

Lenten Devotional

40 DAYS WITH JESUS

A Time of Sacrifice *through* Prayer, Study, Fasting, and Giving

Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024 *through*
Resurrection Sunday, March 31, 2024

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Rev. Dr. Stephen J. Russell, Jr., *Senior Pastor*

LENTEN SEASON 2024

PASTORAL LETTER

Greetings in the Name of our Savior, Jesus Christ!

The Lenten Season is a time of reflection, remembrance, and reverence. We reflect on who Jesus is, what He means to us, and what He has done for us. We remember the sacrifice that Jesus made on the Cross for us through His broken body and shed blood. Finally, we reverence the season through engaging in a time of sacrifice through prayer, study, fasting, and giving.

As we journey through the 40-days of Lent, we should each seek to grow in our relationship with Christ by deepening our commitment to Him. We deepen our commitment to Christ by participating in a time of sacrifice knowing that Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for us. As we engage in this time of sacrifice, we do it in the four aforementioned areas of prayer, study, fasting and giving.

1. PRAYER (MATTHEW 26:36-46, NIV):

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus invites Peter, James and John to a deeper encounter with Him. He invites them to watch with Him while He engages in a time of prayer. When Jesus returns, He finds the disciples sleeping. He says to them, "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" Jesus then admonishes the disciples on prayer by saying "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Jesus modeled the importance of prayer by praying three different times in this scriptural text. During this season, we should be engaging in a time of prayer. I am admonishing our members to set aside three times a day to pray. These times should include a time in the morning, afternoon and evening. The prayer times do not have to be long periods, five minutes or less, as the aim is to promote continual daily contact with God through prayer. Just as Jesus saw prayer as a valuable part of His spiritual life, we should as well.

2. STUDY (MATTHEW 26:31, NIV):

While at the Last Supper, Jesus himself shows us the importance of knowing The Word of God. Jesus, when speaking to Peter about Peter's denial quotes Zechariah 13:7 by saying "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is

written: " 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'" Jesus shows the disciples that knowing The Word is central to the life of the child of God.

As we seek to follow the example of Jesus, we should be using this season to gain more knowledge of God's Word. As Christians, we are strengthened and equipped through His Word. Each day, through this devotional guide, you will have a scripture, devotional and prayer to lead you through this season. Each day, we will be blessed through one of the students or faculty of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary as they use their theological understanding of the scripture to lead us through a time of spiritual reflection.

3. FASTING (MATTHEW 4:1-11, NIV):

Jesus gives us an example of how to spend 40-days getting closer to God at the beginning of His earthly ministry, that period is called fasting. Fasting is a time where we sacrifice something of importance to us so that we can give more attention to God. Fasting can be difficult because during the period of fasting temptation comes in strong ways. In Matthew 4:1-11, we see Jesus fasting from food and while fasting we see the devil tempting Him. Jesus endures through the temptation as a lesson to us that we can fight temptation too.

Though Jesus fasted from food, which is commonly done, there are other things that we can fast from as well. During this Lenten Season, you are encouraged to choose from one of our two fasting options. The two fasting options include: Food Fast or Financial Fast. Each fast is intended to challenge you to commit to an area that may be a struggle for you. This helps you have a meaningful fast during this Lenten Season.

4. GIVING (JOHN 3:16, NIV):

The life and death of Jesus was a true picture of how important giving really is to God. John 3:16 tells us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God's love for us is shown in Him giving to us His best. God did not just give us any type of gift, He gave us a special and sacrificial gift—Jesus Christ. It is through the gift of Jesus that we experience salvation and have access to eternal life.

Through this season of sacrifice, I am admonishing us to give a gift back to God for the gift that He has given to us in Jesus Christ. This gift should be special and sacrificial, just as Jesus is special and sacrificial. Giving a special and sacrificial gift isn't easy; otherwise, it would not be special or sacrificial. Jesus giving His life was not easy, but He loved us enough to do it. We, in turn, should love Him enough to give a special and sacrificial seed back to Him. During this season, we are asking our members to sacrifice one meal a day and in place of that meal to give a gift of \$5 per day during the Lenten Season. For some, that may seem like a lot, but remember Jesus gave a lot—His life. There are those who may not be able to afford to give \$5 per day, that does not mean you don't give anything. It is the hope that those who cannot do \$5 per day would give between \$1 and \$4 per day. We are asking our youth (ages 12-17) to give \$1 per day and our children (ages 12 and under) to do .25 cent per day. Only you and God know what you can do, so do your best to honor Him.

On Resurrection Sunday, we will present our Lenten Season seed to God above our tithes and offerings as the culmination of our Season of Sacrifice through Prayer, Study, Fasting and Giving. Envelopes will be provided for you to give for the 40-days so that you can consecrate your sacrificial seed to God. The 40-days of Lent include Monday to Saturday and exclude Sunday. Though your devotional has a scripture, devotion, and prayer for each day including Sunday, you are not asked to give your sacrificial seed on Sundays because you should be giving your tithes and offerings on Sundays.

Calvary, let's commit to giving God our best!

Love you always,
Pastor Russell

GIVING KEY:

ADULTS:

\$5 per day (\$200 total)

\$4 per day (\$160 total)

\$3 per day (\$120 total)

\$2 per day (\$80 total)

\$1 per day (\$40 total)

CHILDREN:

\$1 per day (\$40 total)

.25c per day (\$10 total)

FASTING

3 FAST OPTIONS:

1. FOOD FAST

During the Lenten fast, **we will refrain from unhealthy eating habits. This includes fast food, junk food, sugary food and drinks, carbohydrates, and other unhealthy foods.** Our goal is to honor God through presenting to Him a healthy temple. Much of what we eat can be deemed as unhealthy and create serious health challenges in the long run. It is our duty, as we seek wellness, to prioritize our health through eating better. This gives us an opportunity to be stronger as we fulfill our God given purpose.

Whatever your health situation, I challenge you to spend the next 40 days committing to this food fast. There are many different types of food fasts you can commit to, but together we will commit to the Daniel Fast. This fast gives us common parameters as a guide for the 40-day journey. As we journey together, we expect to see amazing results as we cleanse ourselves.

2. FINANCIAL FAST

During this Lenten fast, **we will refrain from all unnecessary spending. That includes shopping, impulse purchases, careless financial decisions, and unnecessary dining out.** Our goal is to sacrifice our desire for earthly material possessions and to restrain our desire to make unwise financial decisions, so that we can develop an enhanced level of intimacy, with God, through responsible and Godly stewardship. During this time, we are encouraged to revisit our monthly budget and learn to live on 70% of our income, tithe 10% of our income, and save 20% of our income.

Whatever your financial situation, I challenge you to spend the next 40 days fasting in your finances. The path to radical generosity and financial freedom begins by breaking the yoke to buy, and buy, and then buy some more. Whether you consider yourself a good steward or a spendthrift, all of us consume more than we need. I wholeheartedly believe, we will be amazed to see the increased resources we have to offer God, ourselves, and our families, not through an increase in income, but in better managing what God has already given us. All of us, regardless of our financial situation, are called to be responsible stewards of God's resources that have been entrusted to us.

3. FITNESS FAST

During the Lenten fast, **we will refrain from a lack of commitment in consistent exercise. Through this fast, we will commit to a weekly workout schedule of 3-5 days a week for 30 minutes to an hour per day.** Our goal is to honor God through presenting to Him a healthy temple. Daily exercise is known to be helpful in combatting many medical issues. As we seek to become stronger in our body, we should dedicate ourselves to an exercise regimen that will help us accomplish this goal. Whether you have a gym membership or not, you can commit to this fast. There are so many creative ways to commit to daily exercise.

No matter your health situation, we can all commit to some form of safe exercise practices so that we can remain healthy or regain our health. I challenge you to recommit to the gym, walking in your neighborhood, workouts on the internet or YouTube, registering for a class at your local recreation center, etc. Whether you prefer cardio or strength training, you are encouraged to make the commitment. Use these 40-days to become better in your commitment to your health by committing to this fitness fast.



Lenten Devotional 2024

We hope you'll follow along daily, be deepened in your faith through this year's ministry of our community, and prepare your heart to celebrate at Easter the new life that Jesus Christ made possible for all.

Use this devotional resource in the way that best enhances your Lenten thoughts and practices:

- » **Read a printed copy.**
- » **Read and listen online.** Visit www.pts.edu/devotional.
- » **Receive daily e-mails.** Go to www.pts.edu/e-mail, click "Devotionals."



**PITTSBURGH
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY**

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2024

The Rev. Carolyn Cranston '99, Director of Alumnae/i and Church Relations

SCRIPTURE

Luke 18:9-14

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

DEVOTIONAL

A thumb covered in ashes presses against your forehead, making the sign of the cross, while your pastor says, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." On this Ash Wednesday, as we begin the Lenten season, it is once again time to remind ourselves of our mortality and our sinful natures.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a vivid example of the grace that God extends to us, despite our penchant to sin. The Pharisee went up to the temple to pray, giving thanks to God because he knows he is better than those who sin. He is righteous and spouts off about achieving all the things that are required of him. When he finishes his prayer, he is the same person that he was when he started. He is still righteous; perhaps we would call it self-righteous.

The tax collector, aware of his sinful nature, could not even gaze up to the heavens. He sees himself as wretched. He shows humility, but it goes deeper than that. The contrite tax collector empties himself, pours himself out before God and asks for mercy. He offers God nothing. He has no good deeds to recount. The tax collector trusts God to provide what he needs. He heads home justified.

God knows our hearts. When we surrender to God and accept that God is in control, our lives are changed. God loves us, claims us as God's own, and helps us live into our potential. We too will go home justified before God, by grace, through our faith in Jesus the Christ.

"You see, a potter can only mold the clay when it lies completely in his hand. It requires complete surrender." - Corrie Ten Boom

PRAYER

Holy and all-knowing God, we give you thanks for the many ways that you bless us, even in our imperfection. Teach us, in all humility, to surrender ourselves completely to you—heart, mind, and strength. Then, Lord, mold and shape us to be the persons that you created us to be, a new creation in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2024

The Rev. Andrew Wirt '10

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 102

1 Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you.
2 Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my distress.
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily in the day when I call.
3 For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
5 Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.
6 I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.
7 I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.
8 All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.
9 For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,
10 because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.
11 My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.
12 But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations.
13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favor it;
the appointed time has come.
14 For your servants hold its stones dear,
and have pity on its dust.
15 The nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth your glory.
16 For the LORD will build up Zion;
he will appear in his glory.

17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and will not despise their prayer.
18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD:
19 that he looked down from his holy height,
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,
20 to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die;
21 so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion,
and his praise in Jerusalem,
22 when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.
23 He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.
24 "O my God," I say, "do not take me away
at the mid-point of my life,
you whose years endure
throughout all generations."
25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
26 They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like clothing, and they pass away;
27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.
28 The children of your servants shall live secure;
their offspring shall be established in your presence.

DEVOTIONAL

Interesting how Lent 2024 starts: Ash Wednesday was Valentine's Day this year. Today I find myself still thinking about that unusual combination. The celebration, thrill, and excitement of romantic love mixed with the humility of the ash meant to remind us of our mortality.

But, then again, that seems like a great example of the tension of Lent. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection, a mini-Easter. In Lent that is mixed with the themes of humility, repentance, preparation for the Easter that is to come.

The psalms, as they so often do, help us to express these difficult, conflicting emotions. Many of the psalms help us with our praises:

"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"
(Ps 27:1)

"Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!" (Ps 147:14)

"The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced."
(Ps 126:3)

Many of the psalms help us express our frustrations, worries, sorrow, and laments:

"My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread." (Ps 102:4)

Whatever emotions we may be feeling this Lent, the psalms remind us that we are not alone. Others have walked this path before us. Their poetic words give voice to the feelings we struggle to name. And we can be reassured that in the celebration, the thrill, the excitement; and in the humility, the repentance, the preparation; and even in the frustrations, worries, sorrow, and laments, the Lord is there with us as well.

". . . that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven the LORD looked at the earth." (Ps 102:19)

PRAYER

Lord, look down from your holy height, and see us here on the earth. Walk with us this Lent. Rejoice with us. Cry with us. Guide us and prepare us for the Easter that is to come. Amen.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2024

The Rev. Robin Sharp '18

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 4:1-9

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

DEVOTIONAL

Normally, I would not consider myself a vocal feminist. It isn't that I don't believe in gender equality, because I do. Perhaps I am not a vocal feminist, because I consider gender equality to be broader than between males and females. I am, however, intrigued by the Apostle Paul's reference to the women, Euodia and Syntyche. In a culture where men are considered "superior," he is asking this young church—"his loyal companion"—to help these women reach an understanding. Paul values these two individuals as being as important to the growing Church as the men who have also engaged in the same work of the gospel. And yes, he is doing so because their disagreement is bitter enough to harm this community. It is not the topic of the disagreement that is disconcerting; the crisis Paul addresses is where genuine peace is lacking Christ cannot be present.

Doesn't this underline the importance of women in this Philippian church? Paul did not cast aside their quarrel as immaterial because they were women and therefore little or no harm could come from it. He saw it on the same plane as the frictions found in the Book of Acts: circumcised or not, kosher diet or not, and adherence to Temple Rule and customs or not. These were subjects of disagreement that could have shattered the fragile young church because Christ could not exist within that friction.

Paul has long been considered to treat women in the church as subservient. I admit to leaning this way. His encounter with Lydia, the merchant of purple dye (Acts 16:13-15), as well as today's passage, tells the world otherwise. Today, I see Paul tell us the love of Jesus breaks barriers and works towards trust and forgiveness. Isn't that the message of the cross?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we continue to learn and grow through your grace and your love. Please help us to remove the roots of dissension from our souls bringing peace into your kingdom. Amen.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2024

The Rev. Dr. William Zachery Jr. '12

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 4:10-20

10 I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. 11 Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances

I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me. 14 In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

15 You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. 16 For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. 18 I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 19 And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL

It is no secret the religion of Jesus usually receives bad reviews. Some say, "It promotes a mythical utopianism." This religion does not espouse ideas of false hope. It seeks to bring harmony into the world. If there was ever a time we needed this kind of reconciliation, it is now.

The religion of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ seeks true peace. A true sign of a thriving civilization is one which excels at industry, technology, governing, and culture. There are times when it seems we are living with corporate, innovative (A.I.), congressional, and social/cultural decay. Everyone, it seems, is chasing after materialistic increase. They seek this through the acquisition of power. Most are not satisfied according to the concurrent blessings of God.

There is nothing wrong with a desire for increase. However, when material increase is one's sole desire, it quickly turns to idolatrous greed. We must learn how to live with need and abundance. No one wants to exist in want. They say it is undesirable. Everyone wants abundance.

Nevertheless, there is a blessing living with need. It can teach us satisfaction. It can promote humility within our hearts and minds. This is one of the purposes of Lent. It is a time of expectation. It is a time of waiting to see what God is going to do in our life's circumstances and needs. It is waiting for God's provision.

What can this season of Lent teach us? It is the hope of true peace. God is *shalom* in practice. We must learn how to walk out this divine exercise progressively. Some may say, "This is not enough." However, this season speaks to God's abundant supply of love for us. He is with us and for us. He is more than enough.

PRAYER

God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the father of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ, help us to walk out your peace. Strengthen us to proclaim and confess you are more than enough during this season of Lent. In Jesus' name, Amen.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Rick Willhite '86

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 42

1 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

3 My tears have been my food
day and night,

while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

7 Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

8 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

9 I say to God, my rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?"

10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,

"Where is your God?"

11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 42 is a hymn of longing. Arising from the poverty of spirit that Jesus called "blessed" (Matt 5:3), this psalm is an empathic prayer in company with all who have turned to God in longing and felt a distance. Psalm 42 should be read by candlelight.

The psalmist has been there: longing for divine consolation but before an unfelt presence of God that can seem like an absence. Better times held light and music, but this person stands in a moment when ache is immediate and deep. Their ache stood alongside hope and trust. Ache, hope and trust together: moments in the darkness. Strident voices ask, "Where is your God?" And sometimes, the harshest voices taunt from within. Doubt and trust can dwell alike in a heart that knows its many moments.

The best counsel comes from those who have been there. The Psalmist made a pause; a pause long enough to acknowledge and become intimate with the longing of a moment. They acknowledged all their heart moments without judgment. They listened to the longing, becoming intimate with it. This is not an easy thing to ask, nor is it self-indulgent. Pause with the longing and be drawn near our tender shared humanity. Longing is what unites us most. The pause can also clear a space. It can make room for the new. Pause, we are counseled by one who knew. The longing may become a prayer; a song to sing in the night.

PRAYER

You know us so well, Loving God. It's true: our hearts know many moments. At times we're lost in distraction. Gather us before you as we pause in the longings of our hearts. May we hear your song above the noise of our busy and longing world. May we hear your song of Grace and possibility and live as instruments of your peace. Amen.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2024

Jelty Ochotan '11

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 121

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills —
from where will my help come?

2 My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

4 He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

7 The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

8 The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

DEVOTIONAL

“The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.”
(Ps 121:6)

We are uniquely created by God, not merely a coincidence on this Earth. God has a purpose for each of us being here. When we confess our belief in Jesus Christ, it signifies that we belong to God. He has prepared us to be his ambassadors, witnessing who God is through our lives. We are constantly being witnesses to how God has created this world uniquely. Each part of the earth has distinct conditions, situations, uniquely formed maps and lands, and each area has unique characteristics, including weather.

For instance, the hottest country in the world is Mali in West Africa. At first glance, 28.83°C / 83.89°F may seem surprisingly cool. However, these are not average summertime highs but average overall temperatures for both nights and days. How can people live there? God created them uniquely to thrive in this place and survive each day and night.

In this reading, through the witness of the psalmist, we see that God has protected the Israelites with unique weather conditions for both nights and days. Despite the challenging climate in Israel, the travelers express confidence that God will not allow them to experience ill effects from the daytime or nighttime due to the Lord's watchful care.

This reference is also symbolic of how God still watches over his people, caring for us day and night. Psalm 91:1 promises: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” Jesus assured his followers that there was no need to worry because our heavenly Father provides for us (Matt 6:25-33). Amen.

PRAYER

O Almighty God, we long for peace in our world today. In every difficulty of our lives, may God bless our nation, and may world leaders work together in this time of need, finding peace and harmony for all—the sick, poor, homeless, lonely, hungry, victims of violence and abuse, refugees, immigration concerns, violence in schools, and violence in our streets. Especially, we pray for Israel and Palestine, for Ukraine and Russia; to you, O Lord, we ask. We also pray for those living with life-threatening illnesses, those aging or living with cancer, those with mental health concerns, and those who are caregivers. You care for us. Thank you, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey D. Sterling '88/'98

SCRIPTURE

Mark 1:14-28

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” 16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. 21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

DEVOTIONAL

I just love call stories! We United Methodists “walk” part of our early journey into ordained ministry as part of a “provisional class” of ministerial candidates with whom we

share retreats and training events, so we get to know each other well. And we share our call stories with each other, which is one of the joys of this experience.

Today's text includes the call stories of Simon, Andrew, James and John. Jesus made it simple for them: "Follow me . . ." and they made their decision. Most of the call stories in my provisional class were not that simple! Some germinated during a crisis, or even a tragedy, of some sort. Others were joyous, occurring during a "mountaintop" experience. Many were multi-faceted and drawn out over a considerable time of "give and take" with the Holy Spirit's tug.

Lent is a wonderful time to examine or revisit YOUR call story, whether lay or clergy. We are wise to also note that we may have multiple "calls" from God, and to varying ministries or tasks, even within our broader call that got us to our current place in ministry. I am reminded of a line from one of Woody Allen's movies: "My God, my God, what has thou done LATELY?" All call stories are not permanent; they may have a shelf-life. A good Lenten question for reflection: What is God calling me to do TODAY?

The latter part of today's text demonstrates for his new followers what Jesus' call was to: speaking forth God's word with authority; disarming evil; healing the afflicted; rebuilding lives; and facing the unknown with the confidence of God's abiding presence. They quickly knew what they were in for, and so should we!

All of God's call stories should have a happy ending, as will our Lenten journey!

PRAYER

O God, I've heard your call, and I hear you calling! Give me ears to continually hear the freshness of your call, and courage to act decisively and boldly on where it leads me. As I "drop my nets" and follow you, walk with me, empowering me and comforting me with your presence. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2024

The Rev. Emily I. Miller '07

SCRIPTURE

Mark 1:29-45

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. 32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to

him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. 35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. 40 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44 saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is a time when we all give extra thought to our prayer life. Maybe we even spend a little more time than usual speaking to God. But what about the rest of the year? Do we have quiet time with God on a regular basis? Jesus shows us in Mark 1:29-39 that we should.

When reading this passage, I think back to the Xfinity commercial from early 2021 with Amy Poehler hiding in her bathtub as she tries to get a little "me" time. Using her tablet to binge her favorite show, she tells her family to leave her alone so she can de-stress. And because she is Amy Poehler, she makes it funny. But even now, the stresses of life continue to make us all a little nuts. Such is life in the 21st century.

Being under stress isn't new. It may surprise some readers to know that even Jesus felt the crush of demands on his time and had to get away from things for quiet time with God. In this passage, Jesus is in the throes of ministry. He just healed Peter's mother-in-law, and that evening, "[T]hey brought to him *all* who were sick or possessed with demons. And the *whole city* was gathered around the door" (1:32, emphasis added). Wow. It sounds like a first century emergency room, and Jesus is the only physician.

What does he do after dealing with these hurting people? Mark says, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he went out to a deserted place and he prayed" (1:35). Jesus shows us that to live a balanced life, we need to balance our

ministry with quiet time in prayer. When we feel like things are getting to be too much, we need to take the advice of mental health experts and of Jesus, and center ourselves with God. Then, God's Holy Spirit can rejuvenate us and send us back into ministry better equipped to love God and our neighbors.

PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for the busyness of our lives as we seek to serve you. Help us to balance our busyness with quiet time with you, so that we remain grounded in the One who created us, who loves us, and who gives us strength. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2024

The Rev. Kristen Renee Barner '97

SCRIPTURE

Mark 2:1-12

1 When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. 3 Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?" 10 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" - he said to the paralytic - 11 "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." 12 And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

DEVOTIONAL

I have always read this story as Jesus *proving* he has the same authority as God has, specifically to forgive sins. Today, for me, this reads differently.

In 2017 I had a spinal stroke which left me partially paralyzed. I have become increasingly and acutely aware of places and

locations that comply with ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) laws and those that do not. I have discovered what it is to be marginalized and disqualified simply for my inability to traverse this land as "normal" people do. Suddenly, in this passage from Mark, I'm the one on the stretcher. And I'm lucky because like this man in the stretcher, I have proactive and loving people surrounding me. I've no doubt they'd remove a patch of roof and haul me where I need to be. (How come we never talk about those people in this story?)

The first thing Jesus does is tell the man, "Your sins are forgiven" (2:5). The religious leaders lose their minds and Jesus says, "Fine, fine . . . and stand up, take your mat and go home." Jesus asks the religious folks which might be easier to say, and therefore accomplish: forgiveness or physical healing? Jesus offers forgiveness first. What I see is that Jesus' first interaction with the paralyzed man is to recognize him not for his disabilities, but for his worth and value as a human being. Beyond his paralysis, the man is recognized as a HUMAN BEING WORTHY OF FORGIVENESS! Oh, yeah, and stand up and walk . . . almost as an afterthought, to further prove his power.

When we meet one another, let's start with the place of recognizing the humanity of each other. Please, unless you have a handicap placard, leave those blue parking spaces for people who need it. Also, find people who will remove a patch of roof for you so you can go where you need to go. We really need those people in our lives.

PRAYER

O God, teach us to begin with humanity. Teach us to live in the spirit of saying to one another: "the divine in me sees the divine in you." Encourage us to proactively care for one another, to cut away the patch of roof and to offer praise and thanks when we recognize that we live in a place of forgiveness. Amen.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Scott Dennis '13

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 130

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
2 Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!
3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
4 But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.
5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;
6 my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
7 O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
8 It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

DEVOTIONAL

The 130th Psalm is a *Pilgrimage Psalm*, which is fitting since Lententide is a journey that begins with us getting our “sorry ashes” in church, and one we end at the foot of the cross and peeking into the empty tomb. However, before we can begin our journey with the psalmist and the countless great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, *the Saints*, we find ourselves transported to an all too alien, uncomfortable, and yet all too familiar place: a depth, possibly a great depth, or even *the valley of the shadow of death* itself.

In this place of removal, distance, and isolation, what happens? We find ourselves joining the psalmist in crying out to the Lord, who seems so distant from this place of deep isolation. Yet, he alone is our only hope during this pilgrimage journey of our spiritual discontent. If we proceed from verses 1 and 2 on to verses 3 and 4, we are reminded of the good news that the Lord is our help alone, since none of us can stand on our own merits. None of us mortals have any hope within ourselves. Hence, *should the Lord consider our iniquities*, we must rely upon his forgiveness. Thus, we journey from verses 3 and 4 on to verses 5 and 6, where we join the psalmist in waiting for the Lord with that which is deepest within ourselves, for as long as it takes him to appear and liberate us from the depths!

No wonder, then, we journey from verses 5 and 6 on to the psalm's conclusion in verses 7 and 8. With predecessors gone before us, we hope in the Lord as individuals united in the Church Militant, who rely on his *hesed*, his steadfast, unbreakable, never-ending faithful love to us, his children. Here we conclude with the psalmist that the Lord shall redeem us from our iniquities, from our time of separation in the deep pit of isolation and hopelessness. Such a fitting psalm for Lententide, since we know where our journey ends: with redemption. Now, that's a journey worth embracing!

PRAYER

Dearest Lord Jesus, aid our Lententide pilgrimage to your cross and tomb. Take our spiritual discontent to fill us with your assurance that you journey with us each step of the way to redemption. Grant us a holy, restful, and safe sleep this night that we may arise eager for the new day. This we ask for your namesake. Amen.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2024

The Rev. Anthony R.C. Hita '13

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 43

1 Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust
deliver me!

2 For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because of the oppression of the enemy?

3 O send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling.

4 Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

DEVOTIONAL

Approaching my 30s, my life underwent a radical shift, disrupting the trajectory I'd followed for 12 years. Career changes, a long-distance move, and the end of my marriage plunged me into a self-induced crisis, prompting an uncharacteristic detachment from the communal worship I'd faithfully embraced for three decades.

Two years into this tumult, a friend asked me to preside at his church. Despite feeling unworthy, I accepted. Standing on the chancel after a two-year hiatus, I choked on my words and fought back tears as I recited words I had spoken hundreds of times before. I sensed a stirring in my heart saying, “When you're done feeling sorry for yourself, get up, there's still work to do.”

I wish I could say that all my problems vanished after presiding over that service. They didn't. Yet, this experience exposed me to a different facet of God. Raised perceiving God as a benevolent but demanding taskmaster, I discovered Jesus instead patiently waiting on me without the condemnation I had feared. To paraphrase John Wesley, I shifted from the faith of a servant to the faith of a son.

I realized that God's love is not a fixed place but a transformative process—not a state of being, but a dynamic journey of becoming through which you learn to know the One who already knows you, reaching out when you pull away, and opening up when you draw near.

Many without realizing it see God as the Ancient Taskmaster, a distant Sky Father noting our total depravity from a distant throne. But I met God as a patient friend, present during tearful nights and long days. God desires our faithfulness but also welcomes our anger, failure, angst, and pain. Jesus wants to be with us in both mountain highs and rock bottoms.

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for accepting us as we are, but never leaving us there. You who give ear to our joys and our pains, as we walk through this journey of life, deepen our understanding and open our hearts to know you in new and surprising ways. Amen.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2024

The Rev. Annamarie Groenenboom '17

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 42

1 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help 6 and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,

from Mount Mizar.

7 Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

8 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

9 I say to God, my rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?

Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?"

10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

DEVOTIONAL

When I was young, I had the opportunity to visit Mt. Rushmore. It was the hottest day of the year. There was no cloud in the sky, just the blazing sun. My parents decided we needed to go on a family hike around the base of the mountain. I remember that we seemed to walk around the whole mountain and it seemed to take the whole day. We didn't have water and I remember feeling like I was going to die from a combination of exhaustion, dehydration, and boredom. But mostly, I was just so, so thirsty. This hike was one of the times in my life that I remember distinctly being so thirsty, needing water so badly, that I would have done almost anything to get it.

Water is a necessity in life. The psalmist who wrote Psalm 42 understood this concept well. He needs God like a deep thirst. God is not just a desire but a necessity in life. Yet, for some reason, the psalmist can't find God, can't feel God's presence. He can't go to the temple where he feels God's presence most acutely.

We too need God like we need water. God is our source of life. But where can we find God when the wells of our souls feel like they've run dry? When we ask ourselves, "Where is our God?"

The psalmist finds hope through memory. He finds the presence of God through remembering the places and moments where he felt God's presence. Like the psalmist, we can find hope in God's presence by remembering the thin places in life—the places where heaven and earth meet, and we truly feel God's presence. During this Lenten season, let us all remember the moments of God's faithfulness where we truly felt the presence of God.

PRAYER

Gracious God, you are the God of our past, present, and future. In times when we feel a deep thirst for you, help us to remember the moments when we have felt your presence in the most powerful ways. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2024

The Rev. Trevor Jamison '01

SCRIPTURES

Genesis 41:46-57

46 Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went through all the land of Egypt. 47 During the seven plenteous years the earth produced abundantly. 48 He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities; he stored up in every city the food from the fields around it. 49 So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance - like the sand of the sea - that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure. 50 Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphra, priest of On, bore to him. 51 Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." 52 The second he named Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes." 53 The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end; 54 and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. 55 When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do." 56 And since the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. 57 Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

Mark 3:7-19a

7 Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; 8 hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. 9 He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; 10 for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. 11 Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, "You are the Son of God!" 12 But he sternly ordered them not to make him known. 3 He went up the

mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. 14 And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, 15 and to have authority to cast out demons. 16 So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); 18 and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

DEVOTIONAL

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely . . . there is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it." (John Dahlberg-Action, 1834-1902)

How do you respond to that statement? A hearty "Amen"? Or do you feel it's unnecessarily pessimistic?

Both Bible readings feature people appointed to an office. Joseph, after many trials and tribulations, is now Pharaoh's right hand man, preparing for a famine in Egypt. In the second reading, Jesus appoints twelve men as apostles—messengers with authority to cast out demons. How will Joseph and the Twelve behave now that power is in their hands?

Joseph uses his power to organize a nationwide food collection in the good years. Then when the bad times come, he opens up the storehouses and *sells* that food to the hungry Egyptians from whom he had collected it in the first place! Clever? Yes. Honourable? Not so sure.

As for the Twelve, it's a mixed picture. Peter used the authority of his office to ask Jesus questions, but had trouble listening to the answers. James and John came to Jesus seeking to be promoted above the others. And as for Judas . . .

If Joseph, who was aware of being accompanied by God during his life, and the Twelve, who accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry on earth, underperformed in such fashion, what hope is there for us?

Politicians or church leaders, teachers or social influencers, and all others appointed to positions of power: don't put ultimate trust in them, even the good ones. Instead, look to Jesus, who was not corrupted by power, but used it to teach, to heal, and to set people free, including from our sinful human tendency to be corrupted by office and power.

PRAYER

Gracious God,
We thank you for the gifts of office and power.
We pray for all who hold office,
and for all who wield power,
including ourselves.
May all of us look to follow the example of Jesus,
who wielded power for the sake of others, not self.
Amen.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2024

Lynn Cox '14

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 25

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
2 O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast
love,
for they have been from of old.
7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my
transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!
8 Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
9 He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and
faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.
11 For your name's sake, O LORD,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.
12 Who are they that fear the LORD?
He will teach them the way that they should choose.
13 They will abide in prosperity,
and their children shall possess the land.
14 The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.
15 My eyes are ever toward the LORD,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.
16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.

17 Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.
19 Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they hate me.
20 O guard my life, and deliver me;
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.
22 Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all its troubles.

DEVOTIONAL

I pray Psalm 25 with renewed focus now that I'm in my seventies. Its lament and longing are especially meaningful during Lent: Lord, remember not the sins of my youth (v 7) and let me be counted among your true friends (v 14) in this life.

You probably have your own catalog of youthful sins. My youth looks tame to an outside observer, but the Lord knows the truth. Memories of hidden transgressions can ambush my senior self without warning. I wince to recall people hurt by youthful habits: my petty greed and grasping, my wheedling to gain position, my desperation to cover any hint of ignorance or failure. The list goes on. Asking God to forget the sins of our youth is at the same time to re-acknowledge the wrongs done in a past we cannot change.

The psalmist does not want to live in the memory of past sins though and neither should we. Accordingly, we ask God to remember us not for our sinful past, but for his goodness' sake. Out of his goodness, God does much more. He pardons our guilt, leads us, and teaches us his way of steadfast love and faithfulness. In the process God reveals himself and gives us his friendship.

Jesus is now that revelation and in him we have what the psalmist longed for: the "stroll in the garden" intimacy of Eden once lost because of our sin. In Christ we are privy to the Father's plan: we are friends of God (John 15:14-15).

From the security of this relationship, Lent invites us to recall the sins of our youth, to feel and regret the harm we've done, that we might recognize afresh the benefits of God's forgiveness and forgetfulness and the joy of holy friendship gifted to us by Christ.

PRAYER

Thank you, God, for your steadfast love, faithfulness, and forgiveness. Free us, Lord, from the burden of a past which we cannot change but which you can redeem. Lead us in your truth, instruct us in your way, and teach us how to walk with you as our savior and friend. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Jonathan D. Lawrence '97

SCRIPTURES

Psalm 5

1 Give ear to my words, O LORD;
give heed to my sighing.

2 Listen to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.

3 O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

4 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you.

5 The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.

6 You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

7 But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house,
I will bow down toward your holy temple
in awe of you.

8 Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.

9 For there is no truth in their mouths;
their hearts are destruction;
their throats are open graves;
they flatter with their tongues.

10 Make them bear their guilt, O God;
let them fall by their own counsels;
because of their many transgressions cast them out,
for they have rebelled against you.

11 But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
so that those who love your name may exult in you.

12 For you bless the righteous, O LORD;
you cover them with favor as with a shield.

Matthew 4:1-20

1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and

it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" 10 When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; 12 in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'" 13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. 17 But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. 20 And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

DEVOTIONAL

The last few years have been challenging between COVID-19, economic and political challenges, severe weather, and violence nearby and far away. Each day as the news brings new concerns, many of us may feel like the psalmist: "[G]ive heed to my sighing. Listen to the sound of my cry," (Ps 5:1-2). These years have been particularly difficult for clergy and congregational leaders and many have even decided to leave the ministry in this time of uncertainty. What should we do?

I serve both as a pastor and a religion professor and in both roles I often find myself caught between people saying "We just want to go back to what it was like before the pandemic" and others saying "That world doesn't exist anymore and we can't go back and we won't go back!" The pandemic brought loss and change but in the midst of that loss people found new ways to interact, even through the dreaded Zoom screen. Those streaming worship services were less than perfect but they allowed shut-ins and faraway family members to join in worship. We found new ways to organize and support our communities through porch drop-offs of food for the hungry. When my congregation could finally meet in person again, it was still painful for some of our members because it just didn't feel the same. What should we do?

Some days I feel as clueless as the disciples who heard Jesus' words but didn't understand him. But today's parable gives me some reassurance. The sower spreads the seed without knowing how it will grow—and without responsibility for making it grow. I don't have any big answers, but in the meantime I can keep teaching and caring for the people around me and let God do the rest. And like the psalmist I can start to say "But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy," (Ps 5:11). It's not the answer I was looking for, but many days it is enough.

PRAYER

Lord, we turn to you for direction in a troubled and confusing world. We want answers but we know that sometimes there aren't answers. We take refuge in you and ask you to help the seeds that we have planted grow and bear fruit in service of your people. Amen.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2024

The Rev. Erin Morey '22

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

12 "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. 13 "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." 17 But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. 18 Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

DEVOTIONAL

"[Y]our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body." (1 Cor 6:19b-20)

On our last youth confirmation retreat, we had scheduled time on the "King Swing," where you are harnessed, hauled

as high into the air as you are willing to go, and then released to drop and swing. At first, I thought I might skip the swing. But, I watched the nervous teenagers I was with gently encourage one another to push beyond their comfort zones to try it. Watching the videos later, I realized that no one was silent as they fell, and at some point everyone yelled involuntarily at the thrill of swinging. Each of the youth decided to be hauled up a little higher, and most chose to go all the way up. I realized that this was an intense experience, but it was a holy experience, too, and I finally mustered the courage to share it with them. I'm excited to report that I had to keep my eyes closed as I was hauled up, but I made it all the way to the top, and then shrieked "WOO!" as I swung back and forth.

How holy it is that we share this strange and wonderful experience of being in this physical world with one another, and with Christ. How beautiful it is that we can rejoice together in worship, work, and play! And I've found that I am often capable of doing so much more than I assumed was possible when I am asked to push beyond my own comfort. I am never grateful enough for the gift of this body that allows me to connect with others and with God. This Lenten season, I will focus on God's call to glorify God in the sometimes mundane, sometimes intense, gift of being an embodied human being in the world.

PRAYER

Creator God, all we are is yours. Let us delight in the gift of our bodies, that we may joyfully praise you in every gesture, every moment, and every step. Let the world know your goodness through us. Give us the strength to do the work you have created us to do: to love you, and one another. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 2024

The Rev. Connie B. Hoeke '94

SCRIPTURE

Mark 4:35-41

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to

one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

DEVOTIONAL

"Are we there yet?" It is a standard question for children (and often adults) when traveling to a destination. It is a question of frustration and wonder about whether there will be an end to travel. In this passage, the disciples and Jesus are traveling in a boat when a terrible storm rages against them. The boat was swamped with water and the disciples, including several professional fishermen, were afraid. Because Jesus does nothing about the storm, the disciples think that he doesn't care about their plight. However, Jesus does care. He cares so much that he addresses the storm as he would a demon; he quiets the storm and there is a perfect calm that results.

The main point of this passage is trust and faith. And Jesus asks the disciples why they are afraid. It is as if he is asking them, "Aren't you there yet? Don't you believe?" In Mark, faith is shown by believing in Jesus as Christ and as the Son of God. A miracle worker could have done other miracles, but only God can rule the winds and the storms. Jesus has just told people many parables and has also explained them privately to the disciples and yet they do not understand who Jesus is, i.e. the Son of God. We must believe that God is always with us and is stronger than evil. We also need to go to Jesus with our requests with faith that he will answer our needs and fears. Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus asks them to pray for him, it is the disciples who are indifferent to Jesus' difficult moment when he asks God to remove the cup of death facing him. Faith and trust in Jesus Christ as the Son of God is imperative if we are to follow him and be his disciples. Let us always believe in Jesus the Christ and obey him.

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, thank you for being so faithful to us even when we don't trust you with our fears and desires. As we look toward the cross, we realize the evil you bore on our behalf. You also overcome the evil in our lives and help us to trust you with every part of our lives. May we trust you with our requests and know that you will answer us as our faithful God who accompanies us on our journey. Help us to pray. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 2, 2024

The Rev. Darryl Lockie '17

SCRIPTURE

Mark 5:1-20

1 They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. 2 And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. 3 He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; 4 for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. 5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. 6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; 7 and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." 8 For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" 9 Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." 10 He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11 Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; 12 and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." 13 So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. 14 The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. 15 They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. 16 Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. 17 Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. 18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. 19 But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." 20 And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

DEVOTIONAL

To be frank, today's Gospel reading is bizarre. It's bizarre even by the Gospels' standards, which is a rather high bar. Indeed, if a friend told you this same story over a beer, you'd suggest he close his tab and go home. "You just wouldn't believe it, man," he tells you with a slight slur. "So we get right off the boat, right? Then this crazy guy comes up and starts screaming at us. Oh, there was this hoard of pigs. Did I tell

you about the pigs yet?" It's at this moment you half expect him to fall off his barstool and pass out.

The central message of this passage is of course, the authority of Jesus, the power of God. But perhaps something not to be lost here is the way God works in both the chaos and utter ridiculousness of life. If this is the messiah of the unexpected, we might expect to find him in, well, the unexpected. He is to be found working not just among the staid and the stoic, but also the eccentric and the idiosyncratic. We all likely know this, but this story is a good reminder.

Perhaps it gives us pause to actually say hello to the woman caught in spirited conversation with herself in the park. Or maybe we reach out to the odd man at our church who owns a small herd of cats and has the odor to prove it. As opposed to always trying to turn away from the bizarre, possibly we look for the divine in it. According to this story, Jesus works there. Some thoughts to consider as we make our way through this strange and reflective season of Lent.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, this Lenten season, please give me fresh eyes to see your Spirit at work. Help me to see you bringing freedom where there is oppression, and hope amidst desperation. God, life is so often messy and downright ridiculous. Yet, give me wisdom to see you working through such circumstances, and also, conviction so I too might share your message of hope and light. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2024

Simeon Rodgers '23

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 42

1 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help 6 and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

7 Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

8 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

9 I say to God, my rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?"

10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

DEVOTIONAL

Like the psalmist, we have all encountered times where the circumstances of life have amassed like a great wave and caused us inner turmoil. Perhaps this very moment is such a time for you. There is certainly no shortage of things to be vexed to the soul about in this troubling day. Whether it be personal or about the state of the world, heaviness is much too easy to come by. Everywhere we look there is something that questions the veracity of our claim to hope. Although the words "Where is your God?" are attributed to adversaries who are mocking, we may oftentimes find ourselves asking a very similar thing: "God, where are you?" Depending on different factors, you may face some mental anguish when doubt arises. Perhaps you were told that to have doubt is sinful, disrespect of the divine, or proof of an empty faith. I would like to present another way to look at doubt and renew the image of the person that asks God for God's whereabouts when facing something that surely needs God's presence. The very act of asking God, "Where are you?" is more proof of a teachable faith and a heart that is searching and longing after God's presence than would be a cold, rigid certainty that disengages from the reality of suffering in the world. We ask because we care to know and realize a need! We ask because we are thirsty for the rivers of God's justice and goodness to flow into the desert places of our lives and

our world. When we ask, "God, where are you?" may it encompass the humility of not yet seeing as well as our hope to find the one whom we seek so that we may join them there in the work of healing and restoration.

PRAYER

Heavenly Parent, present with us even when we cannot perceive you, grant us peace and patience with ourselves and our world in the process of becoming. Let us seek your presence while recognizing that we bear you with us wherever we go. Permit us to feel the weight and rest of that truth. In your name, Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 4, 2024

The Rev. B.T. Gilligan '11

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 119:73-80

73 Your hands have made and fashioned me;
give me understanding that I may learn your commandments.
74 Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice,
because I have hoped in your word.
75 I know, O LORD, that your judgments are right,
and that in faithfulness you have humbled me.
76 Let your steadfast love become my comfort
according to your promise to your servant.
77 Let your mercy come to me, that I may live;
for your law is my delight.
78 Let the arrogant be put to shame,
because they have subverted me with guile;
as for me, I will meditate on your precepts.
79 Let those who fear you turn to me,
so that they may know your decrees.
80 May my heart be blameless in your statutes,
so that I may not be put to shame.

DEVOTIONAL

Today is my birthday! I've made another trip around the sun, which has been a long, strange trip. I have made a lot of memories this year, and I hope to make many more memories. I still have hopes, dreams, and goals to accomplish as I continue this wonderful life.

As I reflect on the previous year and look forward to the next year, I find some comfort and hope in today's reading. I long to learn more about Christ and what Christ would want me to do in the future. I know that some memories I make may not be the greatest, but I hope that my comfort can be found in the love of God towards me. I still long for the mercy of God and to find even more delight in God's precepts. I know I'm not there yet; some days are better than others, but I'm

not where I used to be. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "I may not be the man I want to be; I may not be the man I ought to be; I may not be the man I could be; I may not be the man I truly can be; but praise God, I'm not the man I once was." There is much to work on, but I see God at work.

You may be in the same place. You find the years passing, and everything changes, yet the desire is still the same: to fully live into this Scripture and fully immerse ourselves in all that God has for us. If that's the case, may you find comfort and hope in today's Scripture and know that you aren't there yet but aren't where you were either.

PRAYER

Almighty God, you mold and shape my life daily. Please keep making me into your image. Show me your life, help me to delight in you, and guide me ever closer to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 5, 2024

Elizabeth Nicodemus '23

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 45:1-15

1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. 4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. 10 You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11 I will provide for you there - since there are five more years of famine to come - so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' 12 And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin

see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” 14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

DEVOTIONAL

I can’t be the only one that reads this passage and the forgiveness that Joseph has for his brothers (who sold him into slavery!) and be left wondering how Joseph could possibly forgive them. They not only sold Joseph, but we are not told whether they looked for Joseph in the years that followed; and they more than likely did not. Any one of us would probably not welcome the one who wronged us into our lives again, at least not in the way that Joseph has. Joseph, however, not only welcomes them in but shows them such great love and compassion. He grants them the solace to spend the rest of the famine with him, in land that he will provide them. He has shown them unconditional love.

As we read this text during this Lenten season, may we realize that we have been forgiven despite all that we’ve done. Like Joseph’s brothers, we have been blessed with unconditional love: the unconditional love that Christ’s death provided and continues to provide for all of us. This love knows no bounds and exceeds any and all expectations. Just like the love and grace Joseph shows his brothers, we are shown this same love everyday as people of faith. We have been forgiven just like Joseph’s brothers and are loved by a God who sees us and knows us and loves us no matter what. May we spend this season in contemplation about the unconditional love that we have been given.

PRAYER

God of love, open our hearts and minds to the ways that you have loved us. Grant us the peace to know that we are not defined by our past mistakes. Show us how we can love others despite the ways that we have been wronged. Allow us to love others as we are loved. In your name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2024

The Rev. James Golla '16

SCRIPTURE

Mark 6:13-29

13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” 15 But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” 23 And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” 24 She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” 25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

DEVOTIONAL

We enter our Scripture text after Jesus has sent out the Twelve. News is spreading about Jesus that it has reached the ears of King Herod. There is speculation over who Jesus is and King Herod believes that Jesus is John the Baptizer who he had killed. Mark gives us some background on what has transpired between King Herod and John the Baptizer. King Herod broke Levitical law (Lev. 18:16, 20:21) by taking his brother’s wife as his own wife. John the Baptizer went to the King and called him out on his sin. John lives into the role of a prophet, much like how Elijah confronted King Ahab. The dynamic between the prophet of God, John, versus the power structure of this world, King Herod, is important to note. John stands and speaks truth and justice against power. The power system does not like to be told what to do or when they are wrong. John is arrested and eventually beheaded for standing up for truth and justice. Jesus in the same way speaks truth and justice. This pushes the power structures to eventually talk Rome into crucifying him. Will we, as followers in the way of Jesus, stand in the prophetic

tradition of speaking truth and justice into our power structures today? Are we willing to faithfully risk persecution, even though it may lead to death? In the season of Lent, we are called to “suffer” for our faith. This is more than just giving up chocolate or coffee! Jesus calls us in this season to get uncomfortable, and stand up to speak truth and justice into this world!

PRAYER

God of love and justice, we pray that you will embolden us to take a stand. Fill us with your Spirit to speak your truth and justice in the face of opposition. Give us the courage to choose you this day to serve you in your prophetic tradition. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2024

Caroline Baker '23

SCRIPTURE

Mark 6:30-46

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. 35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” 37 But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” 38 And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” 39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. 45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

DEVOTIONAL

The feeding of the 5,000 is a story we know well. We are inspired by this miracle when we are caught in worries of scarcity, trusting that Jesus will provide. Yet, while we focus on the teaching and feeding, it is easy to gloss over the thing that makes it possible: rest.

Read verses 30 and 31, then verses 45 and 46. What do you notice?

Verse 30 is about doing. The apostles told Jesus what they did and taught. His response? Verse 31: come and rest. They did as they were told and got in a boat. Because a large crowd followed them to this deserted place, there were 5,000 people to unexpectedly feed that evening. Once everyone was nourished, verse 45, Jesus “immediately” made the disciples get back in their boat and go take the rest they never got, while he himself went to a mountain to pray.

It is easy to perceive resting as the passive work, and miracles—feeding, healing, teaching—as the active work. Our Western society is one that rewards productivity; one that praises doing more than being. Jesus, with an endless list of important work to be done, consistently made time for rest and commanded his disciples to do the same.

Is this a command you find easy to follow?

Are you consistent with scheduling rest for yourself?

Rest can look many different ways, but is ultimately a time of spiritual grounding and healing that is unprovoked by concerns of productivity. Jesus invites his disciples to rest for “a while”; to be unhurried in their resting. Jesus invites you to do the same, for it is through spending time in rest that we are able to share the full abundance of our gifts with the world.

PRAYER

Creator God, thank you for the divine gift of rest. Thank you for knowing that my body, mind, and spirit all need nourishment and for inviting me to care for them just as Jesus did. Help me to trust in the value of being as much as I value doing. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 8, 2024

Raymond Pelling '23

SCRIPTURE

Mark 6:47-56

47 When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. 48 When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. 49 But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; 50 for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." 51 Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, 52 for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

DEVOTIONAL

Working in a camp kitchen in the California mountains one day, my rational mind became aware of the absurdity of the Gospel. "It's not logical . . . Why does God just love us, and not demand anything in return? It doesn't. Make. Any. Sense!"

My co-worker was Ricky Bender, one of those people you know loves Jesus, and through whom you have a 99 percent surety that the love of God is real. Most of the time he wears a smile on his face, and many times laughing. Ricky also smiles through many scars. His testimony includes that he is in the Book of Miracles at Loma Linda Medical Center. As a young child, he was involved in a car accident in which he hit the inside of a car windshield with his face, not expected to survive.

"That's just the point, Ray, it's not supposed to make sense! God just loves us. Salvation in Jesus is a gift, and that's just the way it is. We can't do anything to deserve it," Ricky replies, laughing.

We probably went back and forth like this for 30 minutes, he laughingly replying every time I declared my confusion.

Mark loves to tease us with the mystery of Christ and the Gospel. Here we have the mystery of the loaves mentioned, and the wild humor of Jesus pretending he is going to walk on water past the disciples, before calming their fears and getting in with them. Those at Gennesaret are healed just touching "the fringe of his cloak."

We naturally put up blocks to the audacity of the Gospel: it's simply too good to be true. We make divisions of who is unworthy of God's love: in our world, nations, families, churches, denominations, and even ourselves.

The outrageous love of God in Christ is not some demigod walking ahead of us, demanding we follow what seems impossible. Christ climbs in the boat with us, calms our fears, and even when it feels we only see something like a fringe of the truth, it is enough for something inside us to be healed.

PRAYER

Lord God, thank you for being a God who loves us outrageously, giving us Christ who gets in the boat with us, and teaches us how to love closer to the way you do, healing our hearts along the way. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 2024

The Rev. Joshua Fisher '14

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

1 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. 6 Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. 7 Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." 8 We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. 9 We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. 10 And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. 13 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.

DEVOTIONAL

In my work as a pastor and chaplain at Allegheny County Jail I have had the honor of holding holy space for others to confess their pain and mistakes. It rarely comes out in a formal confession, like the liturgies we use in worship. Rather, it comes with a hanging head or strained laughter, and sometimes, through bitter tears. It is not uncommon to hear someone say at the Jail that the bitterness that keeps them up at night is that they have committed the same sins as their ancestors. They promised themselves that they would not end up like them. Not them, not like their deadbeat dad, or their drug-sick mom. They are looking into the mirror of life and are having the courage to confess and bring to the light what many bury in the dark of their denial. Sometimes, I wish that we all had the courage to confess these deep wounds and failures. In these moments, I often think of the old monk adage attributed to Abba Moses: "Go to your cell and your cell will teach you everything."

The Apostle Paul encourages the church of Corinth to be looking in their own mirrors. In this reminder though, he is abundantly clear that it is not their faithfulness that will redeem them. It is God's faithfulness. It is God's faithfulness. Yes, this is redundant; it is God's faithfulness that will provide no matter what they face. How do they know? They look to the ancestors and they will see God's faithfulness. They look to the Christ who revealed God's love to both Jew and Gentile. In Lent, we focus on repenting of our sins and opening space to God's love. As you look in your own mirror this Lent and if you see some things you do not like, remember: God is faithful. The love of God is greater than our failures. It was true yesterday, it is true today, and it will be true tomorrow.

PRAYER

God of Moses who murdered, God of Jacob who lied, God of Rahab who prostituted, come into our hearts this day and deliver us from the judge and accuser. Remind us that there is nothing greater than your love or power to heal our wounds. And give us the grace to hold this for others as we need it for ourselves. To the glory of God and in the power of Christ we pray, Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Cindy Parker '10

SCRIPTURE

John 6:27-40

27 "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

28 Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." 30 So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? 31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34 They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." 35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 36 But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. 37 Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; 38 for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

DEVOTIONAL

In December of 1991 I married my college sweetheart. He was raised Catholic in a small town in western Pennsylvania, and I grew up attending The First Presbyterian Church of Bernardsville, N.J. During the seventeen years we were married, I occasionally accompanied him to mass and agreed to baptize our three daughters in the Catholic Church. Whenever I visited his church, I was never welcome at the Lord's Table. I was invited to walk forward with my children, but was always denied the bread and the cup because I was not Catholic.

We divorced in the spring of 2007, and I began my studies at PTS in the fall of that same year. The following year I was able to travel to Israel with a group from PTS and it was there that I understood Jesus' words for the first time, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Our group spent Saturday night in the small town of Jifna, where we were invited to worship the following morning with Father Emil's Catholic congregation. As the priest stood up at the communion table my stomach sank. "Another table where I won't be welcome," I thought. Then Father Emil did something surprising—he invited all of us up to receive communion!

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I walked forward to celebrate, truly celebrate, that I was excluded no longer, there was a place for me at the Lord's Table!

PRAYER

Bread of Life, help us to understand that your grace is sufficient to welcome ALL to your table. Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 11, 2024

The Rev. Ronnie Cox '23

SCRIPTURE

Mark 7:24-37

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter." 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. 31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

DEVOTIONAL

Different genders, different cultures, different nations, different races. So much separated this woman from Jesus. They could hardly have been more polarized, and their people could not have hated the other more. Yet she comes to Jesus. She comes to Jesus because she is desperate in only the way a parent can be to save the little child they love. And the interaction between the two of them is brief and yet very profound. Christ's response to her begging seems harsh and unkind; to call her a dog was even worse in that time than it is today if he had called her *κυσίν*, which he used in Matthew 7:6 but instead, he names her among the *κυνάριας*. The

Greek differentiates between a pet and a wild scavenging dog or even a farm dog.

Yet Christ does place her beneath the Jewish people—a people who were weaker and often persecuted by the more powerful Tyre. For many in our world, this humbling comment would have pushed us from Christ. Our blood boils when life forces us to be brought low and challenges us to admit we are not always on top. Humility is a large part of the practice of Lent, not only as a time for remembrance and self-sacrifice but also as a time for humility.

Now, we have a choice to respond with self-righteous indignation or to respond in the same fashion as the Canaanites. In the only words she speaks, she acknowledges her place as an outsider who is adopted, not as one born into the house. She accepts the place of humility, and she expresses her faith that even the tiniest word from Jesus could work miracles.

Her humility and her faith brought down all the walls that divided them. In the Syrophenician Woman, we see a model of healthy humility. Just as Jesus responded to her faith, he is ready to respond to ours with love, compassion, and transformation.

PRAYER

This Lent, Lord, remind me that I am beloved by God even though I am not worthy. Even though I am not enough. I am loved, and by the power of your Spirit, I am being transformed into a child of God, perfected in love, molded by grace into the image of your son Jesus our Savior. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2024

The Rev. Jeff Bergeson '14

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 34

1 I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
2 My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
3 O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
5 Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
7 The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.

8 O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
9 O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
10 The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.
11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.
15 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.
16 The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.
17 When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.
18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.
19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.
20 He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
21 Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
22 The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

DEVOTIONAL

Ninety-one years ago this month, at the height of the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave his first inaugural address as president. Into that tumultuous context, FDR spoke the words, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Fear is a strange thing. In the Bible, we're told, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps 111:10; Prov 9:10). And yet repeatedly, God's people are told, "Do not be afraid." Even in today's reading, the psalmist declares "the LORD delivered me from all my fears" (v 4) and then goes on to commend and even teach "the fear of the LORD" (vv 7, 9, 11). So, which is it? Should we fear, or not?

I want to wrestle with this question: what is fear? When you're afraid of a spider, or your financial situation, or wars and rumors of wars, or the upcoming election, what is the fear in your heart communicating? I've come to believe that fear is essentially our heart saying, "This has some kind of authority or power over me." Occasionally it's a correct assessment of the situation, but usually it's not.

We know that love is fundamentally a good thing, but it can be misdirected or disordered, and so our perspective on love gets distorted. Similarly, I believe fear is fundamentally a

good thing, but because we almost always misdirect our fear, we have a distorted view of it, and we miss the security that comes with fear properly directed, namely fear of the LORD (see Isa 8:12-13). Improper fear is a form of deception.

This Lent, may we not fear taking up our own crosses, because Jesus has come and set his people free from the fear of death (see Heb 2:14-15), seated us with himself in the heavenlies (see Eph. 2:6), and specifically tells us to fear no threats (see Matt 10:26-33; Luke 21:8-19). The LORD sees, hears, rescues, saves, is near to, and redeems those who fear the LORD (see Ps 34:15-22). If we are in Christ, what have we to fear? Nothing! Not even fear.

PRAYER

LORD, I confess, I have not feared you alone. Jesus, help me to so seek, trust, and love you that I fear nothing else. Holy Spirit, come. Prune the rotten fruit of other fears from my heart, and fill me with yourself, that I may more closely follow Jesus, free from fear and full of love. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13, 2024

The Rev. Audra Krise '10

SCRIPTURE

Mark 8:11-26

11 The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. 12 And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." 13 And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

14 Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. 15 And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out - beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." 16 They said to one another, "It is because we have no bread." 17 And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? 18 Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? 19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" They said to him, "Twelve." 20 "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven." 21 Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

22 They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. 23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and

THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Tom Hoeke '03

SCRIPTURE

Mark 8:27-9:1

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." 1 And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

DEVOTIONAL

One thing that troubles me about the decision to retire is my identity. I know my identities are as a husband, father, grandfather, and son. However, my occupation is where I have spent a lot of time in the last 47, first in secular positions as an information technology manager and then as a United Methodist pastor.

We often define people we meet based on what they do. One of the first questions asked is, "What do you do?" Something similar was happening with the crowd around Jesus. People wanted to define him by what he did. Before this scene, Jesus healed a blind man and a deaf person. For the second time, he multiplied loaves and fish to feed people.

Then Jesus puts his disciples on the spot, "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" Jesus wants to know if his trusted inner circle has a clue.

when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" 24 And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." 25 Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26 Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

DEVOTIONAL

"God, give me a sign . . ." How many of us have uttered those words with the hope that God would deliver a clear-cut sign, so we knew exactly what to do next in our life?

The truth is God is always speaking to us through our loved ones, the little voice in the back of our mind, and through Scripture. And no matter what path we choose, the promise remains the same: God is with us. Through good and bad, through poor decisions and the best ones, God remains at our side bringing us comfort, support, and love.

Our walk this Lent is about recognizing where Jesus is in our life and the best way is through an avid prayer life and reading the Bible. We don't need to test Jesus and ask him to give us a sign; Jesus already gave us all we need in this life by giving us eternal salvation. I know you want clear answers to the problems in your life, but that isn't faith. That is not God's purpose.

God gave us Jesus to cleanse us from our sins, from our temptations like asking for signs. Jesus sighed, deep in his soul because he knew the Pharisees had a sign standing before them and they didn't SEE. And as long as we keep trying to test God and asking him to make the decisions for us, we won't see either.

The point of our existence is choice. God gave humanity free will. Choose whichever option speaks to your heart and God will keep you going even if it's a bumpy walk. We're not always going to get it right, but that's why Jesus's life, death, and resurrection is so important to our faith. Jesus makes the pathways straight and our destination is heaven.

Let go of asking God for the clear cut answers and instead embrace the unknown and enjoy the journey.

PRAYER

Beautiful Savior, in our quest for certainty we forget only one thing is certain and that is our salvation through your sacrifice. Cleanse us of our need for answers and may we find you in the unexpected simplicity of realizing you never leave us nor forsake us. In Jesus' precious name we pray, Amen.

Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah. Right answer! However, does he know what it means that Jesus is the Messiah? Jesus doesn't think so and tells him, "You are not thinking God's thoughts, and you are thinking human thoughts." In other words, you are not open to God's ways.

Jesus is a different kind of Messiah than how Peter identifies him. Jesus is the Messiah who brings people back to God. That required his suffering on the cross to take away sins and get all of humanity back into a right relationship with God.

When you think about who Jesus is to you, think about God's purposes and God being in control, even amid hardships and difficulties. Know that the weight Jesus bore on the cross was for you. Trust in his grace, power, and sustaining work in your life. He is the one who can and does change our lives.

Deep down, I know no matter which stage of life I am about to enter, I am always, first and foremost, a child of God. My identity is in God.

What about you? Who do you say Jesus is?

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, thank you for identifying us as your children. We realize nothing is more important than our relationship with you through Christ. We admit that too often, we try to identify others and ourselves according to the world's ways. We pray that you constantly remind us that our identity is in you. In Christ we pray, Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Cole-Turner '14

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 12:27-13:3

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. 1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

DEVOTIONAL

During the Lenten season, we can begin to unfold the meaning of what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote about God's great love for us. He says that as followers of Jesus, we are all members of the body of Christ—in other words, we embody Christ—and that we should strive to love as our Savior loved. Otherwise, all that we do in this life will mean nothing.

When the visionary English mystic and theologian Julian of Norwich turned 30 years old in 1373 C.E., she experienced 16 visions as a response to her prayers asking for a deeper understanding of Jesus' suffering and God's love for us. In the first book written by a woman in English, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian asked the question, "What was God's meaning in this?" After many years of contemplation, she understood: God's meaning was love!

Both Paul and Julian are speaking of love as *agapé* (Greek: *ἀγάπη*), which is unconditional love, a love that does not demand repayment but is sacrificial, focused on the needs of the other person and not our own.

Like Paul, Julian also calls us to desire "the greater gifts" in the "still more excellent way." We cannot understand what it means to live with the *agapé* mindset of Christ unless we understand that in all that we do and say, actively striving to be love, to literally *embody love as he was love*, is the only action that will give us our true meaning in this life.

How might you become more loving to your family members and friends today? What is one loving action you could choose today to be love as Christ was love to a stranger you may meet?

PRAYER

Jesus, lover of my soul, show me how I might better express your love for all I meet and those I care for today. Help me understand ways in which I can choose to embody your love as I live out my days. Give me grace to embrace an *agapé* way of loving others in your name. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Graham D. S. Deans '06

SCRIPTURE

Mark 9:14-29

14 When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. 15 When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. 16 He asked

them, "What are you arguing about with them?"

17 Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; 18 and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." 19 He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." 20 And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 22 It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." 23 Jesus said to him, "If you are able! - All things can be done for the one who believes." 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" 26 After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. 28 When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" 29 He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

DEVOTIONAL

It's remarkable how frequently great occasions are so swiftly followed by great challenges that drive us almost to despair. Today's post-Transfiguration narrative is a case in point—for after scaling the heights, we plunge to the depths, as we are confronted with a situation where failure loomed large. Back to reality with a bump!

Our Lord's disciples found themselves unable to heal a young man who was clearly deeply disturbed—psychologically, physically, and spiritually—and his father was at his wits' end. His faith was being challenged by circumstances that he could not control; and we feel for him. The disciples had tried to help, but had failed to cure the boy's distressing and self-destructive behaviour (which was attributed to demon-possession); and their confidence must have been at a pretty low ebb. Even Jesus was exasperated by their failure. So he had to take charge of the situation himself.

The curse of failure affects all who are called to ministry—for none of us is ever omni-competent. We need to have the grace and the humility to accept that we don't have all the answers to life's deepest and most challenging questions—but like the disciples, we do know someone who does.

The causes of failure are many and varied. But pressure, stress, pastoral inexperience, lack of spiritual perception and wisdom, and sometimes, even over-confidence in one's own abilities are surely significant. The necessary qualities to enable us to exercise an effective ministry may take a lifetime to develop properly.

The same goes for the cure for failure: it does not come instantaneously, but results from the discipline of lifelong learning from the Master—whose strategy for overcoming failure may be summarised by the exhortation: "If at first you don't succeed, pray, pray, pray again!"¹

¹ From Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (2001), 265.

PRAYER

Almighty and eternal God,
whose Spirit helps us in our weakness,
and guides us in our prayers;
give us the grace and humility
to learn of him who was gentle and lowly of heart;
that we may find rest for our souls
in accordance with our Saviour's promise,
and thus be enabled to minister effectively
in his name. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2024

The Rev. M. Catherine (Kay) Day '97

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 3:16-4:12

16 "Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. 17 I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.' 18 They will listen to your voice; and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.' 19 I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. 20 So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go. 21 I will bring this people into such favor with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; 22 each woman shall ask her neighbor and any woman living in the neighbor's house for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall

put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians." 1 Then Moses answered, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'" 2 The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." 3 And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. 4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail" - so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand - 5 "so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you." 6 Again, the LORD said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. 7 Then God said, "Put your hand back into your cloak" - so he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body - 8 "If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign. 9 If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground." 10 But Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." 11 Then the LORD said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12 Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.

DEVOTIONAL

We know the story of God's call to Moses and Moses' reluctance. We understand Moses' hesitation. This is asking more than he believes he is capable of. God clarifies his name and credentials when God says to tell them, "I AM has sent me to you" (3:14). Then God gives him instructions call the people to follow him to leave Egypt.

But Moses voices concerns. What if the people do not believe him? God gives him an object lesson of his power by turning his staff to a snake and then back to a staff and of covering his hand with leprosy and then healing it. God has the power do these demonstrations and so much more. He invites Moses to trust him.

But Moses' self-doubt takes control. He is not eloquent, is slow of speech. God challenges him about who gives speech or sight? God himself has this power. God promises to give Moses the words to say.

We all shake our heads at Moses for being so untrusting, so unwilling to follow God's instructions, so afraid to be faithful and take the step of trust. We can do this because we know the full story and the power of God to deliver his people from captivity in Egypt. It is easy to trust when you know the

outcome. But Moses didn't. He had to live through it. We many times are in the same place as Moses and have many of the same questions and reservations for the same reason. We don't know the end of our story or the outcome. We question God's power. We doubt our own abilities for the task at hand. We really don't want to do what we are being asked to do. We want God to find someone else. God says to us the same things he said to Moses. I AM is sending you. I have power to deliver. I will give you all you need. I have chosen you.

Are we willing to trust as Moses ultimately was?

PRAYER

All powerful God, we are fearful to follow you, but you are more than able to lead us and empower us. Enable us to trust you for all you call us to do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 18, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Richard W. Wingfield '02/'13

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 121

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills —
from where will my help come?
2 My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
4 He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
5 The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
7 The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
8 The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

DEVOTIONAL

The annual vacation to my grandmother's house was always a memorable journey. As a young child this five hour trip seemed to take forever, but my parents would keep me occupied by singing one of those traveling songs to take the boredom and restlessness out of the trip. The Songs of Ascent (120-134) were those travelling songs during the pilgrim's triennial journeys to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts. This psalm would be sung to remind them of God's ability to help and to keep them while they travelled.

This is a wonderful psalm to pray as you go through life. It's a psalm for all seasons and points to the God who keeps you. Life is a journey of faith filled with both wonder and worry, faith and fear, awe and anxiety. Yet, the psalmist reminds you of God's faithfulness to God's people. God is intricately involved in your life. God, and God alone, sustains you on this journey. God goes before you and is there to guide and protect you (vv. 3-4), God is with you and watching over you (vv. 5-6), and God will keep you in every aspect of life (vv. 7-8). Thus, you do not need to live in fear or worry because God's ever-present help is with you.

Rehearsing this psalm will keep you grounded in your struggles. It's easy to get down and discouraged, especially during those mundane moments when you are exhausted and struggle to get out of bed. But even amid your distress, knowing God's keeping ability helps you to keep going on.

Choose to live life in total reliance on God who is the keeper of your soul. Don't seek help from anywhere else than from YHWH. Wherever he calls you to go, however hard the journey feels, whatever fears emerge along the way, hear the psalmist say, "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

PRAYER

God, you are the great I AM, the Creator and Sustainer of all life. Gently whisper in our ear the reminder of your presence with us, especially during those moments in life when we wrestle with our emotions. Help us to rest in your presence with us and your protection for us. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2024

The Rev. Rebecca Konegen '22

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 34

1 I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
2 My soul makes its boast in the Lord;
let the humble hear and be glad.
3 O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
5 Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,
and was saved from every trouble.
7 The angel of the Lord encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.

8 O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
9 O fear the Lord, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
10 The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.
11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.
15 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.
16 The face of the Lord is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.
17 When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.
18 The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.
19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the Lord rescues them from them all.
20 He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
21 Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
22 The Lord redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

DEVOTIONAL

It's an odd reading for Lent: an exhortation to wisdom, for finding it in seeking the Lord, and celebration for God's consistent rescue of the righteous. All of this while we anticipate observing the fact that the holiest and most righteous of any human being, God's own son Jesus, was crucified. It's hard to think of God's constant rescue of the righteous in light of what happened to Jesus.

The stanza starting in verse 11 is easy: life is to be found in right relationship with YHWH. In order to have a good life, we must seek to live in accordance with righteousness; we must do good and seek peace. The second flows from the first: life is good for the righteous because God stays near to the righteous, even when life is very difficult. And even the converse makes sense, in context: the Lord God turns away from those who do evil.

It's the verse that begins the next stanza that can cause us some difficulty: not so much the "many are the afflictions of the righteous," as anyone who has lived long enough can see that that can happen, but the claim that "the Lord rescues them from them all." One wonders, then, what rescue means, if the righteous have many afflictions and their spirits can be crushed.

But the psalmist is unembarrassed and unapologetic about the juxtaposition of a plan for the righteous to be able to have the good life with the admitted fact of many troubles and our need for rescue. And one wonders, too, what it means to have a good life, or “many days to enjoy good,” if one is also so deeply crushed and troubled. It can’t be simply that a life is a good one because God is alongside us, because the psalmist acknowledges that we still need rescue. So maybe this psalm is a good one for Lent simply because it requires us to acknowledge—all at once—several things that we know to be true: God is good, God is always acting on our behalf, and life can be very, very difficult.

PRAYER

Holy God, we can see that life is beautiful, and at the same time that life is difficult. We thank you for the gift of your presence, and for the gift of faith that allows us to trust in your promises. We cannot see everything we want to see, but we turn again to you in trust, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2024

The Rev. Chad Bogdewic '10/'13

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6

14 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. 15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; 16 to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 17 For we are not peddlers of God’s word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence. 1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? 2 You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; 3 and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. 4 Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, 6 who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

DEVOTIONAL

For years, I have been involved in The United Methodist Church’s disability ministry in Western Pennsylvania; it is

something that I have always felt called to. One of the fundraisers the Disability Concerns Committee has is through its t-shirt sales. One of our most popular has “Who Do You See?” on the front and “Who Does God See?” on the back. We are called to see the image of Christ in others, but we are also called to live out the message of Christ through not only our words, but our actions as well.

In the passage, Paul writes, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.” This imagery is reminiscent of Jeremiah, who said, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer 31:31, 33).

Living out our faith in humility is the highest form of praise. It is so much easier to live for ourselves, but that does nothing for society or for the message of the Gospel. To truly live is to die to self—meaning, I believe, to die to our selfishness, self-interest, and if we are being honest, our self-hatred. This, I believe, starts with loving self. If we do not love ourselves, how can we love others as ourselves? And if we cannot love others, whom we see, how can we love God whom we don’t see (1 John 4:20)? We can show the world the message of Jesus Christ by sharing the message that is written on our hearts by showing them that they are worthy of God’s love. Because if I am worthy, then they certainly are as well.

PRAYER

Living and Loving Incarnate One, you have shown us how to live and how to love. You have written your message on our hearts. May we share that message by showing our hearts to others through incarnational living and loving. In your name, Lord Jesus, we pray, Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 2024

The Rev. Greg Steible '14

SCRIPTURE

Mark 10:17-31

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” 20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and

give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." 28 Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." 29 Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age - houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

DEVOTIONAL

I was having pad thai with a photographer friend of mine a few weeks ago. He was telling me about an upcoming trip to Central America and all the packing required. Three or four days in the jungle looking for the most beautiful birds and three or four days relaxing on the beach requires a good deal of packing. Not only does he have to dress appropriately for the places he'll be, but he has all these different (and expensive) lenses he brings with him—and a laptop, several memory cards, and an external hard drive. It's significant packing.

Sure, Central American birds are likely beautiful and the beach down there must be amazing. But he and I both live on islands in the Puget Sound. We have beauty all around us here, too. He's captured some amazing orca pictures in what amounts to his backyard. But his desires to see new things and encounter new bits of God's creation and witness unique wildlife moments is unwavering. He makes significant sacrifices to be able to make these sorts of trips. They're expensive, they're time away from family, friends, and comfort, there's jetlag involved. I love the passion he has. He is pumped for this trip, and this is just one of several he's been on. I'm inspired by him—and his art.

Following Jesus is something akin to the passion of my photography buddy. It means being willing and excited to go to great lengths for Jesus' purposes and tasks. There may be sacrifices to be made, but when we exude the passion of following Jesus, they sure don't feel that way. By God's grace, the things we give up for the sake of Jesus are liberating and Jesus' call is life-giving.

PRAYER

Lord, strengthen us. As we are challenged to follow you every moment of every day, help us to see the joy you offer as we recognize the hope you provide. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 22, 2024

The Rev. Mark Allio '11

SCRIPTURE

Mark 10:32-45

32 They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, 33 saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; 34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" 39 They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

DEVOTIONAL

In these verses, Jesus reveals the gravity of the mission ahead, foretelling his imminent suffering and death. Remarkably, amidst this revelation, he teaches a crucial lesson on servant leadership. Jesus, the Son of God, models humility on the journey to the cross, dismantling earthly expectations of power and prestige.

In a society driven by ambition and the pursuit of greatness, Jesus redefines leadership. He contrasts the world's hierarchical structure, where rulers lord over their subjects, with the kingdom's radical model. True leadership, he asserts, is not about dominating but about serving.

Jesus uses the metaphor of drinking from the cup he drinks and undergoing the baptism he undergoes. This imagery symbolizes the sacrificial nature of leadership, where leaders are called to share in the sufferings of those they serve. And both baptism and cup point to the sacraments connecting us both to Christ's sacrifice and Christ's victory. Lent beckons us to consider our willingness to embrace this sacrificial cup in our own lives.

Jesus points to himself as the ultimate servant, declaring that even the Son of Man came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This powerful proclamation encapsulates the essence of Lent—a season of introspection, repentance, and a renewed commitment to selfless service.

As we journey through Lent, let us ponder the implications of Christ's call to servant leadership. How can we, in our roles and spheres of influence, emulate Jesus' humility and sacrificial love? This season prompts us to examine the motives behind our actions, inviting a shift from self-centered ambitions to a posture of genuine service.

May this Lenten journey be a transformative one, as we embrace the model of Jesus, the Servant-King, and allow his selfless love to shape our hearts and actions.

PRAYER

Dear God, during this Lenten journey, we seek your guidance in understanding and embodying servant leadership as modeled by Jesus. May his humility inspire us to serve with selflessness and compassion. Grant us the strength to drink from the cup of sacrifice, embracing your call to love and serve others as we follow the example of our Servant-King. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 2024

The Rev. Helen Kester '06

SCRIPTURE

Mark 10:46-52

46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and

say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." 52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

DEVOTIONAL

Tomorrow is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. Today we sit with blind Bartimaeus in the dark unable to see Jesus approaching. As we look at our world, we see wars and murder; we hear of human trafficking and child abduction and addictions to everything from drugs to work, and we yearn to be blind to the needs that surround us and deaf to the cries of pain that assail us. But the words of Mark and the story of Bartimaeus draw us into the hope of belief in the redeeming work of Jesus the Christ. Jesus calls us to him. We can tell him the pain, the sorrow, and our feelings of being overwhelmed by the demands of the world. He hears. Jesus knows all our concerns and asks us, "What do you want me to do for you?"

We are each asked that by our Savior. Too often we forget that Jesus wants us to be honest with ourselves and him. We try to hide our pain, our feelings of inadequacy, and the overwhelming sense that we cannot carry all our burdens. Jesus knows and is calling us to him and asking what we need. We need not hide. Like Bartimaeus, we are invited to shout out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me!" What are you lugging into Holy Week that Jesus wants to help carry? Do you have an illness, are you caring for someone who is ill? Or is it relationship problems, money issues, problems at work, or just a general feeling of dismay with the world in which we live? Whatever the burden that is making you blind to the love and hope of the Easter message, tell it to Jesus. Give it to him and accept his help and the strength of the Holy Spirit.

PRAYER

Jesus who searches and calls to us, help us to hear and respond. Help us to name our needs and accept your help and guidance, in your holy name. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 2024

The Rev. Lauren Davis '22

SCRIPTURE

1 Timothy 6:12-16

12 Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you 14 to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which he will bring about at the right time - he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. 16 It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL

As a chaplain I hear frequently the language of “fighting the good fight.” Even at my own grandmother’s funeral the pastor echoed the sentiments that she had fought long and hard and stayed steadfast in the faith. This language may bring about mixed feelings. One may question why one must fight through life to take hold of the reigns of eternal life. Why does it have to be so hard?

That is a question I have wrestled with quite a bit, and I will not pretend to have the answers. What I can share is that in the sacred encounters with friends, family, and complete strangers I see a great deal of beauty and strength in their choice to keep embracing life even in the face of suffering. Fighting the good fight of faith any given day may look like summoning the bravery to have that hard conversation with a loved one, or voicing a need you have neglected for far too long. *Fighting the good fight of faith may simply mean embracing your life in all its messiness and complexity as one that is worthy of love.*

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PRAYER

Lord, we thank you for your love that surpasses all understanding. We ask for your sacrificial love to guide us through the heartache of Good Friday into the joy of Easter

morning. Help us Lord, embrace each day, remembering you are with us, and we are not alone.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 25, 2024

The Rev. Drew Himes '13

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 119:73-80

73 Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments. 74 Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice, because I have hoped in your word. 75 I know, O Lord, that your judgements are right, and that in faithfulness you have humbled me. 76 Let your steadfast love become my comfort according to your promise to your servant. 77 Let your mercy come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight. 78 Let the arrogant be put to shame, because they have subverted me with guile; as for me, I will meditate on your precepts. 79 Let those who fear you turn to me, so that they may know your decrees. 80 May my heart be blameless in your statutes, so that I may not be put to shame.

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is a season for seeking wholeness. During these 40 days, we are called upon to slow down, pause, and reflect. For many, it is a season of penitence and seeking to be forgiven of our misdeeds and inactions. For others, it is a time to return to God after rushing about throughout the rest of the year. In either way, both approaches call us to return wholly to God, the source of our life and seek God’s wholeness again.

The idea behind the English word “heart” is the Hebrew “**לב**” which gives the impression of the very depth of our being, the soul or psyche some may call it. From the very deepest reaches of our humanity—broken, tired, worn out, hurting, empty—we cry out to the God of life who, as Easter reminds us, resurrects us from our graves and brings us back to life.

The author of this Psalm reminds us of the personal touch of God: “Your hands have made and fashioned me.” God reaches out to us to make us, remake us, and give us life. When we cry out we know that God not only hears but also grabs us and embraces us.

The source of our life is God's love for us. This is God's very being whom we cling to in our Easter promises. The psalmist tunes our hearts and minds back to God: "Let your steadfast love become my comfort." Prayerfully we ask that God would love us back to life again. Prayerfully we seek mercy and reconciliation with God, our sisters and brothers, and God's wonderful creation. Honestly, we confess our need for God and our need for the grace of life and love.

May your Lenten journey make you full of life again. May you find yourself in the stillness of your existence and give yourself the time and space to slow down, speak honestly to our God, and allow God to embrace you back to life.

PRAYER

God of mercy, hear our prayers. We humbly ask you to embrace our weary bodies and reach into the depth of our beings to pour your love and life into us again so that on the day of Resurrection we may experience the fullness of our future life with you. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 26, 2024

The Rev. Sarita L. Robinson '23

SCRIPTURES

Psalm 34

1 I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
2 My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
3 O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
5 Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
7 The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
8 O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
9 O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
10 The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.
11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.

14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.

15 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.

16 The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

17 When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.

18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.

19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.

20 He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.

21 Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.

22 The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Psalm 146

1 Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.

5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,

6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

7 who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

9 The LORD watches over the strangers;

he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

This beautiful psalm takes us on a journey of gratitude and guidance, leaving us feeling inspired and uplifted. It reminds us that despite the challenges we may face, we have a God who is always beside us, listening to our prayers and ready to

save us from our fears. The psalmist invites us to experience God's goodness and to trust in him completely, even in uncertain and difficult circumstances. Through powerful metaphors like the angel of the Lord and the young lions, the psalmist shows us that even the strongest and most self-sufficient among us can experience hunger and struggle, but those who rely on the Lord will never lack anything they need. The psalmist's wise teachings about the fear of the Lord and his actions toward the innocent and the wicked alike remind us that justice will always prevail, and we should always strive to follow God's ways. Let us take comfort in this psalm and the encouraging message it brings. Let us trust in God's goodness and wisdom and always remember that he is with us every step of the way.

Psalm 146 celebrates the greatness of God and encourages us to trust in him. The author reminds us that human help can be limited and fallible, but God's care for the weak, the suffering, and the oppressed is boundless. By trusting in the Lord, we can find peace and comfort. The psalmist refers to God as the God of Jacob, reminding us of his covenant with his people. Let us praise God's power as the creator of all that exists, and let us never forget the eternal rule of the Lord. May we always choose the path of righteousness and reject the ways of the wicked.

PRAYER

Gracious, merciful, and loving God, I pray for your people who need your touch of comfort, peace, and protection. I pray that you will continue to remind your people that you are near those who are faint-hearted and suffering. Let them know you hear their prayers and will answer them according to your will and ways. This is my prayer, in Jesus' name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2024

Nathan Salamacha '23

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 51

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
19 then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
THEN BULLS will be offered on your altar.

Devotional

Asking for forgiveness is hard. It's even harder to admit what we have done wrong. We are all taught from a young age that we should have the discretion not to tell the whole truth. This sometimes protects those around us, but we can also fall into the trap of letting these protective measures become actions to cover our pride and deceive for self-gain. When we get in the habit of telling too many little white lies, they can catch up to us in the long run when our actions are unveiled to those around us. It can lead to an atmosphere of mistrust and fear. We sometimes even try to do this with God. We excuse our actions even though God already knows what is in our hearts. But can you really blame us?

Obscuring our faults can not only be a way to deceive others but can be a survival tactic we have learned to protect ourselves. There are many people in our world who are interested in power and control above all else. They take what we have done and turn it into abuse, fighting for control over our lives. But the good news of the psalmist is that God is not that way. God is not interested in holding things over our heads in pursuit of absolute abusive control but instead calls us to a new life full of restoration and

healing. During this Lenten season, I hope that we can have the courage to trust God with our shortcomings knowing that we will be renewed with a joyful spirit. God's goodness goes beyond the controlling attitudes and faults of those around us. It is something that brings salvation and perfection into our lives. It is a place where we can rest as a refuge for our souls. Our protective walls can come down as we can be fully honest and vulnerable with the Life-Giver of our universe.

PRAYER

God of life, as we tend to our souls this Lenten season let us have courage to approach you with our faults and mistakes. Allow us to not only repent of them but to be filled with a new and right spirit which comes from you. Let your resurrecting reality seep into us as we prepare to celebrate your saving power through Christ Jesus. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 28, 2024

Steffan Johnson '23

SCRIPTURES

Psalm 126

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
5 May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
6 Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 102

1 Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you.
2 Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my distress.
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily in the day when I call.
3 For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass;

I am too wasted to eat my bread.
5 Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.
6 I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.
7 I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.
8 All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.
9 For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,
10 because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.
11 My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.
12 But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations.
13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favor it;
the appointed time has come.
14 For your servants hold its stones dear,
and have pity on its dust.
15 The nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth your glory.
16 For the LORD will build up Zion;
he will appear in his glory.
17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and will not despise their prayer.
18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD:
19 that he looked down from his holy height,
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,
20 to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die;
21 so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion,
and his praise in Jerusalem,
22 when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.
23 He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.
24 "O my God," I say, "do not take me away
at the mid-point of my life,
you whose years endure
throughout all generations."
25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
26 They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like clothing, and they pass away;
27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.
28 The children of your servants shall live secure;
their offspring shall be established in your presence.

DEVOTIONAL

Theologian Martin Luther once said, "God hides in suffering." Using this quote as a lens, it is safe to say that God is all around us today. With wars, rumors of wars,

plagues, corrupt leaders, and oppression on the rise, God is in our midst. As we face large corporations in hopes to unveil their injustices, these battles become tiring and hopeless. When faced with suffering, it is easy to fall into despair, as the Psalmist says: "Like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places" (Ps 102:6).

Although the sight of suffering is overwhelming, overstimulating, and heavy on the heart, our understanding of suffering shows us God's grace. Realizing this grace sets us, as believers, apart from the constant affliction placed upon us by our oppressors. Whether these adversaries are lawmakers with pens, soldiers with weapons, political leaders with pride, or even neighbors with envy, all we are left to do is pray. With our backs against the wall, prayer will guide us.

Prayer is what we have to lean on in the face of suffering: "He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their prayer" (Ps 102:17). To recognize prayer as a byproduct of suffering is where we strengthen our faith, remain humble, and sense God amongst the turmoil of the world.

Now, a question that I often ask myself is "How does this look? How will it look once I am delivered from this angst?" Psalm 126 has an answer: "A harvest of joy." In Psalm 126, the psalmist expounds on restorative justice with an agricultural take, a harvest: "May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy" (Ps 126:8). Tears became joy and joy quickly turned into gratitude, shouts of joy.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for all that you have done in and around us. Thank you for giving us hope in the face of turmoil, and love in the midst of hate. As we see younger generations react to the same world that we have been neglecting, give them strength to do justice and compassion to accept diversity. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 29, 2024

Jon Mathieu '21

SCRIPTURE

Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-33

1 I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath; 2 he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; 3 against me alone he turns his hand, again and again, all day long. 4 He has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones; 5 he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; 6 he has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago. 7 He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on

me; 8 though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; 9 he has blocked my ways with hewn stones, he has made my paths crooked. 19 The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! 20 My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. 21 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: 22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." 25 The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. 26 It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. 27 It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, 28 to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it, 29 to put one's mouth to the dust (there may yet be hope), 30 to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. 31 For the Lord will not reject forever. 32 Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; 33 for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

DEVOTIONAL

This is a hard passage to read, for more reasons than one. The lamenter's sufferings are many and specific: isolation, bodily injury, emotional bitterness, unanswered prayers, homelessness. As difficult as that gauntlet is to consider, I am perhaps even more alarmed by the jarring words of faith and praise that follow. After enumerating the gut-wrenching sorrows, with no warning the writer insists upon God's steadfast love and accordingly has hope.

Perhaps you have been spared from these types of experiences, but when I read this text I am brought back to the "toxic positivity" of many well-intentioned churchgoers from my past. In the face of abject heartbreak after a diagnosis or a death, many bystanders try to be helpful by offering trite statements of positivity. *Everything happens for a reason. There's another angel in heaven. It's all part of God's plan.*

Despite the kindness of those who speak these words, they often have a toxic or corrosive effect because they invite the griever to bypass their negative emotions. Or, worse still, they generate guilt or shame in the mourner for not having enough faith to embrace the positive viewpoint.

Is the author of Lamentations just performing a grand spiritual bypass?

Upon a closer reading, I think not. Just before the turn to words of faith, the writer not only lists their hardships, they note: "My soul continually thinks of [my affliction] and is bowed down within me." Whatever hope has arrived, it is not serving to hide, ignore, or obliterate the pain and anguish.

And so we are left with tension. Heartbreak and hope. Real pain and God's love. Good Friday's execution and Easter Sunday's empty tomb. This lament suggests that the alternative to toxic positivity is not unmitigated despair. It is the affirmation, if only in parentheses, that "there may yet be hope."

PRAYER

God of steadfast love, teach us to feel our negative emotions. Not to hide or ignore them, but to sit with them. As we do, please make space in our broken hearts for faith, joy, and love. There may yet be hope. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 2024

The Rev. Alyce Weaver Dunn '88

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 43

1 Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!

2 For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off?

Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?

3 O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me;

let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.

4 Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

DEVOTIONAL

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" The heart-wrenching words of the psalmist have resonated with me over the past five years as I have navigated some difficult times: the death of my dear mother; a pandemic which snatched away a sense of well-being; and then a season of disaffiliation in the United Methodist Church in which colleagues and churches willingly left the connection in which I had invested my life and ministry. The psalmist gives voice to the desolation, brokenness and anxiety which often maneuvers its way into my spirit.

On this Holy Saturday, I am sure the followers of Jesus experienced disquieted spirits. Their beloved teacher, Jesus, had been denied, betrayed, and brutally murdered. When his body was laid in the tomb, all of their expectations for a new reality of love and peace had been buried. The faithful community of believers for whom Jesus brought good news had been shattered and scattered, their souls cast down, their spirits disquieted.

On this "quiet day" on the liturgical calendar, we have space to consider that the psalmist's cry did not end with pain; the desperate cry to God led instead to a word of hope: "Hope in God; for I shall praise him, my help and my God." The psalmist trusted in the provision of God, the one who would carry him through the present pain and uncertainty. As well, the gospel story does not end with the brokenness of the cross and tomb—it concludes with the startling hope of resurrection, restoration and reconciliation.

Today's psalm is a powerful reminder that God's light and love shines through the darkness of our lives, even in the moments when our disquieted spirits ache and yearn for a better day. May the God of disquieted days give you hope as you wait for tomorrow to come!

PRAYER

Gracious God, on those days when my soul is disquieted, remind me that you are a God of hope and resurrection. Restore me in my brokenness so that like the psalmist and the followers of Jesus, I can praise you yet again! Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2024

Wendy S. Farone '20

SCRIPTURE

Luke 24:13-35

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17 And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" 19 He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21 But we had hoped that he was the

one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. 22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23 and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. 24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." 25 Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29 But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. 30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. 32 They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" 33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. 34 They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" 35 Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

DEVOTIONAL

Do you remember Easter morning when you were a young child? My family did not go to church so it never crossed my mind that connecting Easter with Jesus was a thing. Rethinking, we did go to church one Easter as I remember my sister and I had matching dresses. She wore a cute sailor hat with her ensemble and I wore a really ugly flowered one. The kids made fun of me; I built a resentment; so much for going to church on Easter.

We three siblings did have to wander around the house looking for our Easter baskets filled with candy and a big solid chocolate bunny. The excitement was in the seeking. The joy was in the finding and the moment I took that first bite of solid chocolate bunny ears, I believed in heaven!

I look back on those days with a smile and recognize how much of the meaning of Easter was missed in my youth. I believe that Jesus was there in my ignorance and lack of opportunity. At the time, as with the women who visited the tomb, "I did not see him." Jesus was there nonetheless in my laughter, my fulfilled expectations, my gratefulness, and my faith that this year, we would have a basket of undeserved plenty.

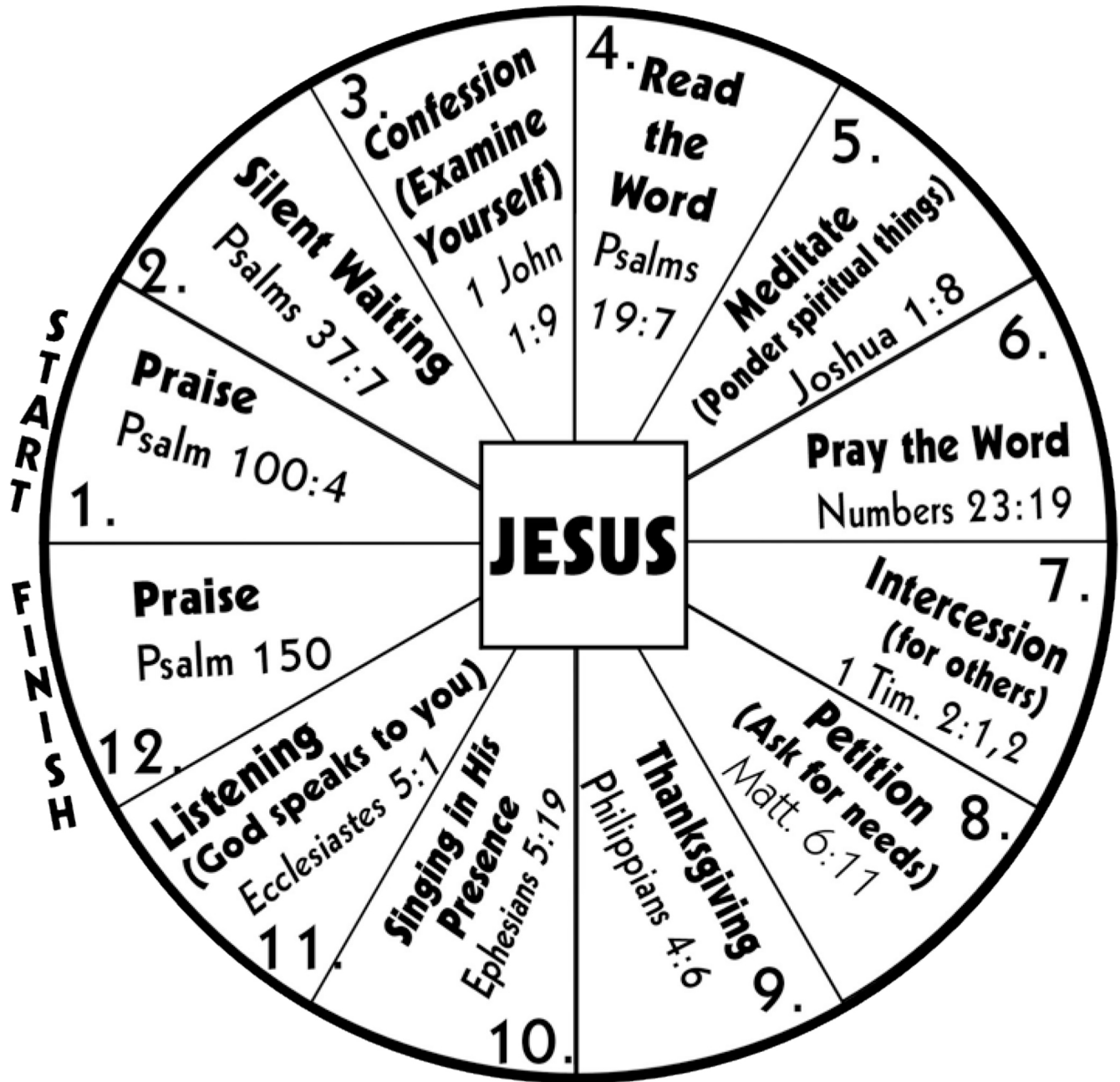
I attend worship for four days in a row during Easter season. I cry at worship on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. I am solemn on Holy Saturday and on Sunday when the doors to the sanctuary are thrown open; the sights of the altar adorned with color and the smell of flowers on Easter Day overwhelm me, and I cry again. "Then [my] eyes are opened, and [I] recognize him." My heart burns "while he [is] opening the scriptures to us!" I seek to understand. I engage in the joy of the glorious gift of God's grace and mercy. The Lord offered his beloved Son to save us from our ignorance and lack of opportunity in order that we may see him clearly. And I know that I am in his presence. Thanks be to God!

PRAYER

Good and gracious God, how many times we did not see you when you were right there with us? How many times we settle for those things we believe that we should seek but discover that they are fleeting moments of a childish wish. Lord, our hope is in you; our hope of resurrection into eternal life. This Easter season may we remember the Lord has risen indeed. May we rejoice that "he has been made known in the breaking of the bread" now and forever. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Scripture quotations contained in the lectionary readings are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

THE PRAYER WHEEL



PRAYING WITHOUT CEASING