud of and that is fulfilling.

There are many ways in which we can live up to that example but a simple one is to help spread love as we go about our days. A smile or simple act of kindness directed at others when expecting nothing in return.

But that does not mean it will always be easy. One of God’s greatest gifts to us is he forgives us for our sins but it can be challenging for us to forgive others. And just as Jesus faced temptations, we face temptations all from our world.

*“The antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come.... It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist... As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.” - 1 John 2:18, 22, 24*

It can be easy and tempting to fall into the trap of the negativity in the world. We see those who don’t put love first succeed. But it is important to remember that we don’t see other’s whole story. Our focus should be on our own story, knowing that if we follow the example set for us to the best of our abilities, we will receive the greatest gift of all, love.

*“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.” - Psalm 20:7-8*

Wednesday, April 6, 2022

Psalm 20 (KJV);  
 Habakkuk 3:2-15 (NRSV);  
 Luke 18:31-34 (KJV, NRSV)

*David Powell*

These scriptures speak to me about the life of a man or a woman, day by day, the joys, the struggles, defeat and victory. And beyond or behind this life, is the timelessness of an all-powerful God. The poet Shelly wrote, "Man is a being of high aspirations, whose thoughts wander through eternity." The grandeur of a timeless world; the quiet desperation of a single life. How can we transition or bridge from our life, to the mystery and power of a God who can make "the ancient mountains crumble," ... make "the sun and the moon stand still in the heavens"?

Roger Gench, in a Sunday school class, spoke of Genesis 1: 27: "So God created man in his own image." Roger had an intriguing thought: what if this creation is not exactly physical, but more accurately that the vast imagination of man is created by God in His own image? Man's imagination can begin to access, bridge or transition to the infinite timeless world created by God, who empowers us with the faith to see and begin to understand it. In Psalm 20, a Psalm of David, assurances come from the Lord who rescues those who remember the name of the Lord. It promises those who trust in chariots and horses will be brought down and fallen, but with spiritual discipline we are risen and stand upright.

In Luke 8: 31-34, Jesus spoke about the desperate days to come for himself and the twelve disciples. Yet he spoke with a vision into this timeless infinity, to tell his disciples what to expect, including his death and resurrection. They did not know what he was talking about.

Whether our faith is as light as a feather that we can easily pick up again and again, or as solid as old, weathered stone wall terraces on a hillside, faith in the Lord provides a bridge, helps us transition from daily struggles to the eternal protections revealed through David and Habakkuk and Christ.

Thursday, April 7, 2022

Psalms 31:9-16; Isaiah 53:10-12; Hebrews 2:1-9

## Suffering

*Jim Turner*

There is abundant suffering in both of the Old Testament passages. The Psalmist pleads for God's protection in the midst of regret and shame. Isaiah's verses are sometimes referred to as one of the "*Songs of the Suffering Servant*." For Christians, the prophesy anticipates the suffering of Jesus. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Servant\\_songs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Servant_songs))

From our own experiences, including the COVID pandemic, we recognize some of the pain that the writers are expressing.

We have been reminded that suffering is not equitably distributed. Some leaders emphasize our differences and assign us to subcultures – then watch as we quarrel with other groups for scarce resources. It seems some want us to stay with "our kind" and lobby for "our fair share." The place for our common humanity in civic discourse seems diminished.

We may contemplate our personal responsibility for inflicting suffering on others and ourselves. Are we responsible for the historical suffering of others? And are we responsible for the suffering that "our kind" continues to inflict?

Paul's letter to the Hebrews offered uplifting counsel to early Christians who were having problems. Perhaps their discord included something like the divisiveness that we have been experiencing in our modern society.

Paul quotes the scriptural assessment of human beings as created "*a little lower than the angels*." Paul brought me to that phrase in Psalm 8 – as lovely an exposition as there is of God's relationship with human beings.

May we find inspiration, and courage, to work together to care for the creation that we have been entrusted with. Help us to recognize that we human beings are much more alike than different. May we emerge from the suffering we have been experiencing.

Friday, April 8, 2022

Psalm 31:9-16; Isaiah 54:9-10; Hebrews 2:10-18

## God's Steadfast Love

*Edith Holmes Snyder*

When preparing to pray, I think about people I know who need God's healing, God's protection, God's deliverance – the kinds of help for which the psalmist pleads in the first passage for this day in Lent.

A friend who is battling stage 4 peritoneal cancer;

Elderly relatives whose frailty leaves them no choice but to transition from their home of decades to assisted living;

Former colleagues who have lost their jobs as a result of a change in business model;

Citizens of nations at war, whether in Ukraine, Syria, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, and soldiers ordered to wage it.

Each week, our church's care/prayer list reminds us of these and so many others for whom we seek God's intervention.

Psalm 31 asserts that relief will come to those who understand that only God has the power to affect the future. *"But I trust in you, O Lord,"* says the psalmist. *"I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors."* (Verses 14-15) God's steadfast love is a saving love.

According to commentators on this and the verses from Isaiah for today, "steadfast love" refers to God's covenant faithfulness, to our understanding of God's character as just and faithful. God does not abandon those who rely on him. Recalling God's promise to Noah, God says, "I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed..." (Verses 9-10)

Psalm 31 is often read on Passion, or Palm, Sunday in the context of Jesus' suffering and death. Indeed, Christ's final words from the cross are from verse 5a – "Into your hands I commit my spirit." As he reaches the end of his suffering and dies, Jesus takes refuge in God and doing so intercedes for us all.

The author of Hebrews, whether the Apostle Paul or an unknown writer, makes this connection between Jesus and all those who trust in God's steadfast love. "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings." (Verse 10) Jesus shares our flesh and blood; we are his children and his siblings. "Therefore, [Christ] had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for

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the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” (Verses 17-18)

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you for the gift of your son Jesus Christ as the pioneer of our salvation, our brother, liberator, and high priest in your service. Help us always to put our trust in you and your steadfast love, especially when we are being tested, when we are suffering.

Saturday, April 9, 2022

Psalm 31:9-16; Leviticus 23:1-8; Luke 22:1-13

## The Devil Made Me Do It

John H. Quinn, Jr.

Or did he (or it)?

Jesus arrives in Jerusalem on the eve of Passover, the beginning of a seven-day festival during which God had long ago commanded that the entire community stop ordinary work and celebrate – give thanks with each other for God’s abundance and deliverance from oppression. He has come to Jerusalem to celebrate these gifts with “the people,” including his family and friends. He also has made detailed plans to follow the tradition Moses established for the Passover meal. He anticipates opposition to his teaching by the temple authorities, chief priests and legal experts, because they fear him; they still don’t understand his mission, purpose or calling, his strange lifestyle. But he has been working and traveling with a small group of close friends, including Judas Iscariot, who will share the Passover meal with him. Surely, these friends have believed in him and understand him and can joyfully celebrate with him on this special occasion.

During the meal, Judas alone “went out.” Why? We are told where he went and what he did. But we are not told why he acted as he did. What about Jesus’ teaching, preaching, and his actual lifestyle modeling did Judas not understand, believe and accept? In what manner had Jesus failed to meet Judas’ expectations? Was Jesus being so “unrealistic” that Judas “had enough” and decided to leave the dinner party alone? Does the psalmist help us understand what Judas might have been thinking on that night?

*“Have mercy on me, Lord, because I’m depressed. My vision fails because of my grief, as do my spirit and my body. My life is consumed with sadness; my years are consumed with groaning. Strength fails me because of my suffering; my bones dry up. I’m a joke to all my enemies, still worse to my neighbors. I scare my friends, and whoever sees me in the street runs away! I’m forgotten, like I’m dead, completely out of mind; I’m like a piece of pottery, destroyed. Yes, I’ve heard all the gossiping, terror all around; so many gang up against me, they plan to take my life!”*

This is the voice of one in despair. Luke tells us that Judas – an apparent, would-be, faithful disciple (like each of us) - “went out.” He apparently felt that he no longer belonged among the disciples. We don’t know his motive for acting as he did, but we do know that he was accountable for his actions, whatever motivated them. He deceptively left the dinner and intentionally met with authorities who feared Jesus

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and to whom he agreed to “hand over” Jesus. We too effectively “go out” – abandon Jesus and other disciples - if we join or support oppressors by putting our faith in deception or the use of any form of coercive power (such as “market forces,” or bullying, or violence) to achieve any ends. But wait. Today’s Scripture passages remind us that God’s commandment to rest every seven days liberates us from the pursuit of such power; this sabbath rest manifests God’s steadfast love and sustaining presence among us. What sense of hopelessness or despair keeps us from relying on this Holy Spirit-provided power? The psalmist answers the question as Jesus does and would have us also pray: *“But me? I trust you, Lord! I affirm, ‘You are my God.’ My future is in your hands. Don’t hand me over to my enemies, to all who are out to get me! Shine your face on your servant; save me by your faithful love!”*

Is it Judas’ insight failure, his apparent belief that the temple authorities were more realistic than Jesus, that led him to abandon Jesus? I suggest that insight failure – the feeling that I can’t lovingly respond to the wrongs of the world because I’m only human, only one person, too busy with important work, too sinful or too ignorant – leads to the despair from which the psalmist yearns to escape and which Judas did not timely reject nor escape.

**Prayer:** Oh God of hope, fill each of us – and all of us – with all joy and peace, in faith, so that each of us - and all of us - overflow with hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Help us to trust and act in reliance on your promises and steadfast love for all of us and the rest of creation. Forgive us when we fail to trust and act in reliance on your promises. Amen.

## Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16  
 Luke 22:14:-23:56; Philippians 2:5-11

*Kristin Ford*

In opening my Bible to read the familiar Scripture passages for today, the thing that most jumped out to me was the fact that Barabbas was guilty of murder and *insurrection*. I certainly remembered from reading this story many times that he had been charged with a serious crime, but insurrection?!

I imagine that for many of you, like for me, that word lands differently a little over a year after violent white supremacists stormed the United States Capitol to try to overturn the results of our election, egged on by a reckless president. Insurrection – a violent attack on the government – hits closer to home now than I ever imagined it would. And the person who is accused of insurrection is Barabbas, who Pilate frees in response to the demands of the mob. Meanwhile, Jesus – who Pilate is disinclined to crucify until he caves to the crowd – is put to death.

Do you remember the horrifying images from January 6 at the Capitol? One of the most shocking was a banner that read, “Jesus 2020.” What a horrifying perversion of the Gospel in service of a fanatical white Christian nationalism.

Turning over this Scripture, there’s a lot to tease apart in terms of ideas around power, empire, authority, kingdom, and leadership. Jesus’ sacrifice was the result of – and an example of – servant leadership. This was not a path he chose nor wished. As he prays in Luke 22:42, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” But Jesus is willing to play his part to bring about God’s kingdom. As Luke 22:26 reads, “...rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” Or as Philippians 2:7-8 reminds us, Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross...”

In Jesus, we have a new model of leadership, authority, and power. Barabbas fits into the old mold – zealotry and armed insurrection, a mold that the January 6 attackers seem to be trying to revive in our own context. Jesus shows us a different way. Not one of docile acquiesce to the injustices of power and the failings of our institutions. As the people of Israel were subjected to crippling high levels of taxation, we can see an analog in the fight for economic opportunity and a living wage. As the people of Israel lived in subjugation, we can look to our own context of trying to beat back partisan attacks on the freedom to vote as a vocal minority tries desperately to hold on to political power despite not representing the voices or values of the majority. Jesus shows us a way to challenge conventional wisdom and uproot injustice without falling into traps of violence or zealotry. The question for us: how can we live into this vision of God’s world today?

**Prayer:** God, we see injustice all around us. Help us to work towards your kingdom on Earth with persistence and love, looking to Jesus’ model of upside-down, inside-out servant leadership. Amen.

Monday, April 11, 2022

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11  
John 12:1-11; Hebrews 9:11-15

*Heather Ferguson*

I have been reflecting lately on the theme of abundance and hospitality, partly inspired by Pastor Sarah's sermons and serving as a volunteer for protest hospitality in early June 2020. What happens when we operate from a place of love, trust and abundance instead of fear and scarcity?

In Psalm 36:5-11, this theme of abundance of God's love is boldly communicated. There is enough of the love for all of us, with themes of refuge, feast and light.

*"How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."*

New York Avenue Presbyterian Church provided more than refuge and nourishment that Saturday in early June 2020. It provided a place where like-minded people could come together to mourn and figure out a new way forward. Like many, I came downtown that day feeling drained and heartbroken, but left feeling uplifted by the gratefulness of the peaceful protestors and the generosity of those freely offering food, drink and medical care. It was a day of abundance among strangers that I had never seen before.

The theme of generosity is also reflected in John 12:1-11, where Jesus attends a dinner in Bethany, six days before Passover, to celebrate the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Mary takes a pint of expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus' feet, filling the house with fragrance. Talk about an act of abundance! This act of "extravagant love" was met with protest by Judas Iscariot, that the perfume should be sold and given to the poor. Jesus responds that Judas should leave Mary alone, and remarks on the fact that this was intended for his funeral, and also "you will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." Mary's act reflected her love of Jesus and came from abundance - there was enough of Jesus's love for everyone.

The idea of God's abundant love is also reflected in Isaiah 42:1-9, where God is speaking to exiles from Israel who have lost everything. Not only have they lost their home, they feel abandoned by God. A servant, Isaiah, is sent to comfort the exiles in Babylonia. Isaiah reassures them that not only do they have God's care and protection, but there is the promise of new life and hope for the future.

*"Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them."*

Here, the Israelites have lost everything they built, and they were given the promise of new life and abundance. As we emerge from the pandemic, I am hopeful the church continues to forge down the path of seeking a new way, of providing hospitality, refuge and nourishment.

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**Prayer:** Dear God, let us recognize that sometimes we find ourselves acting out of fear or scarcity. When this happens, let us remind ourselves that Jesus's love is endless. Let us be brave enough to give generously and abundantly, knowing there is indeed enough for all of us. Amen.

Tuesday, April 12, 2022

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14  
John 12:20-36; I Corinthians 1:18-31

*Nathan Moon*

What in heaven's name can be wrong with our thought process that every year we seem to be on the brink or in the midst of some tragedy or other! Aside from my health issues the world has been at war for nearly my entire lifetime. Isaiah writes:

*"I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God."*

We certainly do seem to labor in vain if our labor is intended to heal.

How do we attain the reward of the Lord? We really must put our faith in the Lord and fear not. In Psalms we read:

*"In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. My praise is continually of you. My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long. O God, do not be far from me; O my God, make haste to help me! But I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more."*

Faith in the Christ is the key. If we trust to our own devices, we are doomed. John writes, *"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."* I have to believe that Jesus could easily have escaped the cross. Yet he did not, but rather endured it for our edification. He called us to our own responsibility saying, *"The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."*

In 1st Corinthians 1 we read:

*"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who*

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*believe.” “But to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”*

*“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”*

In Faith and Humility,  
Nathan Moon

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70  
John 13: 21-32; Hebrews 12: 1-3

## Hang In There!

*Betsy Merritt & Jim Bird*

The Isaiah passage sets the paradigm—an obedient servant who has learned, often through suffering, to rely on the master’s dependable support. The message is subtle and feels a bit confusing. It extolls obedience, rather than rebellion, but at the same time, urges us as servants of God to stand strong in the face of cruel attacks, to engage in principled *disobedience* when the attacks come from those who have not learned, and do not know the truth. The details of the potential attacks (e.g., whipping on the back and spitting in the face) foretell the treatment of Jesus on his way to the cross. The servants can endure abuse, confident that the Lord God will stand beside them. Psalm 70 is David’s prayer for relief from his adversaries, another servant acknowledging his reliance on a higher power. He seeks vindication that the Lord is able to help his suffering servants. But even in his desperation and panic, David’s faith never falters. He has no doubt that God *will* rescue him; he just wants God to hurry.

In John 13 we see Jesus demonstrating the themes announced in Isaiah and echoed by David. He knows that Judas will betray him. (Earlier in verse 2 of this chapter, we learn that the Devil had “already put it into the heart of Judas” to betray Jesus. As *The Message* says, the Devil had Judas “firmly in his grip.”) While talking with the disciples over dinner, Jesus becomes “troubled in spirit” (or “visibly upset,” according to *The Message*), and announces that one of the disciples will betray him. The shocked disciples anxiously beg Jesus to identify the suspect, wondering who among them could possibly do such a thing. Jesus identifies Judas by handing him a piece of bread, after “dipping” it. As Jesus hands over the bread, the Devil “enters” into Judas. Jesus then tells Judas to act quickly, obedient to the suffering he knows will follow. The disciples miss the signal, as Jesus must have known they would. Since Judas managed the group’s money (an interesting coincidence?), some thought that when Jesus told him to hurry, Judas was just heading out to buy provisions for the feast, or to give some money to people in need. But they soon learn the bitter truth.

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In Hebrews 12 Paul brings the message home, encouraging us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (including David and Isaiah), and calls us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us,” looking to Jesus, who obediently “endured the cross” for the “joy set before Him,” as our inspiration. That cloud of witnesses is especially large for us now, as we have lost so many on this earth in the past two years.

**Prayer:** Help us, God, to run with endurance the race we are called to run, inspired by the cloud of witnesses. Strengthen us to live faithfully and persevere, trusting in your unconditional love and redemption.

**Maundy Thursday, April 14, 2022**

Exodus 12:1-10; Psalm 116:1-2,12-19  
John 13:1-7,31-35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

## **“It’s All That Easy, And It’s All That Hard”**

*David Gillies*

I love the way that Sarah closes the benediction each week – it gets right to the point that being a Christian asks something of us. The passages for today take us from Passover to Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper. All tremendous reminders that the Lord does great things, provides for us, keeps promises, and those that follow these teachings are less dependable. I’ve often thought that it should have been easy for the apostles – they saw miracles performed weekly, if not daily! They were able to cast out demons and speak to and learn from Jesus in the flesh. How could you not believe, and live that belief? But then, being a Christian was seen by the powers that be as a subversive act, and was a dangerous act. And it was all so new. The passage from John underscores how much the apostles did not yet fully understand. In particular, in verse 33, Jesus refers to the disciples as “Little children” – incapable of understanding all that would be clear after his death and resurrection.

Today, at least for most of us, being a Christian is not dangerous. But it still asks us to comprehend and do things that are sometimes uncomfortable – engage and love the neediest among us, even those you dislike, and give a fair portion of your material possessions. As Sarah says, it shouldn’t be that hard, but it is. Psalm 116 tells us how to express our love of the Lord in numerous ways, including verse 18: *“I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.”* And even that is harder than it seems, as how many of us are uncomfortable sharing our faith among strangers?

I’m not trying to make us feel worse about our shortcomings, as the Lord knows we will fall short, and there is beauty and fulfillment in trying. Today is Maundy Thursday, and on the day he predicted his betrayal, Jesus gave us 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.”* If nothing else during this season of Lent, let’s do that – love one another, and we will be living the spirit of the season for all to see.

Good Friday, April 15, 2022

John 18:1-19:42

## Following Nicodemus

*Meg Hanna House*

Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, Pilate, the cries of "crucify him!" and Jesus' death on the cross – the Good Friday story is hard reading, a story of desolation and abandonment, portraying a bleak, dark landscape.

John's telling follows the same outline as the other gospels, yet scholars note important differences: The way Jesus is in charge – from the beginning, when he walks out to meet Judas, to his last words, "it is finished," it is as if Jesus is directing the horrible drama. John's gospel also shifts the timeline, so that Jesus dies on the day of preparation for the Passover, when the lambs are slaughtered, reminding us of John the Baptist's words in chapter one: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Another difference? Into this Good Friday landscape walks Nicodemus, carrying a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes for Jesus' burial. We've met him before, under cover of night, back in chapter three. He comes to Jesus curious and leaves confused, asking "How can these things be?" I've always imagined Nicodemus walking away, shaking his head, thinking, "This makes no sense, I don't understand."

If there is such a thing as making sense of the crucifixion, the author of John does it by putting Jesus in control, by foreshadowing throughout the gospel that this will be Jesus' "hour of glorification," and by portraying Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, whose death takes away our sin. But I have to confess that this idea of redemptive suffering makes no sense to me. I know there are many theories of the atonement, ways of making meaning of the crucifixion, but the phrase "he died for our sins" seems to be what sticks, and try as I might, I can neither explain it nor explain it away.

So, in this desolation and confusion, what happens if instead of trying to make sense of it, I follow Nicodemus? Instead of standing outside the story, what happens if I step into the story, next to Nicodemus and his hundred pounds of myrrh?

First, the weight and fragrance of the myrrh overwhelm my problem-solving brain. Then, I remember that I am not alone: Both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea walk with me. And then I recall Jesus' last action while he was dying on the cross: "Here is your son," he says to his mother. And to his disciple he says, "Here is your mother." John tells us that from that moment on, they were family.

And I realize: Into this desolate scene comes not only Nicodemus, but love. Abundant love. That "love one another" commandment we heard just yesterday. Love that means an unrelated pair can be mother and son. Love as big and fragrant as a hundred pounds of myrrh. The scene is desolate. We are grief stricken with the pains and cruelties of the world and with our own tragedies. And yet, we are not alone. Even here, love enters in.

Holy Saturday, April 16, 2022

Psalm 31:1-4

## Refuge

*Adlai Amor*

*“In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name’s sake lead me and guide me, take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.” Psalm 31:1-4 (NRSV)*

The word refuge has been on my mind lately. And reading Psalm 31 -- a prayer of a believer in a time of deep distress -- gives me great comfort.

For about a month, there was no week that passed without news of the illness or death of a family member or a childhood friend. Some died or fell ill of COVID-19, others due to cancer, pneumonia, or accident.

Being able to attend their funerals by Zoom or being able to help with their medical bills gave me some comfort, but it was no substitute for being physically present. Even just to be there, quietly accompanying them through their troubles.

Yet David’s psalm of lament helped sustain me – just as it sustained David as his troubles were mounting, including hearing the news that his son Absalom had entered Jerusalem to kill him.

Through this psalm, David taught me the importance of affirming my trust in God before God can deliver me and my friends out of our troubles. The psalm reminded me that ultimately, God is our refuge.

As we keep vigil before Easter Sunday, let us lean into the knowledge that in God, we are safe, and we are at peace.

**Prayer:** *Merciful God wake us from the slumber of indifference to refugees, open our eyes to their suffering, and free us from the insensitivity born of worldly comfort and self-centeredness. Inspire us, as nations, communities, and individuals, to see that those who come to our shores are our brothers and sisters. May we recognize that together, as one human family, we are all migrants, journeying in hope to you, our true home, where every tear will be wiped away, where we will be at peace and safe in your embrace. (Pope Francis)*

Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

## I have seen the Lord!

*Meg Neill*

In John's account of the first Easter Sunday, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb alone, very early in the morning—not with oils to anoint Jesus's body as in Mark and Luke, but perhaps out of devotion. When she arrives, she sees that the stone has been rolled away, and runs to tell Peter and "*the other disciple...whom Jesus loved.*" They run back, go into the tomb and see the linen wrappings lying there. Seeing this, the beloved disciple believes, though without entirely understanding the meaning of what he sees. He and Peter return to their homes, while Mary remains by the tomb.

Frances Taylor Gench, in her book on the gospel of John, *Encounters with Jesus*, describes Mary's next actions as "weeping, turning and announcing." Mary is so deeply grieving as she stands weeping that she seems not to be alarmed by the presence of two angels. There is no "do not be afraid" in this version. Instead, they ask why she is weeping, and when Jesus appears, he asks the same question: "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" and then "*Whom are you looking for?*" (As Gench points out, this echoes a question in the first chapter of John, when Jesus asks two new followers, "what are you looking for?") Mary thinks he is the gardener, but when he calls her name, she recognizes her teacher. Here is the "turning," or conversion, that Gench describes: "Mary finds her sorrow dispelled, her vision transformed, and her life graced with new possibilities by the reality of the resurrection."

Jesus tells Mary, "*Do not hold on to me...*". After his ascension, she and the other disciples will have a new relationship with him and with God. They cannot cling to him bodily but will continue to relate to him through the Spirit. He enables them—and us—to be brothers and sisters in him, as children of "my God and your God." Mary accepts her commissioning ("*...go to my brothers and say to them...*") and announces to the disciples "*I have seen the Lord.*"

Jesus's earlier question is one we may ask ourselves: what/whom are we looking for? And just like Mary Magdalene, we may not initially recognize the presence of the living Christ with us. Will we know when we have seen the Lord?

May we be open to the appearance of Jesus in our lives, listen when he calls our name, and accept his command to share with others the good news about his life, death, and resurrection.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

