

#### Dear Friends:

He is risen!

Welcome to Covenant Presbyterian Church's Lent Devotional Guide for 2020.

Here at Covenant we have a tradition of preparing our members and friends for Easter with our Lenten Devotional Booklets—daily readings from the Bible for the 40 days of Lent with thoughts, suggested responses and prayers from our elders, staff and other gifted writers in our Covenant family.

It all begins on Ash Wednesday, the day that marks the beginning of the Season of Lent which gets its name from the Old English word "lengten" (lengthen). It's the time of year when days are getting noticeably longer. Spring is coming. New life will soon burst forth. During Lent God's people traditionally prepare for Easter by reminding themselves of their utter dependence upon God by fasting, praying and denying themselves various creature comforts (You find out very quickly how much you need and crave foods when you stop eating them!).

Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras day), by the way, is a perversion of this season of preparation-through-self-denial idea. It approaches the Season of Lent in a formalistic and legalistic way: "On Wednesday I have to start denying myself things I like, so on Tuesday I'm going to indulge in every attractive sensual self-centered practice I can imagine. I'll spend all of Lent paying back the debt of sin I'll run up during Mardi Gras." The fallacy is that we can pay our own debt through religious acts. The tragedy is that the goal of an ongoing vital love relationship with our gracious Heavenly Father is traded for the illusion of peace with the Almighty and Holy Judge through a balance of moral trade—our self-denying acts of goodness can equal the weight of our self-indulging sins. Nope. Won't happen. Can't happen.

But here is something remarkable to consider... Ash Wednesday, like all of the Season of Lent, is fixed on the calendar according to Easter. It is always a Wednesday because it always comes 40 days before Easter (excluding Sundays). You cannot determine when to have an Ash Wednesday Service until you determine when to celebrate Easter. There is no special time to remember our "dust to dust" frailty and mortality and utter dependence without the more special time to remember the "He is risen!" strength and immortality and utter

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faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ who, by grace through faith, shares His eternal life with us.

The reality of God's goodness and grace precedes and transcends the reality of our desperate condition and our total need of Him. God isn't good because we need Him: We need Him because He is good. The very fact that we recognize our need and lament our sinfulness is a testimony to God's glory *before* and *more than* it is a confession of our brokenness. The universe really is God-centered rather than Man-centered or Mecentered, and that is good news for all of us! And that is something to think about for a while.

To help us all have a profitable and fruitful season of Lent this year, we offer our devotional booklet as a gift to our family and friends here at Covenant. This collection of Bible readings is divided into three parts: 1. Old Testament Prophecies Pointing to Jesus' Death and Resurrection, 2. New Testament Commentary on Jesus' Death and Resurrection, and 3. New Testament Narrative of Jesus' Death and Resurrection.

I am grateful to those who have helped make this guide a reality for us this year. Your Worship Ministry Team, Staff, Elders and others have worked hard to prepare this Guide for you. The story of Jesus you will read is true. The faith of people like you evidenced in these pages is genuine. It is our prayer that this Guide will help you put your trust in Jesus and worship God well each day as He guides your steps. And it is our hope and expectation that our commitment to the discipline of daily reading and meditation will help us all come to Easter Sunday with a renewed sense of devotion and a heart full of joyful praise befitting the majesty of our gracious Heavenly Father, His Eternal Son and Their Holy Spirit.

May you be blessed, as we have been, by the retelling of the Easter Story offered here—the humbling truth of God's death for us and the astounding reality of Easter: He is risen!

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	3	Isaiah 49:1-7	"I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.	Dianne Billharz
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18	Romans 5:1-11	"but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."	Justin Luevano
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20	Hebrews 10:1-25	"But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down"	Kathy Ludwig
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## PART THREE: NEW TESTAMENT NARRATIVE OF JESUS' DEATH & RESURRECTION

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	28	Luke 22:47-53	"Judas, would you betray the Son of Man?"	Gerry Dunlap
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	2	John 18:28-40	"Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?'"	Ian Bullard
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	7	Luke 23:26-43 <i>"F</i>	ather, forgive them, for they know not what they do."	<b>Brent Ford</b>
	8	Mark 15:33-41	"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"	Patti Hemsley
	9	Matthew 27:57-66	"Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen'"	Gerry Allen
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## FEBRUARY 26 (Ash Wednesday)

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"



#### **Text: Psalm 22**

<sup>1</sup>My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? <sup>2</sup> O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent. <sup>3</sup> Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. <sup>4</sup> In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. <sup>5</sup> They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

<sup>6</sup>But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. <sup>7</sup> All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: <sup>8</sup> "He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."

<sup>9</sup>Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast. <sup>10</sup> From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God. <sup>11</sup> Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

<sup>12</sup> Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. <sup>13</sup> Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me. <sup>14</sup> I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. <sup>15</sup> My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. <sup>16</sup> Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. <sup>17</sup>I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. <sup>18</sup> They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

<sup>19</sup> But you, O Lord, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me. <sup>20</sup> Deliver my life from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. <sup>21</sup> Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

<sup>22</sup> I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. <sup>23</sup> You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! <sup>24</sup> For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

<sup>25</sup> From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you will I fulfill my



vows. <sup>26</sup> The poor will eat and be satisfied; they who seek the Lord will praise him—may your hearts live forever! <sup>27</sup> All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, <sup>28</sup> for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

<sup>29</sup> All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—those who cannot keep themselves alive. <sup>30</sup> Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. <sup>31</sup> They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn—for he has done it.



#### **Reflection:**

A few years ago, a Sunday school teacher whom I'll call, "Tim Ball", graciously and patiently explained the meaning of the words that David cries out in Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I didn't understand how God seemingly turned His back on David, "a man after God's own heart." David's distraught words reveal his despair of feeling forsaken by God. Forsaken is a heart-breaking word meaning abandoned and deserted.

What is evident in this passage is a divine messianic message. Many similarities exist between Psalm 22 and

the crucifixion accounts. David's descriptions of his own suffering correspond to what Jesus endured on the cross. When Jesus suffered the anguish of separation from His Father, He echoed David's words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I wonder if David knew that he was prophesying the words of Jesus on the cross and describing the suffering Jesus would endure almost a thousand years later.

The best part of Psalm 22 is the victorious conclusion. The agony is over! Despite David's feelings of being forsaken by God and sufferings at the hands of his enemies, he clung to God. He found that God had heard and answered his cries for help. David praises God saying that, "he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help".

David is also foreshadowing the Good News of the Cross when Jesus exclaims, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." His last words were assurance of His Father's faithfulness, a cry of victory in the midst of suffering. We now can have a relationship with God and know the joy of our salvation. David and Jesus are perfect examples of enduring faith in the face of suffering.

#### **Response:**

Have you cried out to God in desperation and heard only silence? Do you hold tight to God even when you are feeling beaten, battered and forsaken? That's what Jesus and David did. In their suffering, they responded in faith.

I've found that when immersed in a circumstance of despair beyond my understanding, it is possible and helpful to be on the lookout for God's tender mercies... Divine blessings that ease the burden. He tailor-makes them for each of us. My hope is that you will see the tender mercies God creates for you.

"Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,
shining on those in the darkness,
those sitting in the shadow of death,
then showing us the way, one foot at a time,

down the path of peace." - Luke 1:78-79, The Message

#### Prayer:

Lord, You are our faithful and compassionate God. Thank You for hearing us as we cry out to You. Thank You for never leaving us alone. Please give us strength to be faithful. Help us see and respond in faith to the tender mercies that we receive in times of difficulty.

Unto You Lord, Amen.

- Kris Pierson



#### **FEBRUARY 27**

"But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"



#### Text: Genesis 3:8-15

- <sup>8</sup> Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup> But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"
  - <sup>10</sup> He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."
- <sup>11</sup> And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"
  - <sup>12</sup> The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."
  - 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

<sup>14</sup> So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,

"Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. <sup>15</sup>And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and



between your offspring [literally, "seed"] and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

Adam and Eve were created to walk in righteousness and communion with God. But, in a cataclysmic rupture of Creation affecting the entire history of mankind, they were entreated by a cunning Deceiver to doubt God and succumb to sin. Today we will look at the immediate aftermath of the Fall.

From our vantage as people born into a world in every way, in every *molecule* tainted by sin, we can only imagine a time when Adam and Eve walked freely in God's Presence. Now in

v. 10 they are "naked." Donald Grey Barnhouse puts it this way, "It was not skin nakedness they discovered but the nakedness of their dead souls. When they sinned, the light went out." (*Genesis: A Devotional Commentary*, p. 19)

#### Reflection:

Adam and Eve did what we all, as unregenerate sinners, do when we encounter God and His holiness: They hid. The innocence they knew in Genesis 2:25 now turned to guilt, stubborn defiance and shame.

How they must have once loved meeting with God in the beauty and peace of His garden! Now they invent "religion," attempting to appease God and cover their sin with works of their own hands. Their garments of leaves must have been unbearably uncomfortable, both physically and spiritually. And we know their "solution" was woefully inadequate to atone for their sin.

Let's look at what God offered in place of their "works":

**God calls them**. They know and have loved His voice. Now it terrifies them. Sin has separated them from the Creator. But in His mercy, He still calls to them.

**God pursues them.** Once they knew only Light, but now they know sorrow, darkness and death. They have no place to hide (read Psalm 139: 1-12). Rather than leave them in despair, God gently, persistently seeks them out.

**God stirs their consciences.** When God questions them, sin causes them to offer feeble, insulting, wounding, even brazen justifications for their disobedience. They did not heed the calling of the Spirit. They were offered mercy, invited to confess and repent. Sadly, there is no suggestion they grasped the opportunity to restore the relationship and intimacy with God they forfeited through sin.

**God provides hope.** In the midst of laying out the consequences of disobedience and resultant sin, we are given the first Gospel: God has ultimate "good news" for us!

This passage ends with God giving Adam and Eve the very first hint of His plan for mankind's redemption. The woman's "seed" ("offspring" in the ESV translation... the surprising allusion to Jesus who was fully God and fully Man, born of a virgin) will be bruised by Satan. But the serpent's evil plan for man's thorough, eternal destruction is

doomed. While Satan could only bruise the heel of this coming Deliverer, his own annihilation is sure. How is this to be accomplished? At the cross:

The Lord says, "It was my will that he should suffer; his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness. And so he will see his descendants; he will live a long life, and through him my purpose will succeed."

- Isaiah 53:10 (New Living Translation)

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

#### **Response:**

Satan was defeated when Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was followed by His triumphant resurrection three days later!

Despite our tendency to overlook this reality, Christ lives today. He still calls us though we often flee from His voice and try to hide in a variety of busy, addictive, numbing or otherwise distractive ways. He shuns our ineffective attempts to cover our own sins with works, graciously substituting His grace:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. - Jesus (Matthew 11:28-30)

He desires our repentance and offers forgiveness. He yearns to set us free from the devastating effects of our sins and adopt us into His family where we will experience the love we were created to enjoy with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

If you desire to be fully restored into fellowship with Jesus, Paul tells us in Romans 10:9-11 how to proceed:

...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.

If you would like further assurance and solid teaching about following Jesus, please call the church at 775-746-8118 or seek to connect with a mature Christian for guidance in Bible study, encouragement through prayer, and fellowship to strengthen and nourish your new life!

#### **Prayer:**

Lord, we cannot fathom all we lost when Adam sinned. Out of our brokenness we call for You to forgive us and restore us to a right relationship with You. We long to walk again by Your side and commune with You in the undefiled beauty of Your perfected creation. Until then, we are grateful You pursue us and lead us into salvation. Amen.

Patti Hemsley

#### **FEBRUARY 28**

"...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."



#### Text: Genesis 12:1-3

- <sup>1</sup> The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.
  - <sup>2</sup> "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

#### Reflection:

In these verses Abram is called to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you." God is asking him to leave all the proven security and provision of the home he has known, and go someplace else. God is asking Abram to trust Him. It must have been hard to leave all that you know and go to

something totally unknown. Before I moved here, I lived across the country in Virginia. It took my daughter and I five days driving to get here. But I had an advantage over Abram as I knew some of what to expect, and I had family here. The advantage Abram had over me was that he was willing to trust God, radically.

Leave your country and go to the land which I will show you.

Genesis 12:11

God made promises to Abram—to make him a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great—and God would make Abram a blessing. God would bless those who blessed Abram and curse the ones who cursed Abram, and all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. We can see the blessing of Abram's descendant, Jesus, but Abram could only trust God. Abram showed his faith by trusting God and moving to the place God showed him. Abram, considered the father of three religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), has a great name indeed! He trusted God and his faith is applauded along with other examples in Hebrews 11.

As I was preparing to write this, I looked up a devotion on line. (No, I have not copied it here, but it is a good read... Ligonier Ministries.) There was a phrase in the text that I

had to look up also: *coram Deo*. It means something that takes place in the presence of, or before the face of, God. To expound, it means living one's life understanding that it is all in the presence, under the authority and to the glory of God. Psalm 139 phrases neatly the idea of living knowing that there is no place to hide from the God of Abram in thought, word or deed. Abram seemed to understand that is what God wanted from him. It is what God wants from us all. In Luke 14:33, Jesus said "*Anyone of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple*." Living our lives for God is trusting in our God for provision and knowing that He is here in all circumstances. Abram gave us all a beautiful example of faith by obeying God and going to a place he did not know. Hebrews11:10 tells us why: "For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations and whose designer and builder is God."

#### **Response:**

Read Psalm 139. Let it guide you to the understanding that God is holding you in His hands and wants you to live your life trusting that He knows you and what is best for you.

#### **Praver:**

Our Father in heaven, please help us to have trust and faith in You. You have shown Your faithfulness to us in so many ways. Help us to hear Your calling and to respond as You will. I pray in the name of Your precious Son, Iesus, who is the best blessing and who descended straight from Your servant. Abram. Amen.

- Joanne Dickson







#### **FEBRUARY 29**

"When the sun had gone down and it was dark behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram..."



#### **Text: Genesis 15:1-21**

- <sup>1</sup> After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:
  - "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."
- <sup>2</sup> But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."
- <sup>4</sup> Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." <sup>5</sup> He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."
  - <sup>6</sup> Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.
- <sup>7</sup> He also said to him, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."
  - <sup>8</sup> But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"
- <sup>9</sup> So the Lord said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."
- <sup>10</sup> Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. <sup>11</sup> Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.
- <sup>12</sup> As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. <sup>13</sup> Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. <sup>14</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup> You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and

be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

<sup>17</sup> When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared & passed between the pieces. <sup>18</sup> On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— <sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup> Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, <sup>21</sup> Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

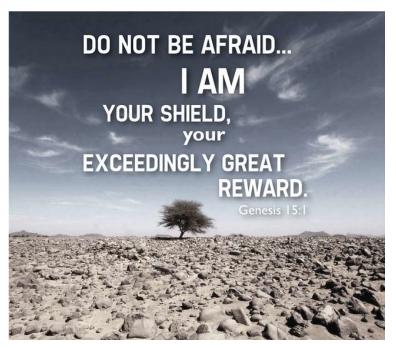


#### Reflection:

These verses are about God's covenant with Abram (Later God would change his name to Abraham). Abram lived 2000 years before Christ. Why are these verses included in a devotion booklet that prepares us for Easter? After meditating on this passage of Scripture, I believe we can see how it reveals some important attributes of God, and how the actual covenant foreshadows the sacrifice of Christ.

We know from earlier in Genesis that God created mankind in His own image. God is *personal and relational*. God opened the conversation with Abram. He knew Abram needed reassurance and encouragement. When He spoke to Abram in a vision, He said not to be afraid and that He was Abram's shield and great reward. God's attributes of *comforter, protector, and provider* are seen.

Abram and his wife Sarai were old and had no children. Abram lamented (with respect – He called God Sovereign Lord) that God had not given him children. God is so *patient*. He listened to Abram's heartfelt complaint. He had Abram look up into the night sky and told him that he would have offspring as numerous as the stars. And a key verse to me in this whole passage of Scripture is this: *Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness*.



Simple, but profound. God's requirement for our righteousness is faith in Him. Can you imagine the joy in Abram's heart as he contemplated the fulfillment of that promise from God?

God's *omniscience* can be discerned. God revealed to Abram that he would be the father of countless descendants, and that his heirs would be enslaved 400 years, but they would come out and inherit the promised land. We can read in the book of Exodus about the enslavement of the Israelites, and then how they were led out of bondage by Moses. The Israelites did come back to the Promised Land. The borders of that promised land were explicit. These were realized during Solomon's and Jeroboam II's reigns. They will ultimately be accomplished again during the future Millennium. God's *omnipotence* is seen in that all that He said would happen He made to happen. He is still Lord of all.

Another example of God's *patience* is when He dealt with Abram's questioning how he would possess the

land God promised. God didn't whack him because he continued to question. He gave His answer to Abram using a covenant method common to that time period. In those days two parties made a covenant to one another by cutting

animals in half and arranging the pieces opposite to each other with space between. The two parties to the covenant both passed through the space between the cut animals. By doing so, they were saying that if either party broke the covenant then what happened to those animals should happen to them. A smoking firepot and a blazing torch passed between the pieces while Abram was in a deep sleep. God took all responsibility for the covenant. It has been further suggested that God was symbolized by the smoking pot and Jesus by the blazing torch. It was the same as God saying that if either party broke the Covenant then God alone would take the punishment. And this is what Jesus did for all who put their faith in Him. Mankind has broken the covenant, but Jesus took the punishment that we deserved. That is why Easter is the most important holy day for Christians.



#### **Response:**

A suitable response is gratitude. Gratitude for God's attributes as a personal relational God; gratitude that He is our protector and provider and patient with us. Gratitude that He is omniscient and omnipotent. Gratitude

that what He requires from us is faith. Faith in the love of the Father, grace of the Son, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Gratitude that we are not punished though we break the covenant. Jesus took our punishment. In gratitude



we should seek His will for our lives every day. We should humbly serve Him and one another and whoever He puts in our lives. "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." 1 Peter 3:15

#### **Praver:**

Dear Father, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit, thank You for who You are and for Your attributes. Thank You that You took the punishment we deserve so that we can live in eternity with You. Help us to deepen our faith in You, and we ask You to work through us to further Your Kingdom.

- Kay Blakely

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."



#### Text: Isaiah 42:1-9

- <sup>1</sup> "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.
  - <sup>2</sup> He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.
- <sup>3</sup> A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; <sup>4</sup> he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope."
- <sup>5</sup> This is what God the Lord says—he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:
- <sup>6</sup> "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, <sup>7</sup> to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
- <sup>8</sup> "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.
- <sup>9</sup> See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you."



What a beautiful foretelling of the Prince of Peace. Not only does this passage give us a snapshot of the Savior, but it comes from God's own words! This is God not only telling us that a New Covenant is going to be established through His Son, but also the type of man that Jesus is going to be on earth. He is going to be humble and meek. He is going to do His Father's work without complaint (v.2). He will restore the less fortunate and encourage those whose faith has been shaken (v. 3). He



will be steadfast, sure and unfailing (v.4). All the while He will be delivering justice for the righteous so that the Law will be fulfilled! Almighty God chose to save His people through His Son. There are probably other ways He could have done it, but this was His plan. His perfect Son was going to come live with us and not only show us the way that we should live but ultimately pay our penalty so that we could be with the Father forever! God closes the passage with a magnificent picture of who He is and always will be (vs 5-9).



#### Response:

Any time I study who Christ was here on earth, I feel embarrassed. God has given me everything I need to know in order to live a life pleasing to Him, just be like Christ. Seems easy enough. Why then, do I fail so miserably? Because I get in the way!

#### **Prayer:**

Help me, Lord, to put myself to death so the you can fill me with Your righteousness and truth. Help me to see the sacrifice that Jesus was for me. Help me to be humble, kind and slow to anger. Help me to rejoice in all that I have and not to complain. Let Your light shine through me. Amen.

- Bob Rowe

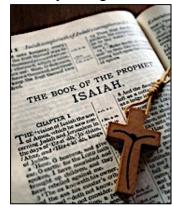
"I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.



#### Text: Isaiah 49:1-7

- <sup>1</sup> "Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.
- <sup>2</sup> He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.
  - <sup>3</sup> He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."
- <sup>4</sup> But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God."
- <sup>5</sup> And now the Lord says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength—
- <sup>6</sup> he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."
- <sup>7</sup> This is what the Lord says—the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers:

"Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."



#### **Reflection:**

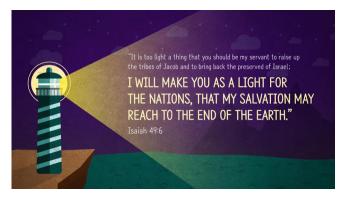
Announcements on U.S. Navy ships are preceded by the phrase, "**Now hear this!**" Teachers often tell their students, "Listen up!" And that is how Isaiah begins his second Servant Song. Not only is Israel to listen up, the people from afar are also to "hear this."

Isaiah says God called him *by name* from the womb. God called others from the womb too: Samson, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and Jesus, each with a special purpose. Isaiah's calling was to be a sharp sword, a polished arrow, and God's servant. He was faithful to deliver God's messages but he felt like he accomplished nothing. In spite of all his proclamations, Israel did not listen, did not change, and they were conquered and carried off by the Assyrians. But Isaiah still expresses confidence that finally the God who was his strength will declare him right, reward him and honor him. History validates his prophecies, and what an honor it is to have his story included in the Word of God, where it still inspires and speaks to all who read it with a willing heart to "hear this."

In verse 6 Isaiah's focus shifts from his own time to the future, when another Servant will be a Light for the nations and a Savior for the whole earth. This Servant, God's Holy One, will first be despised and abhorred but in the end he will be honored and glorified by kings and princes. Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy, and "Therefore God has highly exalted Him and given Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, of those on earth, and of those under the earth" - Philippians 2:9. Isaiah's prophecies, sharp (like a sword) and pointed (like an arrow), all proved true because he obeyed God's calling to speak truth and proclaim the word of the Lord whether it pleased his listeners or not (usually not).

#### **Response:**

I have often heard the gospel presented as "God has a wonderful plan for your life." Think of it - He knew your name before your parents even thought of it. God designed your genetics, gifts, and abilities (or lack thereof) because He has a purpose for *you*, just the way He made *you*, in His kingdom. Scripture is full of exhortations to use our gifts for God's glory and examples of people who did so, as well as examples of God calling someone to do something beyond their natural abilities and then equipping them to do it. Most of us will not have spectacular lives like Moses, the Old Testament prophets, or the apostle Paul, but whatever our place may be, we can do all to the glory of God. I like I Thessalonians 5:14 because anybody can do it - "admonish the careless, encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, and be very patient with them all." When my grandson wanted to earn some extra money, a friend taught him how to clean house, and at the end she told him, "You clean as if you're cleaning for the King, because you are." Even the mundane can be done for the glory of God.



Looking back over my life, I can truly say God did have a wonderful plan. At the moment, I am grateful God can still use me in the church. I hope that He will continue to call me into service until He takes me home. Whatever God is calling you to do, remember I Thess. 5:23-24: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it."

Long before the world or time began, You knew me and You loved me then. Long ago, when everything was new, You knew me and You loved me still.

Yesterday, You gave your life for me; You loved me and You always will. On the day You gave me flesh and bone, You claimed me as Your very own. Then one day, You called me by my name; You called me and I came, to You. Holy Father, Heavenly Dove; Lord Jesus, You are my true love.

#### **Prayer:**

O Lord, You know that there are no words good enough to express our gratitude for Your love, for salvation in Christ, and for Your calling us, caring for us, and making us new. May Your glory be our prime motivation in everything we do. Give us the strength, inspiration, and wisdom we need to accomplish Your purposes and further Your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Dianne Billharz

#### MARCH 4

"Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant?

Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust
in the name of the Lord and rely on his God."



#### Text: Isaiah 50:4-11

- <sup>4</sup> "The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.
  - <sup>5</sup> The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.
- <sup>6</sup> I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.
- <sup>7</sup> Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.
- <sup>8</sup> He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!
- <sup>9</sup> It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.
- Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.
- <sup>11</sup> But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment."

#### Reflection:

This passage of Scripture is the third in what is referred to and known as the "Four Servant Songs of Isaiah." All four of these songs foretell of the Messiah, who will open the eyes of the blind, who will set prisoners free, who brings

salvation, who is humble and meek yet will be exalted. In our passage, 50:4-11, He, the Servant, is an obedient Servant who listens to the Lord, and trusts in the Lord completely. What could sustain Him during such suffering?

Have you ever found yourself to be amongst those who, after witnessing or hearing of some terrible tragedy that happens to a godly man or woman, say or at least think how horrible it is! How could such terrible things happen to someone so giving, one who does so much for others? Well, I have thought that. I have heard people ask, "Why them? Why not the other member of the family who probably deserved some tragedy?" I think it's natural for us to think that good people deserve good things. And it's natural for us to ask why. We have this set of scales in our heads that weighs the good against the bad, and somehow the scales seem to be off when bad things happen to good people. We know Jesus was without sin, He did nothing wrong, and yet He endured the most horrific physical torture imaginable. Imagine Mary having to witness this and not being able to help. But friends, please don't miss all that Isaiah says. The Servant began speaking the truth, He was instructed by the Lord. His ears were open. He was not rebellious, and He turned not backward. He is affirming the reason there is no disgrace or shame because He is giving and He is offering himself. The Servant had spent enough time with God to un-reservedly trust. He was able to set his face like flint, and in His mind there is no scale where He weighs good against bad: There is only the Lord's will and the Lord's justice. Jesus' eyes are on what can't be seen yet—the redemption of you and me. I weep as I remember the day when I understood for the very first time that all this is motivated by Love. Love for me, and love for you. Love that never dies. Love in action.

#### **Response:**

The only thing that sustains us during the worst of times is a "face set like flint," speaking the truth and acknowledging God's goodness and character. He will help us. We are not like those in darkness, because we rely and trust in the Lord, therefore, we will not be disgraced.

#### **Prayer:**

Dear Lord, forgive us when we trust in ourselves and anything else that eventually burns out. Lord, give us hearts and minds set like flint for You alone. You are our help and our salvation. In the worst and best of times, help us to remember how grateful we are and how amazing Your love is.

Cindy Duncan



#### **MARCH 5**

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."



#### Text: Isaiah 52:13-53:12

- <sup>13</sup> See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
- <sup>14</sup> Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness—<sup>15</sup> so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.
- **53** Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
- <sup>2</sup> He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
- <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
- <sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.
- <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

- <sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
- <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.
- <sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.
- <sup>9</sup> He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.
- <sup>10</sup> Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
- After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.
- <sup>12</sup> Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

#### Reflection:

This is the 4th Servant's Song, subtitled "The Gospel in the Old Testament"

2 + 2 = 4; H + H + O = water; bright sun + raw skin = sunburn; suffering unto death = salvation/exaltation/glory! So which one doesn't fit? I've heard this same story for over 60 years – why am I continuously taken aback, amazed, ashamed...?

700 years before Jesus' birth, God asked Isaiah to tell us about The Christ!

- ....There will be unimaginable suffering and punishment yet it will bring us peace.
- ....He must be wounded that we might be healed.
- ....He will accept all this without complaint/response that we might know love.
- .... As He poured out His life unto death salvation 'began.'
- ....And all this because it was His Father's will And He already knew my name!

#### **Response:**

Why is this important to us?	relevant? motivational?
Will this change how we live?	Will I tell someone about Jesus,
the Christ?	
Will I	

#### Prayer:

Almighty (Thank You!), merciful (Thank heaven!), God of all eternity, I'm at a loss about what to even ask. How many times before have I asked for forgiveness, sought guidance and courage, asked You to take away self-consciousness and embarrassment...!? Humble me Father, so that You're the only filter through which I experience life. And strengthen and encourage me, Father, to tell the other sheep – *Hey, He's over here!!!!* 

Dan Carne

A DECEMBER 1			
BUT HE WAS PI	RCED FO	R OUR	
TRANSGRESSIO	NS, HE WA	AS 💉 🛶	
CRUSHED FOR	OUR INIC	UITIES;	
THE PUNISHME	NT THAT	BROUGHT	
US PEACE WAS	JPON HIM	M, AND BY	
HIS WOUNDS V	E ARE HI	EALED.	
ISAIAH 53:5			

We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God.

"In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness."

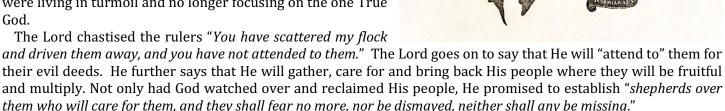


#### Text: Jeremiah 23:1-6

- <sup>1</sup> "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the Lord. <sup>2</sup> Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the Lord. <sup>3</sup> "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. <sup>4</sup> I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the Lord.
- <sup>5</sup> "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.
- <sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.

#### Reflection:

God's Word in Jeremiah contains both a warning and a promise. The Lord warned both the shepherds/leaders and their flock/people of what was to come. God's people no longer had a nation but had been scattered throughout the land. It was a time of political unrest and perversion of worship. Many of God's people were worshipping idols. The leaders were not caring for their people but were looking only to their interests—political expediency, power and comfort; the people were no longer keeping God's commandments and were living in turmoil and no longer focusing on the one True God.



Then, amazingly, in verses 5-6 God promises "to raise up for David a righteous Branch," one who will be called "the Lord is our righteousness." This is a clear reference to His Son, Jesus, our Savior.



As I read this passage, I couldn't help but reflect that no matter how much time passes, and how "enlightened" we claim to have become, nothing has changed. It seems many leaders look only to their own self-interest and we, God's people, focus on what we want too often and not on what God's word tells us. "Me first" seems often to be our



mantra. What would be different in my life and in yours if we were in the habit of saying to ourselves, and to anyone else who will listen "God first!"?

#### Praver:

Heavenly Father, forgive us for falling away. I pray You will draw us near, that our leaders will seek Your will rather than their own, and that we, Your people, will seek Your Face first. Thank You that You sent Your Son to show us how to live, and that You love us in spite of our transgressions. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.



"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."



#### Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34

- <sup>31</sup> "The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.
- <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.
  - 33 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord.
    - "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

<sup>34</sup> No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord.

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

#### **Reflection:**

Our relationship with God is through the New Covenant that was prophetically foretold in today's passage. Jesus announced this New Covenant at the last Seder Feast with his disciples, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you," foretelling his imminent death at the Cross. The prophecy of this coming New Covenant was spoken by Jeremiah six centuries before Jesus came to earth. God called Jeremiah to proclaim dire warnings to the Israelites that their great sin of idolatry would be punished by exile unless they repented.

But the pattern of disobedience had been set long before. God's chosen nation, Israel, disastrously broke the Old Covenant that they had made with God during Moses' leadership. When Moses descended Mount Sinai from his first meeting with the Living God, he shared God's words: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you



will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Exodus 19:8 records that the Israelites responded in unison, "We will do everything the Lord has said." Yet while Moses met with God again on Mount Sinai, the people had already melted their jewelry to make a golden calf to worship.

Such turning toward idols was rampant in Jeremiah's time. Yet in the midst of Jeremiah's prophetic woes, God proclaimed that in the future he would inaugurate a new covenant that would not be like the covenant he had made with their forefathers. Chapter 8 of Hebrews, which repeats this prophecy of Jeremiah, explains why the New Covenant is superior to the Old. Jesus as the high priest of the New Covenant accomplished the

final sacrifice for sin through his own blood. Jesus' final atonement made the Old Testament sacrificial system obsolete. His ministry as our great high priest is superior because he opened the way for all believers to come boldly before the throne of God. Under the Old Covenant only the high priest was allowed an annual entrance into the Holy of Holies. Hebrews teaches that the New Covenant is founded on better promises. The Tablets of the Law given to Moses were external, but the New Covenant embeds God's laws in believers' minds and hearts. Our Heavenly Father promises deep intimacy with his people and such complete forgiveness that he will remember their sins no more.

#### **Response:**

Thank God that Jesus accomplished this glorious redemption for all who believe. Let joyful obedience be our response to God for these better blessings we receive through the New Covenant!

#### Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank You for the promised New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah so long ago. Without Jesus' willingness to make this complete sacrifice in His own blood on the cross we know that our sin would keep us separated from Your loving presence. In Jesus' great Name we pray, Amen.

Debbie Barackman

"The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."

# LENT (Old Testament Prophecy)

#### Text: Psalm 2

- Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?
- <sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.
  - <sup>3</sup> "Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters."
  - <sup>4</sup> The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.
  - <sup>5</sup> Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
  - <sup>6</sup> "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."
  - <sup>7</sup> I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father.
  - <sup>8</sup> Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.
  - <sup>9</sup> You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery."
  - <sup>10</sup> Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth.
  - <sup>11</sup> Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.
- <sup>12</sup> Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

#### Reflection:

Psalm 2 sets forth two ways for nations and peoples to live... the way of sinners or the way of righteousness. It is divided into four parts with each part containing three verses and with each part having a different speaker. In the first part (verses 1 - 3) God asks two "why" questions... why do nations conspire and why do people plot in vain against me? The second part (verses 4 - 6) finds God laughing and mocking the disbelievers, and at the same time making sure they know His Anointed one (King David and/or King Jesus) is already on the throne in Zion (Jerusalem). Part three (verses 7 - 9) has God's Anointed One asking and receiving his inheritance to rule with a rod of iron. In part four (verses 10 - 12) the psalmist gives counsel to these unbelievers... worship the Lord, be wise, and serve the Lord with awe and reverence.



#### Response:

What does this mean for us as Christians on this side of the cross and Jesus' resurrection? This particular psalm is an assurance for us that "the Lord's Anointed" shall have the final victory in the end. It also helps us to know that God always has been and always will be in control of everything. It is a comfort to know that even as we "conspire and plot in vain" (verse 1) our precious Lord will have the last word. As we come to the season of Lent and Easter, let us remember that our God chose to raise his Son Jesus on that first Easter morning so He could sit at the right hand



of God to reign forever... "He is risen, He is risen indeed!"

#### Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, please forgive me when I choose to "conspire and plot in vain" against You. Help me to see that You are always there to love me, forgive me, and give me a fresh start. Heavenly Father, please help me to have a fresh understanding and acceptance of the gift of Your Son, his death and resurrection, during this Easter season. Amen.

- Dave Gallagher

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh..."



#### **Text: Ezekiel 36:16-32**

<sup>16</sup> Again the word of the Lord came to me: <sup>17</sup> "Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight. <sup>18</sup> So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. <sup>19</sup> I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. <sup>20</sup> And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the Lord's people, and yet they had to leave his land.' <sup>21</sup> I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.

<sup>22</sup> "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. <sup>23</sup> I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

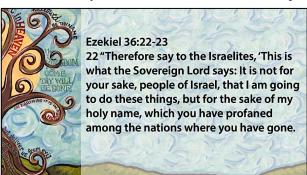
<sup>24</sup> "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. <sup>28</sup> You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my

people, and I will be your God. <sup>29</sup> I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. <sup>30</sup> I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. <sup>31</sup> Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. <sup>32</sup> I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign Lord. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel!

#### **Reflection:**

God's name is great! Israel was judged for its' ways and deeds and was dispersed among the nations. The nations did not see God's greatness in pouring out his wrath against his people. God's name was profaned by the nations and Israel. So that the nations would see God's holiness and greatness, He would restore His people to their fathers' lands. They will be His people and He will be their God.

God removes the people's uncleannesses and provides a new heart and Spirit. The Spirit requires the people to follow carefully God's law. God makes the land prosper, and his name is great among the nations. God makes it known



to the people that this is done for His great name, the people remember their iniquities and abominations and are confounded and ashamed.

#### **Response:**

Think about what God says here through His prophet Ezekiel about His concern for His own great name. How is this almighty and everlasting concern good news for us to whom God has promised and delivered salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord?

#### **Prayer:**

Lord God thank You for your great name! Thank You for Your Word that is pointing all of history and all nations to the name of our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus. Help us to know that in Jesus name we need not be ashamed. Amen.

"See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey..."



HE IS JUST, AND HAVING SALVATION; LOWLY, AND RIDING UPON...A COLT...

#### Text: Zechariah 9:9-13

- <sup>9</sup> Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
- <sup>10</sup> I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.
- <sup>11</sup> As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.
- <sup>12</sup> Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.
- 13 I will bend Judah as I bend my bow and fill it with Ephraim. I will rouse your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece, and make you like a warrior's sword.



#### Reflection:

What a wonderful prophetic passage to contemplate during Lent. This is a very hopeful passage, full of optimistic language describing Israel's coming King. The prophet Zechariah is encouraging the recently returned Babylonian exiles to trust in God and worship Him. This passage gives the Israelites good reason to "Rejoice", actually to "Rejoice greatly." What great hope that a king is coming that doesn't need chariots, weapons or war horses to bring peace to the whole earth. In addition to the news that the king is coming, there is

news that people will know a new freedom, freedom from oppression and sadness. This is indeed cause for jubilation. As I read these encouraging words I am filled with hope and can imagine a wonderful peaceful future. Who wouldn't rejoice in a future with no war and God's peace throughout the whole land? The reality is that Jesus the king wasn't going to arrive for another 500 years. We don't know if the people who heard this message did any rejoicing at this news. Did they jump up and down and endlessly celebrate at the news that the promised king was going to arrive? Sometime? There of course was no date given. But there was hope.

And so here we are 2500 years later. We know that Jesus showed up, was hailed as a king, but was eventually crucified. But then He overcame the ultimate obstacle – death. We have cause to rejoice, because we know He came, and we know He's coming back. But do we? Our self-centered sinful nature makes it hard for us to rejoice that Jesus came once, let alone that He's coming again. Can we rejoice in hope?

#### **Response:**

Yes. But how do we rejoice when we are still stuck in a world of turmoil? We rejoice in what God has already done. He created a wonderful world for us to abide in. He has sent his son as a sacrifice for our sins. He has been faithful to his Word throughout history, and He has given us hope for the future. So how exactly do we rejoice? Well that depends on who you are. For some that is singing, for some painting, for some being in nature. I believe we all have our God-gifted "worship activity." For me that is dancing. When I dance, I rejoice that God made me, that I can use my heart, my mind and my body to celebrate in Him, and with Him. For a few moments that is all there is, a spiritual encounter in the presence of the Almighty. I would challenge you to figure out what your manner of rejoicing is and to do that as often as you can.

#### Prayer:

Dear Lord, as we prepare for Easter, help us to rejoice greatly in all that You are.

You give us everything including hope in a peaceful future. Forgive us when we doubt Your faithfulness. Help us to see beyond the turmoil that is life on earth and focus on Your coming kingdom. Help us to learn to rejoice greatly in Your Son, who rose from the dead to give us the ultimate ticket to rejoice forever with You in heaven. We ask that You give us the nudge we need to rejoice in You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Kathy Croughan

"They will look on me, the one they have, pierced and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child..."



#### Text: Zechariah 12:10-13

<sup>10</sup> "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for



an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. <sup>11</sup> On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. <sup>12</sup> The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, <sup>13</sup> the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, <sup>14</sup> and all the rest of the clans and their wives.

#### Reflection:

Zechariah's name means 'God remembers'. He probably returned from exile in Babylon with his grandparents in 537 BC and grew up in

Jerusalem while the Temple foundations were being laid. However, the work of rebuilding was delayed due to the complacency of the people and local opposition. In company with his fellow prophet Haggai, Zechariah sought to arouse the remnant of the returned exiles to recommence work. He is likely the same Zechariah mentioned in Matthew 23:35, "...whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar."

God revealed prophesies to Zechariah for him to write down and declare. In these verses the voice of the Messiah is clearly heard saying, "...when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced..." What does the Messiah say he will do? "I will pour out...a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy." Why do they (we) need grace and a willingness to plead for mercy? We have all "pierced" Jesus in the sense that he died for our sins too, and not just the sins of those who crucified him 2,000 years ago.

With a true understanding of God's grace and need for repentance, one cannot help but mourn Jesus' death on the Cross--he suffered and died so unjustly. Today's passage suggests that such mourning is not to be a public spectacle (misery loves company), but rather it is to be personal. However, God does not leave us in perpetual mourning. After the resurrection we forever rejoice in Jesus' victory over sin and death. Hallelujah!

#### **Response:**

God remembers. Let's be thankful that He remembers his promises and is ever faithful to keep them.

God gives. Let's be mindful that not only is His grace a gift to us, but even our pleas for mercy, as the Spirit works in our hearts to lead us to belief and repentance.

God forgives. "...you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love..." Neh. 9:17

#### **Prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, as said in your Word, all we like sheep have gone astray and You have laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Thank You that Your Son Jesus was willing to be pierced and die for us, paying the penalty for our sins. Help us always to be quick to repent. Lord, we believe; help our unbelief. Amen.

- Phil Barackman



"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone..."

# LENT Old Testament Prophecy

#### **Text: Psalm 118**

- <sup>1</sup> Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. <sup>2</sup> Let Israel say: "His love endures forever." <sup>3</sup> Let the house of Aaron say: "His love endures forever." <sup>4</sup> Let those who fear the Lord say: "His love endures forever."
- <sup>5</sup> In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free. <sup>6</sup> The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? <sup>7</sup> The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies.
- <sup>8</sup> It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. <sup>9</sup> It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.
- <sup>10</sup> All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off. <sup>11</sup> They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off. <sup>12</sup> They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off. <sup>13</sup> I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me. <sup>14</sup> The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.
- Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: "The Lord's right hand has done mighty things! 16 The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!"
   I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done. 18 The Lord has chastened me severely,
- <sup>17</sup> I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done. <sup>18</sup> The Lord has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.
- <sup>19</sup> Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. <sup>20</sup> This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter.
  - <sup>21</sup> I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.
- <sup>22</sup> The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; <sup>23</sup> the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.
  - <sup>24</sup> This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.
  - <sup>25</sup> O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success.
  - <sup>26</sup> Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you.
- <sup>27</sup> The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.
  - <sup>28</sup> You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you.
  - <sup>29</sup> Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.

#### **Reflection:**

This is not an obscure, deeply shrouded prophecy. While the original hearers of these words could not have been expected to understand how this prophecy would be fulfilled, once Jesus lived and died these words were vividly illuminated.

Jesus talked extensively about being scorned and forsaken. He foretold His own rejection and admonished His followers that theirs was inevitable as well. It's easy for Christians to focus on our now and future reward but Jesus did not mince words when he said that we would be hated because of His name. The world hated Him first and, if we faithfully follow His example, the world will hate us as well. But this hatred is not to be taken in vain, for the darkness that hates the light will be defeated.

#### **Response:**

Acts 4:8-12 - Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made

THIS IS THE DAY
THAT THE LORD
HAS MADE; WE WILL
AND BE GLAD IN IT.
Psalm 118.24

well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the 'stone which was

rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."



These words Peter spoke in response to a question by "the builders." The very same Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus just a few months earlier were questioning he and John about a man whom they had healed. What a sobering thought: who have the "builders" been throughout history? Who are the "builders" of today? It seems that it's been, and still is, religious teachers who don't acknowledge Jesus for who He truly is. And this happens subtly; some of the most dangerous lies about Christ are the ones that seem closest to the truth. As a little deviation opens the door, it's easy for full-blown deception to push its way in. If I'm honest, I have to say that I don't keep this thought at the forefront of my mind and should do a better job at looking out for signs of partial "truths" about my Savior.

#### Prayer:

Father, thank You for sending Your Son to be rejected by the builders. Thank You that You had a perfect plan to give Him the name that is above every name. Jesus, thank You for humbling Yourself and being rejected by the builders. Now, You reign. Your name is exalted; at Your name every knee

bows, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confesses that You are Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Holy Spirit, thank You for guiding us in and sealing us for salvation. Amen.

- Ian Bullard

### **MARCH 14**

"The blood will be a sign for you on the house where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."



#### **Text: Exodus 12:1-13**

<sup>1</sup> The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, <sup>2</sup> "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. <sup>3</sup> Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. <sup>4</sup> If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. <sup>5</sup> The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. <sup>6</sup> Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. <sup>7</sup> Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. <sup>8</sup> That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. <sup>9</sup> Do not eat the meat raw or cooked in water, but roast it over the fire—head, legs and inner parts. <sup>10</sup> Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. <sup>11</sup> This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover.

<sup>12</sup> "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. <sup>13</sup> The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

#### **Reflection:**

I find the parallels between this passage and the events that occurred around Jesus' crucifixion very interesting. The timing and substance of the events mirror the time when God freed the Israelites from Egypt. After 430 years of



His people living in Egypt, God instructs Aaron and Moses on how to prepare for the first Passover. The Israelites were to pick a lamb on the 10th day of the month of Nisan. A yearold lamb, without defect. Many years later, on the same day of the month, Jesus passes the weekly Sabbath at Bethany where Mary anoints him with expensive perfume. Judas complains about the waste, and Jesus tells him to leave her alone and explains: "it was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial." Four days later, on the 14th day of Nisan, the Israelites were to slaughter the lamb at sunset, at the end of the day. The next day they would leave Egypt for good and it would become the annual Sabbath, the Passover, a high religious day for the Jews. Jesus was crucified around 9AM on the same day of preparation for Passover. At noon darkness came over all the land. At 3PM Jesus would die. One of the Passover restrictions was not to break any of the lamb's bones (Exodus 12:46). According to John 19:31 the Jewish leaders didn't want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, so they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. When they approached Jesus, seeing he was already dead, they didn't break any of his bones. They must have buried Jesus before sunset as they were not allowed to work on that special day.

Coincidence? I don't think so. For the Jews the Passover was a permanent celebration of the freedom God gave them. They were relieved from their oppressors. They were finally out of bondage, not slaves anymore. For all humanity our Passover lamb is Jesus. He relieved us from our oppressors: sin and death. He set us free from bondage, slaves

no more to sin. Today, just like in the days of Moses, the blood of the Lamb is a sign for us, and when the just God sees the blood, his wrath passes over us. No destructive plague will touch us when He strikes a deserving world with death because of sin. I read this quote today: "The Lord did not check who inside the house was worthy. He checked for the blood on the doorposts. None of us is worthy. Only the blood of Jesus can cover us."

#### **Response:**

Moses gathered the elders of Israel and explained everything God had told them. Let us respond in the same way the people of God did in Exodus 12:27-28: "Then the people bowed down and worshiped. The Israelites did just what the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron." Worship and obedience are both very good and wise ways to respond to Jesus' sacrifice for us.

#### **Prayer:**

Father it is amazing to see Your salvation being rolled out throughout your Word. We constantly see Your hand of mercy and compassion as we read about the history of Your people. It culminated in the unexpected, at least for us humans, solution You had all along to the bondage to death and sin that we could have never escaped on our own. We worship You for Your holiness, justice, grace and love displayed all at once in the sacrifice of our Passover lamb, Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus the Passover Lamb

(Matthew 26:17-30)

- Samuel Dueñas



#### PART II: NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY ON JESUS' DEATH & RESURRECTION

#### **MARCH 16**

"And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things...

#### **Text: Mark 8:31-38**



- <sup>31</sup> He [Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.
- <sup>33</sup> But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."
- <sup>34</sup> Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. <sup>36</sup> What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? <sup>38</sup> If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

#### Reflection:

In this passage Jesus predicts His death. Peter then takes him aside and rebukes Him. Jesus responds by calling a crowd to Him and gives them, along with the disciples, a lecture on the need for a person to take up their cross and follow Him, even at the peril of their own life. Jesus concludes with the stern warning "If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father's glory with holy angels."

In the story immediately preceding this passage (Mark 8:27-30) Jesus asks Peter "Who do you say I am?" Peter responds "You are the Christ." Jesus then warns the disciples not to tell anyone. So why would Christ tell the disciples to tell no one about Him, and then say that if anyone would come after Him they must take up their cross and follow Him? That would surely be a public display proclaiming Christ as the Messiah.

When you look at the preceding stories in Mark, you see people being amazed at the miracles that Jesus performs. But not so much with the disciples. They challenge Jesus. When He wants to feed five thousand, they point out to Him that it just isn't practical. Later, when He is about to feed only four thousand He once again faces opposition from the twelve. In Mark 7:18 Jesus calls the disciples dull. In reading through the gospels you might get the idea that Jesus should get rid of the original twelve and start over with a new group. Thankfully He didn't, just as He did not cast aside you or me for our blundering as we claim to be His followers.

I think that although the crowds around Jesus were amazed and marveled at what he did and taught, perhaps the problem with the disciples was that their time had not yet come. We see that they still had a way to go before they would be the witnesses that He intended them to be. Jesus commanded the disciples to follow Him, and He would make them fishers of men. He did not say they were already fishers of men, but that he would make them into fishers of men. The original disciples went through a lot of faith-testing adventures until they finally arrived at the Day of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit empowered them. And by then they were ready. The Apostle Paul (not one of the original twelve, or even thirteen for that matter) says in Romans 1:16 "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is

the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Paul took up his cross and followed Jesus unashamedly, even at the peril of his own life.

#### **Response:**

I view Lent as a time of preparation. It is a time to meditate on the saving grace of God through the work of Jesus on the Cross, with the expectation of the resurrection on Easter morning. Just as Christ continually challenged the disciples in order to build their faith, let us also meet the challenges that He puts



before us to strengthen and guide us for the vocation that He has for us in proclaiming His kingdom. It is this adulterous and sinful generation in which we live that should be ashamed. As God's people we should lift high our cross unashamedly and proclaim "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

#### Prayer:

Dear Lord, teach me to lift the cross that you have given me. Give me the strength to bear its weight. When I grow weary let me remember that it is a badge of honor that proclaims my identity. When others point out the dark stain upon it let me with humility and authority respond, "That is the blood of my dear Savior who said come follow me."

Make me wholly Thine, O Lord. Amen.

- Chris Rhodes

#### MARCH 17

"...there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."



#### **Text: Acts 4:1-12**

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. <sup>2</sup> They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup> They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. <sup>4</sup> But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

<sup>5</sup> The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. <sup>7</sup> They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

<sup>8</sup> Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! <sup>9</sup> If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, <sup>10</sup> then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but

whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. <sup>11</sup>He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.'

<sup>12</sup> Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

#### Reflection:

What is the meaning of Acts 4:1-12? A good question. The temple priests asked how the apostles were able to heal the crippled man. Peter boldly proclaimed it was through Jesus Christ whom they had crucified. He had died, but He had also been resurrected. Peter and John were thrown in prison for their preaching of the Gospel. Of course, the priests would not be happy to hear about their preaching because they had Jesus put to death to stop the spread of his teachings and to squash those that were following Him. This is one of the first instances of persecution of the church. Even more, many of the Sanhedrin priests (the majority of them were Sadducees) also did not



believe in resurrection. But the apostles continued to preach the Gospel that it is only through our Savior Christ Jesus that we are saved... that Christ laid down His life to cover our sin with His blood. Glory to God that He provided us with the way to be reconciled to Him through His Son, Christ Jesus. The apostles knew this, and by their preaching many more people were coming to saving faith.

Peter spoke with authority (from God) to those in power stating the fact that they (the priests) had crucified Christ Jesus, that a prophesy had been fulfilled (the stone you builders rejected - Psalm 118:22) and that Jesus by his resurrection had become the capstone of salvation.

#### **Response -** A miracle and its consequences:

The miracle is that Christ Jesus ransomed Himself for our sins as He was crucified. He died and rose again, and we fall on our knee's and thank God for this gift of grace & mercy. The consequence of following Christ Jesus is that we

may suffer (various hardships and even persecution) as Christ suffered. But this is nothing compared to what we have already received through Christ Jesus. We see the persecution of Christians increasing worldwide. We need to stand united as the Body of Christ. We are to be like Peter and John and boldly preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world in need.

#### **Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son so that we as believers may be saved by His atoning blood, given at the cross. We don't always remember the sacrifice and the immensity of it in our day to day lives. Please help me focus on You and Your love for me and to remember what Christ has done for all of us. Help me to love You with all my heart, mind and soul. Please give me daily, the desire to live as You would have me live... to put off worldly ways and follow Christ more fully. In Jesus' name. Amen.

- Lorrie Ford

#### **MARCH 18**

"...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."



#### **Text: Romans 5:1-11**

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

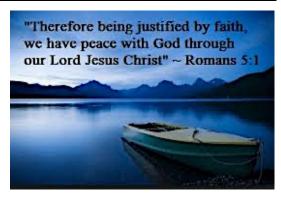
<sup>6</sup> You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

<sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! <sup>10</sup> For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! <sup>11</sup> Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

#### Reflection:

Throughout all of Romans leading up to this point Paul has made the very detailed argument that we are all guilty in God's court, we are guilty according to God's law and we are guilty to our very own conscience. But through the coming, and the death, of the Messiah we ARE justified. Paul has already made it clear in earlier chapters of Romans that our justification comes through faith and faith alone, but in chapter 5 Paul shares some of the benefits which we receive through our justification.

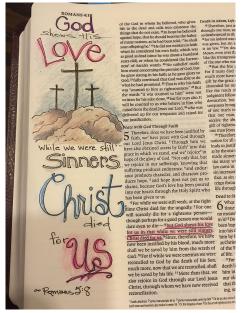
"Peace with God.... Into this Grace in which we now stand." We are justified through faith and faith alone, and that justification brings peace; ultimate peace. Does that seem too good to be true? Well, maybe



it is a bit. Paul rightly does not promise peace with the Devil, or peace with our sin, or our flesh, or our worldly desires, or the pressure put upon us from cultural standards and formalities. No, Paul does not promise us that, and therefore we are still going to struggle with hardships in this life, but what he does promise us is something greater; PEACE WITH GOD. The battle between us and God is OVER, it ended when Jesus came and sacrificed His life for all of us worthy of God's wrath. And, because of this we now live "into this Grace in which we now stand" loved by God unconditionally. Standing in God's grace allows us to realize we don't need to prove our worth and we don't need to earn our love. All of that was done for us on the Cross. This is real peace, and this is the peace that is going to allow us to stand with God and fight our battles, and oh those battles are sure to come.

But, those battles and "sufferings" are proven yet again by Paul to be GOOD. You see, God is willing to accept us in our miserable and pathetic state when we first find Him, but He isn't going to leave us that way. I'm sure we would all much prefer God to push the magic button & instantly build up our character and make us all much more just and

moral beings, but that isn't part of His plan. And I think that is in part because it wouldn't be any good or of greatest benefit to us. Instead, God uses our sufferings or our tribulations to set up what Paul seemingly describes as a chain of evolving and growing character traits. Our suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. The building of who we are and our character is yet another benefit of our justification through faith.



#### **Response:**

Peace, Grace, and Growth are all just a part of the result of Christ's timely death on the Cross, or as Paul describes "just the right time." Paul goes on to finish this passage by saying that our only real option in response to the Good News of Christ's death and resurrection is simply to boast. Not to boast in ourselves or our accomplishments, or to be proud of our great theological discoveries, but to boast in Christ, to boast of all that He has done for us on the cross. We are to boast in Christ and share His great name for because of his coming, death, and resurrection, we are JUSTIFIED. How can you "boast in Christ" today?

#### **Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, we thank You that because of what You did for us our battle with God is over. We are saved, and we can live freely in Your grace and magnificent love forever. Help us to boast warmly and boldly of You, of Your goodness and greatness. Amen!

- Justin Luevano

#### **MARCH 19**

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit..."



#### Text: 1 Peter 3:13-22

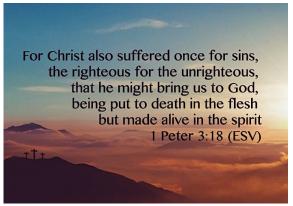
<sup>13</sup> Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." <sup>15</sup> But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, <sup>16</sup> keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. <sup>17</sup> It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. <sup>18</sup> For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison <sup>20</sup> who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, <sup>21</sup> and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

#### Reflection:

The apostle Peter exhorts the church that we will be blessed when we suffer for righteousness sake, that we should honor Christ the Lord as holy by living a life reflecting holiness by having a good conscience.

We do well to remember Christ suffered once for sins to bring us to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, a transcendent state in which He could travel in time and in a dimension not currently available to us.

The apostle Peter divulges what the risen Jesus confided to him before His ascension: He visited the souls imprisoned since the flood of Noah's day and proclaimed to them His salvation which is not limited by the confines of time.



This event of Noah and his family surviving the flood by the intervention of God brings to the apostle's mind the analogy of baptism. This represents the death of sinfulness in the water of the flood and our deliverance by Jesus' death and resurrection. This alone allows a good conscience before God.

The efficacy of Jesus' death for the sins of the uniformly unrighteous members of our race is demonstrated by His resurrection, His reappearance to His disciples and by His ascension to the right hand of God the Father. The right hand of the Father is symbolic of all authority and power over God's creation.

#### **Response:**

The apostle distinguishes suffering for good versus suffering for evil. We can take some comfort in the idea that even the inspired Christians of Peter's day, living in the shadow of the very apostles just one step removed from the epiphany of God on earth, were in need of rudimentary exhortation, even as we are.

He nevertheless holds forth for all of us the sublime goal of honoring Christ the Lord as holy. We may only do so by yielding ourselves to His Spirit in every aspect of our lives and exerting ourselves as He leads us to put away carnality and replace it with His will for us.

#### Prayer:

Lord, our Savior through all time and space, continue to lead us and convict us when we fail to follow You in favor of the temptations of the flesh, the world and the devil. Let us always be mindful of the great mercy You have shown us in subjecting Yourself to death in the flesh for our sins, so that we might have life in the present with the companionship and counsel of Your Spirit and in the life to come in Your presence. Amen.

- Jim Hemsley

#### MARCH 20

"But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God..."

# TENT

#### **Text: Hebrews 10:1-25**

- <sup>1</sup> The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. <sup>2</sup> If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. <sup>3</sup> But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, <sup>4</sup> because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.
- <sup>5</sup> Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; <sup>6</sup> with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.
  - <sup>7</sup> Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.'"
- <sup>8</sup> First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). <sup>9</sup> Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. <sup>10</sup> And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.
- <sup>11</sup> Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup> But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. <sup>13</sup> Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, <sup>14</sup> because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.
  - <sup>15</sup> The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:
    - <sup>16</sup> "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."
  - <sup>17</sup> Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."
  - <sup>18</sup> And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. <sup>25</sup> Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

#### **Reflection:**

The "law has just a shadow of good things to come" was a preview of how God's Son would change <u>everything</u>. The people of Biblical times knew full well that the "blood of bulls and goats" (the action that was necessary for humans to stay conscious of their sins), would not ever truly take their sin away. Sacrifices were offered often and were repeated, and people knew full well that the sacrifices were their only opportunity for pardon in this world.

But in verse 5, we read the word *consequently*. This word is a game changer for us. The consequence of God's plan being fulfilled in Jesus coming into the world to become our once and for all sacrifice must be at the root of our faith and understanding of the grace and freedom and goodness of God. We can rejoice that his laws are now written "on our hearts and in our minds". We can rejoice that our "sin and lawless deeds" are remembered no more.

Christ did away with the "shadow of good things coming." He became the good things Himself!



#### **Response:**

The final verses are how we respond to Christ's sacrifice, once and for all. We are able to draw near to Him with confident faith, with sincere hearts! We should dwell continually on the truth that He who promised is faithful! It's time for us to "stir up one another to love and good works"! We must make sure we meet together and encourage each other! Think of those people God has placed in your life. Who is the spirit nudging you to spur on to love? Who is someone you can meet with? Is there a person God is laying on your heart this moment that needs encouragement? Let us respond to this text with excitement and energy to celebrate Christ's sacrifice, once and for all!

#### **Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, I thank You for being my once and for all sacrifice. I thank You for Your love that changed everything. Create in me today a desire to draw near to You with confidence, and to be aware of someone in my life that I can encourage, meet with, love, and spur on towards good deeds. In your name and for your glory, Amen.

Kathy Ludwig

## MARCH 21

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."





<sup>15</sup> "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' <sup>16</sup> know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

<sup>17</sup> "If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! <sup>18</sup> If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. <sup>19</sup> For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup> I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

#### Reflection

Well, as I was thinking about these verses the other morning, and I couldn't help but remember the time I was so broken over my sin, although I didn't know it had a name; Sin that is. I had done almost everything wrong in life and

there was no way I could ever fix all the broken stuff. I still had hope, but truthfully, I was barely hanging on. I didn't want to go through it, I wanted to go around it, or avoid it completely. I had just become a born-again believer and started reading the Bible, and I was mourning. Mourning for the lost person I was all those years. I hadn't memorized any Scripture yet, but that day I heard these verses in my spirit and to this day I can say it word for word. I believe

God was making a deposit into me that day. Sometimes letting go of the old self isn't so easy even though she needs to be buried. Paul says we are justified and alive now in Christ. Justified, and that means to be pardoned and free from guilt, and now it's not even me living anymore, because it is a new life in Christ. Where would I be without the Lord and this incredible gift? Where would any of us be? What a foretaste of things to come.

Our old condition is gone, we now live in a life hid in Christ. We gain ourselves when we lose ourselves. He died a horrible death for the world, but each of us can appropriate it for herself. Love is so powerful, **this love**, **His Love!** 

#### **Prayer**

Dear Jesus, thank You for the miracle You have given to us who believe. No one can ever know the depth of Your great love, Lord. We are forever grateful for how You saved us, and we magnify Your name. Show us today Lord, ways to express our thanks. Amen.

- Cindy Duncan

When Buddha was dying, his disciples asked how they could best remember him. He told them not to bother; it was his teaching, not his person, that counted. With Jesus it is altogether different. Everything centers around him, his person. Discipleship means knowing <u>him</u>, loving <u>him</u>, believing in <u>him</u>, being committed to <u>him</u>.

David Watson, Called and Committed, p.9

I HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED

WITH CHRIST

BUT CHRIST LIVES IN ME.

Galatians 2:20



How can you live with the terrifying thought that the hurricane has become human, that the fire has become flesh, that life itself became life and walked in our midst? Christianity either means that, or it means nothing. It is either the most devastating disclosure of the deepest reality of the world, or it is a sham, a nonsense, a bit of deceitful playacting. Most of us, unable to cope with saying either of those things, condemn ourselves to live in the shallow world in between.

#### PART THREE: NEW TESTAMENT NARRATIVE OF JESUS' DEATH & RESURRECTION

#### MARCH 23

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is who comes in the name of the Lord!"



#### **Text: Matthew 21:1-11**

<sup>1</sup> As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

<sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: <sup>5</sup> "Say to the Daughter of Zion,

'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. <sup>7</sup> They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted.

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest!"

<sup>10</sup> When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

<sup>11</sup> The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

#### Reflection:

There are three perspectives in this passage.

- 1: Jesus proclaiming what will happen. As the teacher He instructs the disciples as to what is needed; a donkey and a colt for His entrance into Jerusalem. If anyone questions the acquisition, the justification is simply that "the Lord needs them" and that is sufficient. His entrance into Jerusalem is simple, humble, and peaceful.
- 2: Disciples dutifully doing as they are instructed. At this point in the relationship between these men I would suspect that obedience is natural and without question.
- 3: The crowd who has undoubtedly heard the rumors of a special arrival of "Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." This crowd cries out to Jesus in praise.

Jerusalem is "abuzz" with excitement and anticipation. As Jesus enters the city He is greeted by people spreading their cloaks and branches on the road for the colt to walk upon. He is welcomed with shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David", "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", and "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

The experience of Jesus' arrival in the city would be celebratory, an event to be a part of and one that I would have loved to have witnessed. At this time, Jesus is the only one who knows what is to happen over the coming week and the fickle allegiance of a crowd whose shouts of "blessings and hosanna" today will pivot to "crucify him" in less than one short week.

#### **Response:**

The change in Jesus' public image from Palm Sunday to Good Friday baffles me! How could the pendulum swing so far so fast? I do typically go through an internal conversation each time I read this passage. Am I a fickle Christian? Am I susceptible to the drastic shift in allegiance and obedience from one week to the next, one day to the next, one minute to the next? Surely not from week to week or day to day—I say with the confidence of Peter who rejected the notion that he would deny Jesus three times (Matthew 26: 33-35). Hmmm, well in all honesty I am convicted with a "yes"! What I would want to do is be steadfast in praising Jesus from his momentous entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday through his crucifixion, and resurrection. How can I be faithful regardless of any hardships I face? I need to hold on to the exciting, anticipatory energy of the crowd in Jerusalem while Jesus rides into the city on his humble

colt. I need to be always praising Him in his peaceful presence!

Going back to the three perspectives from the passage, maybe it would be best if our response to Jesus would be to (1) listen to his simple timely instructions, (2) dutifully obey, and (3) praise him like the Palm Sunday crowd. Our challenge is to maintain that praise and be mindful when worldly influences cause us to drift away from him.

Spend some time in prayer today, praising Jesus for his peaceful and steadfast presence in our lives regardless of where we are or how we feel.

#### **Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, scan my heart and reveal to me the ways in which my faithfulness falters. Forgive me and I ask that You restore in me a heart of praise. Amen.



Anthony van Dyck, Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, 1617

- Jennifer Oliver

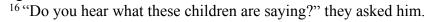
#### MARCH 24

"And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple..."

#### **Text: Matthew 21:12-17**

<sup>12</sup> Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. <sup>13</sup> "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'"

<sup>14</sup> The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. <sup>15</sup> But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.



- "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read,
- "'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?"
- <sup>17</sup> And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.



El Greco, <u>Jesus Purifies</u> the Temple, c. 1570

#### **Reflection:** A Matter of the Heart

I was blessed to grow up in a Christian home where my parents took godliness seriously. (By the grace of God my mother and father will be celebrating their 91st birthdays this spring.) Whether or not I wanted it at the time, my childhood was full of all sorts of good "churchy" stuff, and over time my parents and the Lord developed a Christian conscience within me. In my childhood, I remember some old cartoons where a main character would be struggling with a decision and a miniature angel, white robed with little white feathered wings and a gold halo overhead, would appear on one shoulder and

a tiny devil, all red with horns, pitchfork in hand and a spearhead pointed tail trailing behind him, would appear on

the other. The two opposing consciences would fight it out until one overcame the other and directed the character to do whatever good or ill was in the cartoon's script. That picture was the secular world's view of good and evil, all cartoony and unreal, but often then, and even now, I feel a similar struggle within me.

When our Savior drives the "marketplace" from out of the Temple courtyard, He knew the intent, or motive of the vendor's hearts and is removing those who are there for obviously the wrong reason, to profit from those coming,

either out of love or duty to worship God. Those coming from a long distance, hopefully took the time to prepare their hearts to enter God's gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise, just to find "business" going on where prayer and praise should be. Maybe over time, some living in Jerusalem and heading for the Temple had gotten used to the marketplace in the outer court, maybe others still had their own little devils and angels fighting it out... What is the motive of your heart? What have you gotten used to? The sinful condition of the human heart still plagues us.

Even the Apostle Paul whom some see as a "supersaint" struggled with the intent of his heart and the sinfulness he was still capable of when He said in Romans 7, "For I do not do the



Ipolito Scarsellino, Driving the Merchants from the Temple, 1585

good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep doing...for I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" The sinfulness we inherited from our earthly father Adam is in our spiritual DNA so to speak, but the Holy Spirit of our Savior works with those He redeemed to put off sin and put on godliness through His process of sanctification. This is of benefit to us because it reminds us just how much we need our Savior, because we cannot save ourselves, and how much we should want out of love, to be more like Him in everything and in every way. Sometimes I think I don't want it enough...

When I started typing this on January 29th, the morning after our elder's session meeting, I was well rested for a change, and began to formulate in my mind what I wanted to put on the page while I was still laying in bed, so when I sat at my computer the first three paragraphs pretty much flew onto the page without much additional thought. But when I stopped to read it out loud, as is my custom, I broke into tears, knowing that I, that we, all struggle like every Christian before us, even Paul. I want my heart, my inner being to be Christ's, and I want my outer members to reflect Christ in me the hope of glory, but that devil and angel keep fighting on my shoulders, so tearfully, by the Spirit's direction, I turned to First John, chapter three, verse twenty, and read the following: "...for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases Him. And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He has commanded us."

So then, what is to be the intent of my, of our, hearts? What is my, our, motive for anything, for everything? Believing in Jesus Christ and loving like Jesus Christ by the power of His Holy Spirit! In this we can have confidence, even when the intent of our heart falters, because our Jesus is The One and Only RISEN Jesus!

#### **Response:**

At Stone Valley Memory Care on Sunday afternoons, Janet and I sing this song to the residents often:

*In all the world around me, I see his loving care,* 

and though my heart grows weary, I never will despair;

I know that He is leading through all the stormy blast,

the day of His appearing will come at last.

He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today. He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives! He lives, salvation to impart. You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!"

Little angel, little devil, get off my shoulder! You have no sway over me, My Savior is alive and He holds my heart, not you! He is my God, The Almighty God, and GOD ALWAYS WINS!

#### **Prayer:**

Father God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, thank You for loving Your creation so much! Thank You for sending salvation through Jesus and sanctification through The Holy Spirit. Give me the confidence to love You and live for You every day. When my heart is troubled, remind me that You are greater than my heart. May Your godliness through Your Holy Spirit direct the matters of my heart in all things, all the time. In Jesus Name and for His sake, I pray, Amen.

- Gerry Dunlap

# MARCH 25

"She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial."



# **Text: Mark 14:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. <sup>2</sup> "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot."

<sup>3</sup> While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

<sup>4</sup> Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? <sup>5</sup> It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

<sup>6</sup> "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. <sup>9</sup> I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

<sup>10</sup> Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. <sup>11</sup> They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

#### Reflection:

In this passage, my attention immediately gravitates to the woman who pours the perfume on Jesus' feet. This woman is Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. We've seen her in other Bible stories - for example, when Jesus visited the house of Mary and Martha, and Jesus commended Mary for choosing to sit at His feet and pay attention to Him rather than being distracted and anxious because of busy work like her sister Martha (see Luke 10). In Mark 14, Mary once again chose to take an action that brought her close to Jesus, even as critics suggested that this was a poor choice, and once again Jesus commended Mary's choice.

Mary poured out her box of perfume as an act of love and honor to Jesus. This was a sacrificial act on her part, as the perfume was expensive - estimated to be worth about a year's salary! Once the box was opened, it couldn't be



closed again; she made the choice to give away the whole thing. By anointing Jesus with this perfume of great value, Mary showed her single-minded devotion to her Lord. Her selfless act makes me think of the famous hymn "Take My Life and Let it Be," specifically the sixth verse:

Take my love; my Lord, I pour, At Thy feet its treasure-store. Take myself, and I will be, Ever, only, all for Thee, Ever, only, all for Thee. As she poured out the perfume box, she was immediately criticized for not selling the perfume and giving the proceeds to the poor. The criticism seems worth considering on its face - both Jesus and the Old Testament writers frequently instruct us to help the poor. Couldn't Mary have helped feed many people with an item that valuable, rather than having a nice (but fleeting) moment with one person?

Mary understood the problematic assumptions in this question that are so easy to miss: First, Jesus was not just a person - He was (and is) the Son of God. Second, this was not just a "nice" moment - this was a rare and beautiful chance to glorify God by anointing Him for his death, and it was the most important thing she could be doing with her time and resources. Third, none of us can be of any real help to others, or do any real kingdom work, if we are not first and foremost prioritizing our relationship with God and then acting from the outflow of that relationship. (It's also worth mentioning that the criticizer-in-chief here, Judas Iscariot, wasn't really worried about the poor: He was worried about getting money for himself, as we see later in this same chapter. Just as Jesus could see the devotion

in Mary's heart, He could see the hypocrisy in Judas' heart.) We see that Jesus was pleased with the choice Mary made in pouring out the perfume to anoint Him because Jesus said, "She has done a beautiful thing for me...She has done what she could." Jesus gave approval to Mary as others disapproved, and Jesus' opinion was the only one that mattered.

# **Response:**

This passage shows us some things Jesus valued in Mary's act: it was costly, it was done with whole-hearted devotion, and while it didn't produce the kind of numbers and outcomes that are impressive to the world, it achieved the much more important result of glorifying God. We



should evaluate whether our acts of faith meet these same criteria. Do they cost us anything, in terms of our time and resources? Are they done with whole-hearted devotion? Do they value glorifying God over impressing people?

#### Prayer

Lord, please help me to care much more about serving and glorifying You and much less about pleasing and impressing the world. Please grow in me a heart of love, generosity, humility, and whole-hearted prioritization of You.

- Erin Ching

# MARCH 26

"And he said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."



# **Text: Mark 14:12-26**

<sup>12</sup> On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

<sup>13</sup> So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. <sup>14</sup> Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' <sup>15</sup> He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

<sup>16</sup> The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

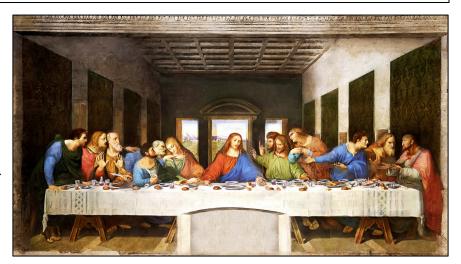
- <sup>17</sup> When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. <sup>18</sup> While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me."
  - <sup>19</sup> They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?"
  - <sup>20</sup> "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. <sup>21</sup> The Son of Man will

go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

- <sup>22</sup> While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."
  - <sup>23</sup> Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.
- <sup>24</sup> "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. <sup>25</sup> "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."
  - <sup>26</sup> When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

#### **Reflection:**

Iesus sharing the Passover meal with his disciples is a memorable scene, inspiring the creation of many priceless works of art. Through the ages the cup known as the "holy grail" has been embellished with mythical properties (just ask Indiana Jones). But the spiritual reality of this scene transcends all of the artistic interpretations. This scene harks back to a key moment of the Original Testament and points ahead to the greatest moment of the New Testament. Jesus' words transform an ancient annual Jewish ritual meal into a regular and sacred part of Christian worship. From this and its counterpart passages in every Gospel we trace our tradition of the Sacrament of Communion.



Leonardo da Vinci, The Last Supper, 1495

The concept of communion predates creation. The eternal preexistent Godhead is Communion itself – three persons in such complete communion that they are one. Our God is a relational God. From the beginning, God created humankind to be His companions. He communed regularly with His children, walking with Adam and Eve daily... until they walked away from Him. The rest of Biblical history reveals God's faithful, and man's faltering, efforts to reestablish that sweet communion. Jesus came to restore that communion and His desire is for each believer to become as completely united with Him as He is with the Father.

This unity is beautifully depicted in Jesus' observance of the Passover with his closest friends. The scene opens with the mundane. For generations, observant Jews carefully prepared for the Passover meal each year, so the disciples ask Jesus for instructions to carry out a familiar task. Jesus' response reveals that He has already taken care of the details. The disciples need only to follow his instructions.

The meal itself is imbued with tradition. The four cups of the Passover meal symbolize different aspects of the history of God's relationship with His people. The cup taken after the blessing of the bread is the cup of redemption, commemorating the exodus of the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt. The Scripture connected with this cup is God's promise in Exodus 6:6, "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm."

God's everlasting loving arms stretch through all of Biblical history. His arms ushered the errant first couple from the garden, gently clothing them for their new life. He strengthened Moses to stretch out his arms as God split the sea to allow passage of the Israelites into life after slavery. Jesus' arms stretch out to offer the bread and wine to his disciples. And a few hours later, these same loving arms will be stretched out in painful agony to win salvation for our new lives in Christ.

The disciples shared a traditional meal commemorating a historic moment of God's redemption of His people from physical slavery. But what happened during that meal far transcends the familiar ritual. The amazing fact is that the God of redemption celebrated in the Passover is physically present presiding over this particular Passover meal. Jesus' words turn the cup of redemption into the New Covenant in His blood. His Passion of the next few hours will transform that meal into a Sacrament commemorating God's redemption for us from spiritual slavery and death.

#### Response:

As we prepare during Lent to celebrate the amazing life-giving resurrection of the Christ, may we pause to reflect on the continuity of Scripture. Our God knows we are errant, so He has given us the Scriptures and established rituals



Salvador Dali, The Last Supper, 1955

to remind us of His love and mercy and His desire for communion with us. In this passage we see the Creator of the universe, God Incarnate, celebrating with His disciples the Passover feast He commanded to be observed through the generations, and imparting to them a new way of understanding the significance of redemption. When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we not only declare His death and resurrection, but we are also reminded that we have the privilege of being in communion with Him not only in the Sacrament, but in every moment of our lives.

# Prayer:

Loving Heavenly Father, during these days of preparation as I revisit the story of Your Passion and Resurrection, deliver me from the complacency of the familiar. Fill me again with awe at the breadth of the ageless story of Your loving patience with Your wayward

children. Grant me a heart of gratitude for Your Incarnation, for Your desire for communion with me, and most of all, for the gift of my salvation. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

# **MARH 27**

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."



# **Text: Luke 22:39-46**

<sup>39</sup> Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. <sup>40</sup> On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." <sup>41</sup> He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, <sup>42</sup> "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." <sup>43</sup> An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. <sup>44</sup> And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

<sup>45</sup> When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. <sup>46</sup> "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

#### Reflection:

God is faithful and will not let us be tempted beyond our ability (1 Cor 10:13). Jesus instructs his disciples to "Pray that you may not enter into temptation" and then withdraws in prayer. Jesus' prayer starts like many of my prayers: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." It is a comfort to me that Jesus asks our Father to change something in his path. If there is a difficulty in my life, it is good to ask God to remove the difficulty. But am I prepared to accept God's answer and continue my prayer like Jesus did: "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done"?

# **Response:**

Should I get a little less sleep to spend a little more time in prayer? Should I let my colleagues know I am a Christian? Avoid a conversation for God's sake? Share my faith? Go on a mission? Serve my neighbors?



The Garden of Gethsemane Today

When I turn to God and rely on his strength, I can answer "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.".

#### **Praver:**

Lord Jesus, thank You for doing Your Father's will. It was our salvation. All glory and honor be to You, forever and ever. Amen.

- Dave Berry

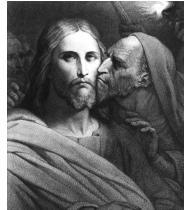
"Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?"

# Text: Luke 22:47-53

LENT

<sup>47</sup> While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, <sup>48</sup> but Jesus asked him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of

Man with a kiss?"



Ary Scheffer, Kiss of Judas, 1869

- <sup>49</sup> When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" <sup>50</sup> And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear.
- <sup>51</sup> But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him.
- <sup>52</sup> Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? <sup>53</sup> Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns."

# **Reflection:** A Matter of the Heart (part 2)

This January at the Worship Ministry Team meeting, Pastor Jay handed around the Lenten devotional sign-up sheet and I chose two, because there are 40 of them and sometimes devotional writers can be hard to find. (I prefer reading yours more than

writing mine, and all the other devotionals have truly blessed me in the past!) The two I selected were because of their difficulty. I didn't want to write about religious people defiling the temple or Judas betraying Jesus because my sinful self related much too closely to them both. So I knew I had to, for my own growth in grace, choose these episodes in the story of Jesus' Passion. Baring your soul to others is part of discipleship, and it is difficult, but I never imagined I would write what I did in part one of my devotional, but it spilled out and I realized it would be wrong to take it back, to hide it, so like it or not, it's written. I am anything but "holier than thou" and if I appear that way to some, I apologize. There are some whose feet are made of clay. Sometimes I think mine are made of sand. Unfortunately, I really relate to Judas. Some say Judas was trying to save Jesus from himself, not realizing it would end in His death. Some believe that Judas wanted to overturn the Roman government in Jerusalem, and Jesus was not being radical enough to suit his timeline. Does it matter? Look deep into your heart. What matters there?

Whatever was at the heart of Judas' actions, his heart was not ultimately with Jesus, or he would have understood that Jesus Christ is the pure and holy definition of radical. I can type it on the page, I can say it out loud, but to my shame, I most often fail radically to follow Jesus. The word radical is based on the Latin word *radix* which means *root*. Jesus came to rescue us from the root of our sin problem and connect us to the root of His grace solution, so that we might be rooted in Him in a radical relationship of holy love. My heart at it's root, was made for betrothal to Jesus, but I act out betrayal more often than not, because I am afraid of being rooted to The Radical Savior in His most holy

radical way. Are my motives false? Am I fooling myself? Am I afraid? Jesus can heal the motives of the heart, just as He healed the High Priest's servant's ear, yet with everlasting effect.

You see, at the root of it all, we were **not** made for betrayal but betrothal. A Christian's primary purpose in this life is to glorify and enjoy God forever. To what end? All true believers are the Bride of Christ, and He will have them all. Christ will not lose one. We will slip, fall, sin and betray Him in this life, but He will have His perfect and complete Bride, because He perfects and He completes all His chosen ones with His perfect salvation. And He sanctifies them through His Holy Spirit over the course of their lives, so the righteousness He gives them shines through their very lives. And as His Bride, they will shine at His Glorious Banquet Table in heaven as well.



Maybe today you feel like you have betrayed Jesus. The Good Lord knows I have many times. There is nothing you can do but fall before His Throne of Grace, confess your sin and ask forgiveness, trusting in Him and living for Him out of a love rooted in His grace. Many years ago, I wrote a song called "He Reached His Hand Out." It included these two verses:

Peter's faith was little, when he walked upon the water, and he saw the storm around him.

Sounds an awful lot like you and me. Jesus reached His hand out. Peter stood beside Him on the sea.

Jesus is my Savior and He speaks to me of heaven, and I know He loves me greatly,

'Cause He gave His life that I might be set free. He reached His hand out, and set my spirit free."

The Redeemed have been set free from the law of sin and death, in order to be rooted to Jesus' Law of Love. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." - Matthew 22:37-40

# **Response:**

Not only are the Law and the Prophets *rooted to* Christ's Law of Love, but the redeemed are rooted to Him as well. For Jesus IS the Law of Love and He offers salvation and forgiveness in all matters of the heart and the soul. Turn everything over to Him—Your heart, your soul, your motives, your time, your talent, your treasure, your worries... your very life.

# **Prayer:**

Most Holy Radical Jesus, root Your heart to my heart and radically change me. May the matters of my heart and life be completely intertwined with Your purposes and good pleasure. Give me the strength, courage and purpose to glorify and enjoy You and become more completely rooted in You and Your love. Thank You for saving me and forgiving me when I betray You. In the Name of The Father, and The Son and The Holy Spirit I pray, Amen.

- Gerry Dunlap

# MARCH 30

"And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.'"



#### **Text: Luke 22:54-62**

<sup>54</sup> Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. <sup>55</sup> But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. <sup>56</sup> A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."

- <sup>57</sup> But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.
- <sup>58</sup> A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."
- "Man, I am not!" Peter replied.
- <sup>59</sup> About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."
- <sup>60</sup> Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed.

61 The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times."

<sup>62</sup> And he went outside and wept bitterly.



## **Reflection:**

At the Last Supper with His disciples, Jesus tells Simon Peter that He has prayed for him that his faith might not fail, that in time he would be the one to strengthen his brothers.

Peter's response?

"Lord, I am ready to go with You to prison and to death,." to which Jesus answered "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know Me."

In my NIV translation of today's reading the heading says "Peter Disowns Jesus." Is disowns too harsh a word? As I wondered what words I might apply to Peter in this late afternoon/early evening scene, FEARFUL, WEAK, SCARED, DISLOYAL are a few that came to mind. Jesus has been arrested, taken to the home of the high priest, and Peter follows at a distance. We find him sitting with others around a warming fire. Within a very short period of time Peter does deny being associated with Jesus, even knowing Him, those three times, and that barnyard alarm clock goes off - and Peter remembers - and he weeps bitterly.

# **Response:**

Is disown too harsh a word? The Bible uses it in v. 61, so I believe it should be there. Therein lies the reason Peter wept so bitterly. He realizes he has separated himself from Jesus. And that is how I can put myself in Peter's shoes, when at times - either in thought, word or deed - I separate myself from my Lord and how He wants me to live my life for His honor and His glory. As I thought and thought about a word to describe myself while writing this piece for our Lenten devotional, I've come up with "weak", and with that thought came some of the words of an old traditional faith song—"Just a Closer Walk with Thee"...

I am weak but Thou art strong; Jesus, keep me from all wrong I'll be satisfied as long as I walk, let me walk close to Thee.

# Prayer:

Gracious Lord, I am so thankful that You allow me to walk with You through this life with all its ups and downs, for You give me the strength for each new day. Thank You for Peter, for it is through his story that we learn You will always be there to strengthen and lift us up again, making us truly redeemed and forgiven. Amen.

- Joyce Miers

# MARCH 31

"Is that how you answer the high priest?"

# **Text: John 18:19-24**

<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.

<sup>20</sup> "I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. <sup>21</sup> Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they

know what I said."

<sup>22</sup> When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded.

<sup>23</sup> "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" <sup>24</sup> Then Annas sent him, still bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.



The charges against Jesus included declaring Himself the Messiah and deluding people about it. In questioning Jesus about his disciples and doctrine, Annas expected He would claim that dignity in their presence. Without further trouble they would have condemned Jesus on His own confession. But to pressure a prisoner to confess what might condemn Him to death was an unjust procedure. Indeed, the entire proceeding was unjust, being held in secret before dawn. Jesus complained with reason and requested they find proof by witnesses. He also pointed out how very public all of his teaching was. Throughout his ministry He sought to preach from synagogues and even the temple when the opportunity presented itself... NOT in secret as this hearing was. By this inference He turned the tables on Annas and was struck for his perceived impudence. John pointedly mentions again that Jesus was still bound to show the inhumanity of the rebuke.

Jesus' message was the same in private as it was in public. His reply to Annas regarding His teaching echoed God's words in the Book of Isaiah:



Lucas van Leydan, <u>Christ Before</u> Annas the High Priest, 1521

I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness I did not say to the offspring of Jacob 'Seek me in vain.' I the Lord speak the truth, I declare what is right. (45:19)

Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there." And now the Lord God has sent me, and his Spirit. (48:16)

We have a library of books – a veritable tome of knowledge...<u>from God</u> speaking Truth, speaking love, teaching us

how to live a good life now and through eternity. Some of what He says is mysterious... but it's not a secret! God has been speaking to us all throughout history... directly (Adam, Eve, Abraham and Moses), through prophets (such as Isaiah) here in the New Testament through Jesus (His Son)... and in our hearts.

# **Response:**

As you read the Bible, note the various ways in which God speaks to us. Can you hear Him? Listen with your heart. Though it may be a whisper, it's not a secret. In hindsight, I can look back through my life and discern where God's Holy Spirit was moving in my life. I bet you can too!

The Bible is the most printed book in the world. We worship in a building open to the public. God's message is not hidden. Men may operate in secret – usually when they know they are in the wrong – but God is light and good and His message is not a secret reserved for a select few. It is for me... and you... your neighbors... and the world.

# **Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, I am grateful to be living in a country where I can worship You in the open. Thank You for Your continued interaction with us throughout our lives. Help us to hear You when You speak, Lord, so that we may honor You and respond to You, building a relationship to last throughout eternity. Please continue to reveal Yourself to us through the Bible and in our hearts. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

- Susie Rummens



Gerard van Honthorst, <u>Christ</u> Before the High Priest, 1617

# **APRIL 1**

"Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse..."



#### **Text: Matthew 27:1-10**

- <sup>1</sup> Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. <sup>2</sup> They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.
- <sup>3</sup> When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. <sup>4</sup> "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."
  - "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."
  - <sup>5</sup> So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.
- <sup>6</sup> The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." <sup>7</sup> So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. <sup>8</sup> That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. <sup>9</sup> Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel, <sup>10</sup> and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

# Reflection:

Today's verses seem to have four separate subplots: Politics, Pride, Prophecy, and Procedure. Let's look at Judas and see if we recognize any of him in us...?

Judas, Judas... How I'm so like you – let me count the ways. Methinks self-righteous vindication, aka Pride, is the cloak he wore right up until the end; only to find that the sudden realization of his error had come too late. His attempt to swallow or spit out the Pride stuck in his throat failed as he watched his friend be led off to his fate at The Cross. Sadly, his appointment with the Holy Spirit was still weeks off, unbeknownst to him! All was lost. Better to end his agony with death – the pain was unbearable! Huh!?

Although selected by Jesus (...for such a time as this...), Judas was the only disciple not from Galilee – he was from Judea. He was also given the financial "oversight" duties of the group. This "oversight" may have been the issue which steered him away: greed and a self-righteousness which led him to anger when they didn't follow or live up to his "rules" for how the money should be spent. Perhaps the more they diverged from his sense of "right-spending," the more his self-righteousness grew. They never spent the money the way they should, and they certainly didn't



- Dan Carne

save as much money as they could have – not to mention this goody-two-shoes guy who had no financial sense at all! How was he ever going to get them to see things his way!?

Fortunately for Judas, the Jews were having their own problems with Jesus. When he had finally had enough and couldn't take it anymore, it looked like handing him over to them would maybe teach them all a lesson. Would he have done the same thing if he knew "him" as "Him"? Would he have done the same thing if "CRUCIFY HIM!" was already the chant of the crowds...? Self-righteous vindication – that point at which he could no longer just argue and debate with himself – made its demand: HE HAD TO ACT!... and presented its version of reality: the consequences would prove him correct.

# **Response:**

So, if all y'all would only agree with me... (Judas, Judas, Judas...)
What would it mean for us to shift our objective and ACT in concert with a different phrase:

So, if we all would only agree with lesus...

# **Prayer:**

Our Father, how much I need Your Holy Spirit to temper my self-righteous assumptions about life and the way things ought to be. Please show me that even when/if I'm right that it will come out wrong if Your Spirit is not tempering my words, attitude, and outlook. And help me realize that being right is maybe the wrong thing to champion if "losing the war" is the probable result. May my goal be for people to see Jesus in me. I pray in the name of Your Son, who went to the Cross humble and quiet... for me! Amen.


Judas' betrayal of Jesus was taken by others to be the final word by which the fate of Judas was sealed, and with which the story of his life was written. But through Jesus Christ we know that no sin can be the final word in our life, nor can death as the consequence of sin be the final word. By his own death and resurrection, Christ has destroyed the power of death to seal our fate. Christ is the final word for all humanity. No death can overturn that word, even death that is self-inflicted.

- Ray Anderson, <u>The Gospel According to Judas</u>, p.25

"Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?'"

# LENT

# **Text: John 18:28-40**

<sup>28</sup> Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. <sup>29</sup> So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

<sup>30</sup> "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you."

<sup>31</sup> Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."

"But we have no right to execute anyone," the Jews objected. <sup>32</sup> This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled.

<sup>33</sup> Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

<sup>34</sup> "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

<sup>35</sup> "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

<sup>36</sup> Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

<sup>37</sup> "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

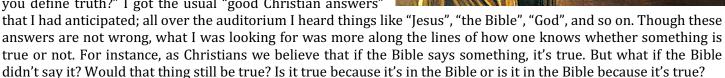
Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

<sup>38</sup> "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. <sup>39</sup> But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?"

<sup>40</sup> They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.

# Reflection:

Years ago, while speaking to a group of Jr. High and High School students at a private Christian school, I asked, "How do you define truth?" I got the usual "good Christian answers"



What about addressing the question from an experiential standpoint? There has been a dramatic shift in how people from different generations understand truth. In past generations, people generally believed that if something was true, and you applied that thing in your life, it would work. More recently, though, people believe that if something seems to work when it's applied, then it's true. The advent of the term "relativism" in the mid-to-late 19th century and, even more recently, phrases like "truth is relative" reflect an ever-more-popular belief that to say something is absolutely true is not only a fallacy but is narrow-minded and malicious.

The reality, though, is that nobody lives this way; it's impossible to be completely consistent with a worldview that says truth doesn't exist. From the way that we schedule and conduct our daily lives, to our communication, to how we plan for the future, even the greatest truth skeptic is shown to be a practical believer.

The Bible teaches, and Jesus is the embodiment of, absolute truth. The strength and immovability of "Capital 'T' Truth" makes it the ideal foundation to build on. I think that at the root of relativism, and the question behind Pilate's question, is not only a desire to live apart from what is perceived as others' arbitrary standards but also a discouragement and fatigue that comes from trying to reside on an ever-changing, shifting foundation.

#### Response:

As we see Pilate, deeply conflicted, looking out on the crowds as Jesus stands before him on trial, we can sympathize with him on some level. We can see ourselves in Pilate; we know what it is like to be surrounded—pressed on every side by conflicting pressures to question even our most deeply-held beliefs. We are all driven to doubt and to do



Jesus, Pilate & Barabbas, from The Passion of the Christ

things that are not consistent with what we believe to be true. Where do you feel pressured today? Who can help you know and stand in the Truth?

# Prayer:

Father, thank You for the Truth. Thank You that You have given us the ability to see glimpses of Truth. Though we look through marred lenses, You make our vision ever-clearer. Jesus, thank You for coming to earth as the Truth; the Word made flesh. Thank You for humbling Yourself and confronting our broken world in such an unmistakable way. Holy Spirit, thank You for being our Guide, leading us into all Truth. Lead us and empower us to stand for Truth in all our ways.

- Ian Bullard

A church which abandons the truth abandons itself. - Hans Küng

# **APRIL 3**

"His blood be on us and on our children!"

#### **Text: Matthew 27:15-26**



- <sup>15</sup> Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. <sup>16</sup> At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. <sup>17</sup> So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" <sup>18</sup> For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.
- <sup>19</sup> While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."
  - <sup>20</sup> But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.
  - <sup>21</sup> "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.
  - "Barabbas," they answered.
  - <sup>22</sup> "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

<sup>23</sup> "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

- <sup>24</sup> When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"
  - <sup>25</sup> All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"
  - <sup>26</sup> Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

#### **Reflection:**

A claim and a name. These are the things that leap out at me from this episode in the story of Jesus Passion—the final hours of His life in the flesh. It's a corporate claim and a personal name. It's a claim and a name, each of which embodies irony as extreme as we will ever find.

The claim is made at the end of this passage, and it is made by the people who cry out "His blood be on us and on our children." Pilate, who proves to be a state-sanctioned coward, wants to let this "Jesus who is called Christ" go, but the people will have none of it. To encourage Pilate to do what they want with Jesus, they threaten to tell the Emperor on him ("If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar!" – see John 19:12) and they make their claim—perhaps the most hollow claim ever uttered by human lips: They claim that they can bear the weight of responsibility for the death of this Jesus.

The people believe they can bear this weight because they think they are right. The religious leaders have told them so. Their natural instincts for rash judgment tell them so. And Jesus' refusal to defend Himself with shaking jaws of earth and thundering fire from the sky tells them so. And never have people been more wrong.

To call this claim foolish isn't enough. These people are embracing evil as dark and destructive as evil can be. Killing the Almighty Himself? Snuffing out the Light of the World? Calling Truth Incarnate a Lie and making it stick by silencing the One from whom all sound originates? Murdering the Author of All Life? The weight of Jesus' murder will crush them utterly. They are asking for the weight of the universe to be dropped upon them. And they cry out: "We can bear it!" They cannot. But still they made the claim.

And then something happened.

Jesus filled their most-hollow claim with His most-holy love.

And by His miracle, gracious power, the stupidest and most evil thing ever uttered becomes the smartest and best thing ever said: "His blood be on us and on our children." And this occurs even though the people themselves still mean it for evil and have no idea how well their words express the deeper wisdom and gracious will of the God of Love who stands before them.

How are these people going to be saved from their sin, including and especially the sin of what they are doing and claiming right then? By the blood of Jesus! They will be saved, they and their children's children's children, by the sacrifice of Jesus which they are insisting on, against Him, for all the wrong reasons but which He is going to make, for them, for all the right reasons. He is about to stand under the weight of a broken universe inhabited by no people but sinful people. And He is about to let this weight crush Him... for the very people who are screaming for His death... and claiming they can bear the weight: His blood be on us! They are cursing themselves by all their power with the ultimate curse. But, praise God!, His power is greater.

His blood be on us! They are cursing themselves by all their power with the ultimate curse, but if their words are true by the greater power of God they will be



Rembrandt van Rijn, Pilate Washes His Hands, 1660

blessed with the ultimate blessing. They will be covered by His blood. They will escape the curse of God's rightful wrath against their sin. They will be called, justified, glorified... Their atrocious corporate claim of innocence as they commit history's greatest crime is overshadowed by God's wondrous claim of saving sovereign grace over their lives... His blood be on us and on our children!

And now let's get personal. Let's turn our attention to the name.

The name is *Barabbas*. He is the vile criminal whose violent behavior and bent character were well known to the crowd of people, who stands next to Jesus and who is judged more deserving of a pardon than the wholly good and innocent Son of God. He struts away free as Jesus is thrust headlong toward the murderous terror of the Cross. As Jesus is nailed to His chosen instrument of torture and death for anti-social behaviors and religious blasphemies He neither did nor would ever even consider doing, *Barabbas* escapes the just penalty for crimes he had done and, given the opportunity, would likely repeat. And he does so in a way he could never have foreseen. And do you know what the name *Barabbas* literally means? *Bar* means "son," and *Abba* means "father." *Barabbas* means "the son of a father."

It is the epitome of a generic name in a patriarchal culture. He is "child of a parent." It's a name that could fit anybody. By name he could be "anybody." And now the import of his name begins to materialize before our eyes. *Barabbas* is "any one." He is "every man." The place he occupies next to Jesus is my place. And it is your place.

Standing by Jesus, I am the vile criminal James Hull, also called Pastor Jay. My bent character and my violent opposition to the Holy, Holy, Holy God of all goodness and all beauty and all righteousness is well known in the courts of heaven. And then something happens, something which I could never have foreseen. What happens is the Jesus-Barabbas exchange. It is entirely and absolutely unfair. Jesus takes my place. And I take His. He goes to torture and death for me. And I go to eternal life in Him. He goes to the Cross wrapped in the horrors of my sin. And I am thrust toward the white-hot holiness of God wrapped in the wonder of His love to enjoy this heat that would have turned my sinful self to ash in a moment but which now will be the most luxurious warmth I have ever felt and in which I will want nothing more than to stay. And stay I will.

And as I—another *Barabbas*—turn from this exchange and realize my freedom, God help me not to strut. And do not let me trudge. And keep me from wandering thoughtlessly or marching to the beat of worldly drums. But help me to dance, with leaping, joyful feet and arms outstretched in praise to the One who dies to save and rises to life and glory made greater by its sharing.

#### **Response:**

Read today's passage again and out loud. Only this time whenever you come to words referring to the crowd ("the crowd" or "they") substitute the name of someone you remember to have been particularly cruel to you, someone who has betrayed you or offended you. Then ask yourself how the "blood of Jesus" upon that person – whether or not they understand His saving grace – might change how you see them and relate to them.

Then read out loud again and wherever you see the name "Barabbas" substitute your own name.

# **Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for Your amazing act of love when You put Yourself in my place and put me in Yours. Help me to know myself to be covered by Your blood and so to rest in this amazing exchange made real because of Your love. Help me to live for Your glory out of the new identity, the new strength and the new joy You have given me by your grace.

- Jay Hull

# **APRIL 4**

"The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.'"

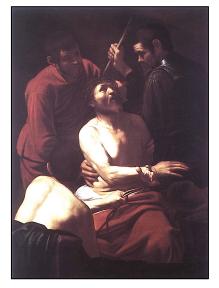


# Text: John 19:1-16

- <sup>1</sup> Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. <sup>2</sup> The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe <sup>3</sup> and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face.
- <sup>4</sup>Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." <sup>5</sup> When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"
  - <sup>6</sup> As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify!"
  - But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him."
- <sup>7</sup> The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."
- <sup>8</sup> When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, <sup>9</sup> and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. <sup>10</sup> "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"
- <sup>11</sup> Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."
- <sup>12</sup> From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

<sup>13</sup> When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). <sup>14</sup> It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour.

- "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews.
- <sup>15</sup> But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"
- "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked.
- "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered.
- <sup>16</sup> Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.



Caravaggio, <u>The Crowning</u> of Thorns, 1603

# **Reflection:**

Pilate had Jesus flogged, hoping to satisfy the Jewish leaders that it was punishment enough and crucifixion was unnecessary. The ploy did not work, but Pilate (unwittingly) and Jesus (willingly) fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 50:6 - "I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting." Saying, "Behold the man," Pilate hoped the crowd would feel sorry for Jesus when they saw him bloody, beaten and wearing a crown of thorns. That didn't work either; they still hollered "CRUCIFY!" Then the leaders said Jesus ought to die because He claimed to be the Son of God. Pilate became afraid and asked Jesus where he was from. Jesus didn't answer, fulfilling Isaiah 53:7, "He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not his mouth." Pilate tried again to release Jesus, until the Jews accused Jesus of treason for claiming to be a king, and said, "We have no king but Caesar." Oh really? These Jewish leaders who had memorized the Psalms could not remember Psalm 29:10 - "The Lord sat enthroned at the flood, and the Lord sits as King forever" or 47:2 - "For the Lord Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth" or 95:3 - "The Lord is the great God, and the great King above all gods"? Pilate did not have the strength of character to do the right thing when he

found himself between a rock and a hard place, and he condemned a man he knew to be innocent to death. The Jewish leaders rejected their Messiah out of jealousy and to maintain their status and favor with the Roman government. Jesus was correct in saying that theirs was the greater sin.

# **Response:**

So how did that work out for them? Pilate lost his job and faded into obscurity. Whatever else he might have done, all he is remembered for is unjustly condemning Jesus to death. Some legacy! The Jewish leaders got Caesar as their king all right - in AD 70 Caesar's General, Titus, destroyed and burned Jerusalem, including the temple where not one stone was left upon another. They too were out of a job. No more sacrifices, no more temple worship, no more prestige.

What can we take away from all this? From Pilate - <u>integrity matters</u>. Even as a pagan, Pilate knew what was right and didn't do it. Cultivate character. Doing the right thing, regardless of the cost will always be better in the end. From the Jewish leaders - <u>obedience</u>. They knew God's Word better than anybody, but knowing it wasn't enough. They needed to obey it, and so do we. Finally, from Jesus - <u>sacrifice</u>. He could have fought, resisted, argued, or cursed, but He didn't. He *gave* his life with all that suffering because He loved *us*. Whom do we love? What do we give? *All* for Jesus? To paraphrase a local lawyer, how much is your freedom in Christ worth?



Jan Sanders van Hemessen, The Mocking of Christ, 1544

## **Praver:**

Lord Jesus, thank You for your perfect example. Help us to model Your integrity and do what is right. May we obey You the way You obeyed your Father. We cannot begin to love the way You loved us, but thanks to the gift of Your Holy Spirit we can inch closer and closer. Make us like You, Lord, make us like You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Dianne Billharz

"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

# **Text: Matthew 27:27-44**



<sup>27</sup> Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. <sup>28</sup> They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, <sup>29</sup> and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. <sup>30</sup> They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. <sup>31</sup> After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

<sup>32</sup> As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. <sup>33</sup> They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). <sup>34</sup> There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. <sup>35</sup> When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. <sup>36</sup> And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. <sup>37</sup> Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews. <sup>38</sup> Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>39</sup> Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup> and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

<sup>41</sup> In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. <sup>42</sup> "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. <sup>43</sup> He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.' " <sup>44</sup> In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

# Leather Thongs Wooden Handle Leather Fiece Lead Fiece Lead Spike Roman Scourge (Flagrum)

# **Reflection:**

Everybody mocks Jesus. In these scenes from Jesus' passion story, the story of His suffering and death and..., everybody makes

Him the punch-line of their cruel, cruel jokes. Have you heard the one about the Jew who pretended to be King?

The hardened, killing-machine Roman soldiers mock Jesus: "Hail, King of the Jews!" they proclaim before His just scourged (whipped severely, often in Roman practice with leather straps laced with glass or sharp bits of stone so that chunks of flesh would be ripped from the victim with each stroke), pathetic, broken and beaten body. He wobbled before them as a man literally within an inch of his life. A less kingly form could hardly be imagined. Their dark, obscene coronation ritual with the sharp crown, bloody robe, shower of spit and sarcastic praise, seems so unnecessary but in a way I find it so enlightening... I think of myself. I'm pretty sure I tend to talk louder when I am less confident in what I am saying. I think I act more belligerently when I am less sure of myself. Perhaps this scene, with all the mocking, reveals more than anything else the weakness and anxiety of these men. And then I think some more, and I think of all those Nazi soldiers serving in concentration camps. How could they do what they did? How could they exhibit the kind of hellish cruelty holocaust survivors report? I think of sociopathic killers, sex traffickers, power-abusing pastors and enlightened post-modern philosophers. Once we decide, in specific circumstances or in



general, that "evil" is a non-starter with us, a term that doesn't apply to us at present or is without meaning for us in general, we put ourselves in a place of great insecurity because there is evil (and there is good) and denying it takes a great deal of energy. Once we have decided that evil is in the eye of the beholder, merely a label one person attaches to another person whom they find distasteful or disagreeable or whom they desire to control and has no real existence apart from human imagination and convention, there is no depth of depravity we are not capable of sinking into. And it seems that on our way down toward the pit of hell itself we will desperately exhibit ever more vile actions as a way of convincing ourselves, in the face of the deepest insecurity possible, that we are above such archaic notions as "evil." It seems that what we see in those terrible soldiers may be an awful mirror on ourselves—people who want to make the rules with god-like authority.

The passersby mock Him. They hurl his astounding claim of building prowess which they utterly misunderstand and which He is in the process of fulfilling (not merely rebuilding in three days what took them years to erect—the Jerusalem Temple—but resurrecting His own human body!). They declare that one with such power ought to be able to save Himself. The religious leaders say pretty much the same thing. If He is the King, if God favors Him, He should prove it. And we are deciding here and now how he ought to prove it. We are going to make the rules, and this Jesus, if He is the real deal, should follow them. This line of thinking actually works out pretty well for all these mockers in the short run. Not so much when all is said and done, though.

Jesus, to borrow a phrase from Captain Barbossa in Pirates of the Caribbean, is "disinclined to acquiesce to their request." Apparently He doesn't take His orders form this band of religious pirates. Jesus doesn't save Himself. He stays put on the Cross until His earthly, physical life is drained from Him. This, of course, seems to be the final vindication for all the mockers. See! King of the Jews? Powerful Savior? Just look! Does that dead guy look like He could save anybody?! And I think of people I know who don't want to believe in Jesus. It seems to me it is easy to disbelieve if our habit is to make up things that Jesus is supposed to do if He is, in fact, Lord and Savior. And when He is disinclined to acquiesce to our requests, we conclude that He must not truly be the real deal.

Spoiler alert. Jesus doesn't stay dead. Not for the soldiers. Not for the priests. Not for the passersby. Not for us.

I am pretty sure Jesus isn't taking orders from me or you. Real Lords don't do that. And real Saviors must be trusted in their transcendent saving reality, in the truth of who they are and not the fantasy of who I think they ought to be, or they cannot truly be trusted at all. What these rule-makers-for-Jesus don't realize is that Jesus is actually doing, right then and there, what The Real Lord and Savior does. He doesn't jump down to save Himself: He bows His head and dies to save us!



All these mockers, it seems to me, are like the coward who chances upon a sleeping lion and takes his place beside its fearsome but seemingly lifeless form with fists upraised pretending that the lion is dead and he has triumphed: "I am more powerful than this!" Thus, modern man, in his secular man-is-the-measure-of-all-things religion, stands beside what he believes to be the dead form of what has been called "morality" or "right and wrong" or "goodness" or "evil" or "God" or "Jesus." We are beyond all those old manipulative constructs, he says. We know ourselves to be masters of our own new world where we decide right and wrong for ourselves. And all the

while one soft growl would have the coward running for cover with soiled trousers!

And Jesus in His passion story doesn't growl. Not then. Not yet. He came to die. Die He must. Die He will. And along the way He will allow us to reveal our true nature, natural character, characteristic blindness, blind foolishness, foolish activity, active need, need for salvation, salvation of Jesus...

What happens when the Lion starts roaring? What happens when we suddenly realize that the Lion is alive? I

think some of us know the answer to this from God's revelation and our own faith and experience. I believe all humanity will one day find out. And those religious leaders of old will be there. And those cruel soldiers will be there. And some of them, perhaps, will be so sorry for what they have done. And they will experience the Best News ever. Forgiving Grace. And others will continue their anxious mocking into all eternity. And they will experience the Worst News ever. Righteous Justice. And it will be terribly glorious. And Jesus, the Lion, will be the punch-line to God's beautiful, beautiful joke. Have you heard the one about the Jewish Carpenter who was the self-giving Eternal King of Love?



#### **Response:**

Think about things that you have wanted Jesus to do for you. Has he ever disappointed you? Why do you think He doesn't always obey our requests? What might He be doing instead? How might He be working out His redemptive blessings even as He is failing to deliver what we want?

#### Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank You and praise You for Your strength of will. Thank You for what You endured, the physical pain, the mocking, the false accusations, the cowardice, the cruelty... And all the while You stayed the course. Dead center. Unmoved. You see what truly needs to be done, and You do it. You will never be distracted or led astray by any other power. You are my Savior and You are my Lord and nothing in all reality and nothing in anyone's imagination will ever change that. Hallelujah!

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

# LENT

# **Text: Luke 23:26-43**

- <sup>26</sup> As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. <sup>27</sup> A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. <sup>28</sup> Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. <sup>29</sup> For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' <sup>30</sup> Then "'they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"'
  - <sup>31</sup> For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"
- <sup>32</sup> Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. <sup>34</sup> Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.
- <sup>35</sup> The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."
- <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar <sup>37</sup> and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."
  - <sup>38</sup> There was a written notice above him, which read: This is the King of the Jews.
  - <sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"
  - <sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?
- <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."
  - <sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."
  - <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

#### Reflection:

Jesus was in effect giving the multitude following Him to the crucifixion a warning that if they could wrongly punish a sinless, totally innocent man, what would happen to others, like those in the Jewish multitude, especially when He was gone from their midst along with His heavenly guidance? Jesus foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming tribulation. He realized that his followers had no idea of what was coming and again was attempting to make them realize how bad things would get. To say it would be better for a woman to be barren and never nurse in that culture was a horrific consequence which would be comparable today to being handicapped in the most horribly debilitating manner possible. Jesus later promised the criminal whose incredible faith in Him would result in

unearned forgiving grace and everlasting life (In short, you can't earn your way into heaven, but through faith in Christ are guaranteed acceptance into paradise). After suffering the cruel ridicule of the guards, the mockery from the crown of thorns, sour wine, and the pain from crucifixion, Jesus gave up His sprit when He decided it was time to die. Even unto the end, He was always in control.



#### **Response:**

I find it amazing that after all Jesus endured, His unrelenting love for mankind and concern of up-coming events allowed Him to fulfill prophecy without regard to personal injustice. Who among us could even begin to imagine how much of a sacrifice He accepted? His example makes me feel embarrassed that I fall pray to sin as frequently as I do, realizing what He gave up for me. It certainly inspires me to do more than I am currently doing to bring the Good news to those wandering aimlessly in the world and searching for something that is missing in their current life. I simply need to be more like Jesus (and less like me).

# Prayer:

Dear Lord, please help me follow Your ways, to be patient, and to <u>listen</u> for answers to my prayers. Help me help You bring others into your flock by setting a better personal example and by serving others. Please give me the strength to use the tools You have given to me to do a better job evangelizing and to bring glory to You in all my ways. I ask this in the name of the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. Amen.

- Brent Ford

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

# Text: Mark 15:33-41



- <sup>33</sup> At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. <sup>34</sup> And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
  - <sup>35</sup> When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."
- <sup>36</sup> One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said.
  - <sup>37</sup> With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.
- <sup>38</sup> The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup> And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"
- <sup>40</sup> Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. <sup>41</sup> In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

## The Sixth Hour.

The hot noon sun faded as a strange darkness descended on the land surrounding Jerusalem. On Golgotha there was torture, torment, wailing and mocking as the crucified struggled to breathe... Three hours of Jesus' earthly life



Ann Kim, <u>Eloi, Eloi, Lama</u> Sabachthani, 1998

remained, and His every moment was filled with physical agony. But it was the excruciating ordeal He was enduring in His soul that caused Him to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" For the first time in eternity, He was separated from the Father.

In some way we cannot truly comprehend... Jesus endured a spiritual void, a breaking of communion with His Father for one completely selfless end – to save us from eternal death and open a pathway to eternal peace with our Creator.

Our sin separates us from a Holy God; only Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, could make a way of reconciliation. What depth of love was this? Paul writes, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rm. 5:8)

It was this love that placed the sins of the world on Jesus. We cannot conceive of the desolation He experienced when He was unconscious of His Father's presence. It was at this time that "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us..." (2 Corinthians 5:21a). In Galatians 3:13, Paul tells us Jesus was made a curse for us.

#### **Reflection:**

**The Veil:** Along with the physical manifestations of a wrenched universe (eerie darkness, earthquakes, graves opening and the dead resurrected), at the moment

Jesus died a miracle occurred to confirm physically what Jesus accomplished spiritually: The Temple veil was torn.

Biblical and historical accounts tell us the veil was probably about 60 feet high and as much as 4 inches thick. The book of Exodus teaches it was fashioned from blue, purple, and scarlet material and fine twisted linen. It served to separate all but Israel's High Priest from the "Holy of Holies", the earthly seat of God. It was a constant reminder that sin renders humanity unfit to be in the presence of God.

Once a year the High Priest would perform hours of ritual cleansing in preparation to enter behind this veil and, through sacrifices and supplication, make atonement for God's people. It was an act that had to be repeated year in and year out. Only Jesus' death removed the barriers between God and man once and for all.

Every feature in the Temple and legal requirement of the rituals ultimately pointed to Jesus Christ. The shadows disappeared when He died. The miraculous rending proved His perfect sacrifice and the shedding of His blood had opened the way to God's throne for all people and all time:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.

# **Response:**

Notice that Mark begins each sentence in this section with "And". I appreciate his brevity of words describing the pain and suffering of Jesus. But I also hear his breathless urgency to tell us about Jesus the Savior who died to set us free from sin and open a door to an eternal life of knowing and communing with Him. This is glorious GOOD NEWS we can share with fellow sinners!

Sometime today, find a quiet place and read Psalm 22. Read Hebrews 8-10. Spend time in prayer and thank God for His perfect and costly plan for our salvation. Then ask Him to show you the friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers or strangers He is calling into His kingdom, the people HE has prepared to respond to a sincere conversation about what the death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished.

# Prayer:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, You willingly endured incomprehensible separation and suffering to save us, to annul the power of sin in our lives. The veil was rent and we are incredibly thankful You provided the Way to peace and salvation for us, Your people lost in rebellion and sin. Thank You that the Way is Jesus, a Person we are invited to obey, honor and love. Thank You for Your forgiveness and the assurance believers have of new life with You. Now, please make us bold. Awaken in us a sense of urgency, and remind us the time is short to introduce You to others. Amen.

- Patti Hemsley

# **APRIL 9 (Maundy Thursday)**

"Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first."



## **Text: Matthew 27:57-66**

<sup>57</sup> As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. <sup>58</sup> Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. <sup>59</sup> Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, <sup>60</sup> and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. <sup>61</sup> Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

<sup>62</sup> The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. <sup>63</sup> "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' <sup>64</sup> So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."



Giovanni Savoldo, Christ with Joseph of Arimathea, 1525

<sup>65</sup> "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." <sup>66</sup> So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

#### **Reflection:** Faith in Action

Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple of Jesus. Even though a council member of good standing, he asked Pilate for Jesus' body to give him a proper burial. This, I think, is a good example of faith with action. How strong his belief in Jesus must have been to risk his stature in the religious community and to boldly (though with apprehension) go to the Governor of Judea with his request.

The two Marys that followed the body of Jesus to the tomb that was carved out for Joseph of Arimathea also showed their faith in action by going to see where he was to be buried so they could come back and do the customary burial

preparations. More so than this was the extreme sadness that I believe they felt at the death of their teacher and savior as they watched Him being put into the tomb and the large stone rolled in front of the entrance.

Though neither Joseph nor the two Marys were able to grasp that He was going to rise on the third day and that neither the large stone, the guards, nor the seal would stop that promise, they still put their faith into action.

The disciples offer somewhat of a different faith lesson. After Mary had been told that Jesus was no longer in the tomb and had ascended, she went to the disciples. Mark 16:11 tells us that they did not believe her. Luke 24:11 says the words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them. Scripture tells us that they were behind locked doors, probably for fear of the religious leaders. Jesus had to appear more than once to the disciples and even

had to let Thomas touch His hands and feet before he would believe. To their credit, they became solid believers and their lives were changed dramatically.

The Pharisees had their own kind of misdirected faith. Though they did not believe that Jesus was who He said He was, they feared Him and plotted to kill Him... and to stop any appearance of resurrection on the third day. I often wonder what they felt/believed after Jesus rose from the dead. However misguided they acted, they acted strongly and with conviction.



J. R. Howley, Guards at the Tomb, 2011

As we read this Scripture and think about the different people of faith, can we see ourselves in any of the people or are we a partial combination of two or more? Where do we want to be? And how can we put our faith in action to get to where we know God wants us to be?

# **Praver:**

**Response:** 

Heavenly Father, please lead us to a new, stronger faith, a faith of action. Will we meet resistance like the Marys did when they tried to tell the disciples? Sometimes. Will we run up against very strong disbelievers such as the Pharisees? Sometimes. But we will also run into people such as Joseph of Arimathea who had part of the story, but needed to hear about the resurrection and wanted to listen to the whole story.

Father, please lead us to the ones You've chosen for us to preach the Gospel to. Amen.

- Gerry Allen

# **APRIL 10 (Good Friday)**

"Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'"

## Text: John 20:1-18



<sup>1</sup> Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. <sup>2</sup> So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

<sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. <sup>8</sup> Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to their homes, <sup>11</sup> but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

<sup>13</sup> They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." <sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

<sup>17</sup> Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

#### Reflection:

Jesus is man. Jesus is God. Jesus had just been crucified. Many witnesses to the events of "Good Friday" could testify to the facts. Our understanding of death is pretty universal, and from Scripture, we learn that Jesus needed to rise from the dead. That fact is something that we may know, but truly grasping that concept is another matter altogether – much like Jesus being man and God. Disciples were present when Lazarus was raised from the dead after 4 days (John 11: 1-44). And yet the reality of Jesus being gone from the tomb is one that Mary, Simon Peter and the other disciple couldn't quite reconcile in their minds. Mary's response illustrates this rationalization: "'They must have taken him, and we don't know where he is now" (paraphrasing). How distressing.

Mary sees two angels and someone she assumes to be the gardener. She is asked the same question by them at different times... "Woman, why are you crying?" Her response: "The Lord has been taken..." After her plea to the gardener to please tell her where he had taken Jesus's body if he had done so, she hears one word. That one word spoken by the "gardener" is her name, "Mary". Her eyes and heart are opened to the Lord and she recognizes Jesus.



Eugene Burnand, Peter & John Running to the Tomb, 1898

No lightning from the sky and no trumpets majestically calling our attention to the mighty leader on a pedestal. Just a personal message by Someone who looked like a quiet gardener near an empty tomb. Is that all it takes for us to truly see Jesus? We seek Him out, we seek the Truth, and in return all we need to do is simply listen for our name.

# **Response:**

Take a moment today and open your heart to the Lord. Invite Him in, and purposefully, silently, and patiently listen. He is calling your name and will never stop waiting for you to turn your head to His soft voice so that you can truly see Him and know Him. He died for you, and He died for me. He did this all for us out of love.

# Prayer:

Jesus, forgive me for not truly seeing You, for impatiently going through my life and calling upon You out of my own convenience. When I slow down and close off the noise of the world, then and only then can I appreciate Your silent voice. Thank You for never turning away from me, and thank You for always being right there calling my name with open arms. Amen.

- Jennifer Oliver

Jesus lives, and so shall I: Death, they sting is gone forever! He for me hath deigned to die, Lives the bands of death to sever. He shall raise me from the dust: Jesus is my hope and trust.

Jesus lives and reigns supreme: And, His kingdom still remaining, I shall also be with Him, Ever living, ever reigning. God has promised—be it must: Jesus is my hope and trust.

Jesus lives—and death is now, But my entrance into glory; Courage, then, my soul, for thou, Hast a crown of life before thee. Thou will find thy hopes were just: Jesus is my hope and trust.

Hymn "Jesu, Meine Zuversicht" by Christian F. Gellert

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."

# **Text: Matthew 28:16-20**



<sup>16</sup> Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."



#### Reflection:

This text contains one of the most paraphrased verses in the Bible. Verse 19, "...make disciples of all nations..." or "The Great Commission." But what drew my attention was this from verse 17, "...but some doubted."

Jesus had appeared to one or more of the disciples prior to the appearance in Galilee, so at first it seems hard to understand how some could still feel doubt. Some have suggested that Jesus may have prevented recognition when he appeared to others as described in John 20 and 21. This may have led the disciples to question whether the appearance was more than a manifestation of the glorified body of Jesus.

I tend to agree with other writers who question the uses of "doubt" in this context. The Greek word in the text is " $\delta\iota\sigma\mu\nu\rho\iota\alpha\zeta$ ", pronounced "dismerias" which translates to "doubt, waver or hesitate."

After the initial appearance to the disciples in the upper room, we are told Thomas "doubted." I think it is clear that in this context "doubt" means "disbelief."

However, even though the disciples had seen Jesus since the resurrection, I think it is natural that they would have hesitated when Jesus appeared before them, but they did not disbelieve that He was before them.

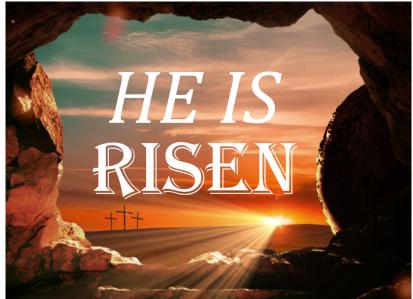
#### **Response:**

Witness Matthew's transparency and accuracy as he notes that there are doubters (whether disbelievers or hesitaters) in that confrontation with Jesus. Only one passionately concerned with giving a true account of the circumstances surrounding Jesus would have done so. Stop for a moment and thank God that He has given us a reliable account in His Word, the Bible, of these most important events in all of human history.

#### **Prayer:**

Lord I thank You for helping me understand Your Word about Jesus as related through the Gospel of Matthew.

Amen. - Bill Myers





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