

The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert landscape. A dirt road winds through rolling, brown hills. The sky is bright blue with scattered white clouds. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Lenten Devotional Guide 2026

Covenant Presbyterian Church
Reno, Nevada

Dear Friends:

He is risen!

Welcome to Covenant Presbyterian Church's Lent Devotional Guide for 2026.

Here at Covenant we have a long-standing tradition of preparing our members and friends for Easter with our Lenten Devotional Calendar—40 days of daily readings from the Bible with thoughts, suggested responses and prayers from our elders, staff and other teachers in our Covenant family. I am so glad you have decided to share this year's journey with us through the pages of the Bible.

Foretold in the account of creation, pointed toward by God's prophets in Israel, investigated and affirmed in the New Testament letters, and presented in the Gospels, the true story that we celebrate on Resurrection Sunday is the most important ever told. The creative and redemptive work of Jesus—His life, death and resurrection—is the story of God's eternal love overflowing for every one of His beloved people. Is that you? Put your trust in Jesus Christ, call Him "Lord and Savior" with the measure of faith God has given you, and it is!

From sometime before The Beginning, God planned for the redemption of His people through the coming of His Son. And this was accomplished when He—the Messiah, the Holy One of God, the Suffering Servant, the King of Kings—died one day by one of the cruelest state-sanctioned and deterrence-motivated means of execution ever invented. It was called crucifixion, and the instrument of torture was called a cross. And then this son of a Nazarene carpenter was revealed to be the one-and-only divine savior of the world when He was raised to life on the third day.



The 40 days of Lent consist of all the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, excluding Sundays. We are offering a Bible reading, personal reflection, suggested response and prayer for each of these 40 days. This collection of devotions 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. The New Testament Narrative of Jesus' Death and Resurrection.

I am grateful to those who have provided their Bible-based devotional thoughts for this year's guide. Each of day's devotion is an expression of personal faith and a testimony to our God's work both in human history and in His people's lives today.

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 that He is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Pastor Jay Hull for the CPC Elders, Staff and Members
Lent 2026

2026 Lenten Devotional Booklet – Table of Devotions



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	20	Genesis 12:1-3	<i>"...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."</i>	Samuel Dueñas
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	23	Isaiah 42:1-9	<i>"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."</i>	Mike Blakely
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	26	Isaiah 52:13-53:12	<i>"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."</i>	Dianne Billharz
	27	Jeremiah 23:1-6	<i>"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."</i>	Dan Carne
	28	Jeremiah 31:31-34	<i>"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."</i>	Gerry Dunlap
March	2	Psalm 2	<i>"The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."</i>	Jim Prosser
	3	Ezekiel 36:16-32	<i>"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..."</i>	Larry Stockert
	4	Zechariah 9:9-13	<i>"See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey..."</i>	Debbie Barackman
	5	Zechariah 12:10-13	<i>"They will look on me, the one they have, pierced and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child..."</i>	Phil Barackman
	6	Psalm 118	<i>"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone..."</i>	Ryan Ludwig
	7	Exodus 12:1-13	<i>"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."</i>	Joyce Miers



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9	Mark 8:31-38	<i>"And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things..."</i>	Kay Blakely
10	Acts 4:1-12	<i>"...there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."</i>	Patti Hemsley
11	Romans 5:1-11	<i>"...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."</i>	Kathy Ludwig
12	I Peter 3:13-22	<i>"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God..."</i>	Bob Rowe
13	Hebrews 10:1-25	<i>"But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down..."</i>	Jock Ochiltree
14	Galatians 2:15-21	<i>"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."</i>	Katie Guerrero



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

LENT

16	Matthew 21:1-11	<i>"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"</i>	Janet Goodman
17	Matthew 21:12-17	<i>"And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple..."</i>	Gerry Allen
18	Mark 14:1-11	<i>"She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial."</i>	Kathy Croughan
19	Mark 14:12-26	<i>"And he said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.'"</i>	Jennifer Oliver
20	Luke 22:39-46	<i>"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."</i>	Mark Eshoff
21	Luke 22:47-53	<i>"Judas, would you betray the Son of Man...?"</i>	David MacDonald
23	Luke 22:54-62	<i>"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.'"</i>	Preston Yoshioka
24	John 18:19-24	<i>"Is that how you answer the high priest?"</i>	Chris Rhodes
25	Matthew 27:1-10	<i>"Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind..."</i>	Susie Rummens
26	John 18:28-40	<i>"Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?'"</i>	Jay Hull
27	Matthew 27:15-26	<i>"His blood be on us and on our children!"</i>	Tim Ball
28	John 19:1-16	<i>"The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.'"</i>	Doug Heidema
30	Matthew 27:27-44	<i>"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."</i>	Patti Hemsley
31	Luke 23:26-43	<i>"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."</i>	Brent Ford
1	Mark 15:33-41	<i>"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"</i>	Melissa Bullard
2	Matthew 27:57-66	<i>"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...'"</i>	Jay Hull
3	John 20:1-18	<i>"Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'"</i>	Barbara Landis
4	Matthew 28:16-20	<i>"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."</i>	Bill Myers

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PART I: OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES POINTING TO JESUS' DEATH & RESURRECTION



FEBRUARY 18 (Ash Wednesday)

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

Text: Psalm 22

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

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

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

¹²Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. ¹³Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me. ¹⁴I 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. ¹⁵My 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. ¹⁶Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. ¹⁷I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. ¹⁸They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

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

²²I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. ²³You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! ²⁴For 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.

²⁵From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you will I fulfill my vows. ²⁶The poor will eat and be satisfied; they who seek the Lord will praise him—may your hearts live forever! ²⁷All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, ²⁸for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

²⁹All 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. ³⁰Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. ³¹They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn—for he has done it.



Reflection:

Psalm 22 is one of the most poignant expressions of human suffering and divine abandonment in the Bible. This psalm, traditionally attributed to David, finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ during His Passion. As we journey through Lent towards Easter, this psalm invites us to reflect deeply on the suffering and victory of our Savior.



Lent is a season of penitence, fasting, and prayer, a time when we remember Jesus' forty days in the wilderness and His preparation for the suffering at the cross. The opening words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" echo Jesus' cry from the cross (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). These words remind us of the profound sense of abandonment Jesus experienced as He bore the weight of the world's sin. Sin cannot be in the presence of the Father, and therefore, when Jesus approached the cross, He did so alone. Given the trinitarian nature of God and Jesus' place within the Trinity, this would have been very difficult. Lent calls us to enter into this mystery, acknowledging our own sinfulness and

the brokenness of the world.

The vivid imagery of pierced hands and feet, and divided garments foretells the crucifixion in astonishing detail. One would be hard pressed to find a more prophetic text in all creation. It not only describes the physical agony of the cross but also the emotional and spiritual torment. Yet, amid this suffering, there is a profound trust in the Father. Jesus' use of this psalm from the cross reveals His intimate connection and dedication to God's plan, even in the depths of suffering.

The latter part of Psalm 22 shifts from lament to praise. After the suffering comes the proclamation of God's deliverance: "For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one." This mirrors the journey from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The resurrection is the ultimate vindication of Jesus' suffering, proving that God had not forsaken Him but was working out His plan of salvation through Him.

Response:

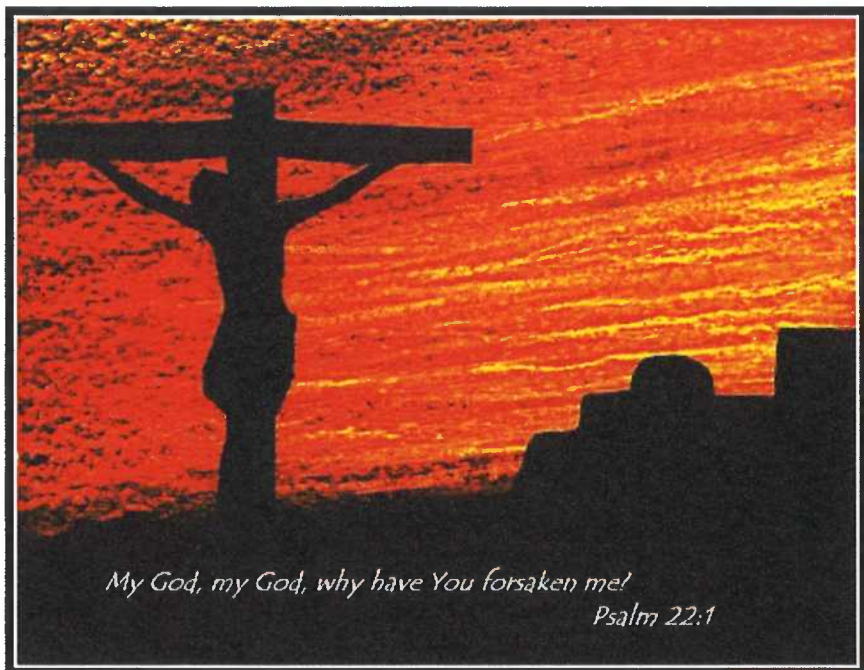
During Lent, let us not shy away from the hard questions and the raw emotions of suffering. Like Jesus, we can bring our deepest pains and fears to God, trusting that He hears us. As we meditate on Psalm 22, let us also look forward to Easter with hope, knowing that our suffering is not the end. The cross is a reminder that through Christ's pain, we have access to eternal life and victory over sin.

This Easter, may we celebrate the triumph of God's love and grace, remembering that through Jesus' suffering, we have been redeemed. Let us be guided through the shadows of Lent into the light of Easter proclaiming valiantly, "He has done it!"

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son, who endured the cross for our sake. Help us to reflect on His suffering and our own need for repentance. Allow our own trials to strengthen our faith and remind us of the hope we have in the resurrection. Lord, prepare our hearts to celebrate the joy of Easter, knowing that through Jesus, we are never forsaken. In Jesus' name, Amen.

- Chris Schlatter



*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me!
Psalm 22:1*

FEBRUARY 19

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



Text: Genesis 3:8-15

⁸ 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. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

¹⁰ He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

¹¹ And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

¹² 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."

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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."

Reflection:

A little background to this scripture we thought was important is the fact that in Genesis 2, when God placed man in the garden, Eve had not yet been created and the command concerning the tree was given to Adam. The account in Genesis 2 says that Adam was first placed in the garden and there he was given the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam must have shared this information with Eve because when she was tempted by the serpent, she was aware that God had said not to eat of it.

As the serpent baited Eve and convinced her that she would not die, but rather her eyes would be opened and she would be like God, knowing good and evil, we see Eve excusing her act by minimizing her sin and disregarding God's command. She renames it, "desirable for gaining wisdom." It's much easier to excuse our sin if we just relabel it.

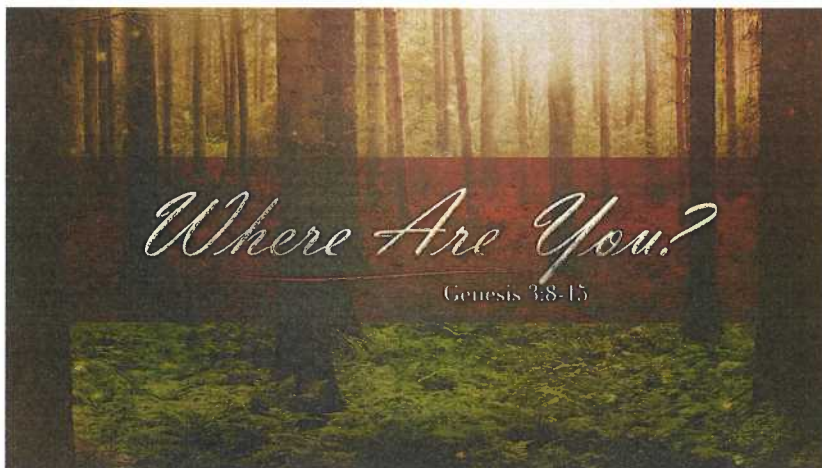
In reading this passage, Annette was struck by a couple things. First, that Eve was receiving what the serpent said without holding it up to what God had told Adam. The importance of being aware that often people we love and trust can misguide us away from God's word and truth. Satan uses many tactics to lead us away from God, and the world is getting even more clever at doing so. When I was a resident at Hosanna Home, I often got frustrated with having to memorize so much Scripture & learning who God is and who I am in Him. It took me a while to realize the importance of doing this, but it makes me able to be guided by

God, honor God, share the Word, speak truth into your life, and hold your emotions and thoughts captive to the Word of God.

Words are powerful, and if we don't know what God is speaking to us and have those words hidden in our hearts, we can be in a lot of trouble discerning truth. As it says in Psalm 119:10-13 *"I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."*

Second was the importance of being yoked together with people who are like us,

especially in relationships as with spouses in marriage. We should not enter into deep relationships with people who are not believers. That doesn't mean that we don't have friends who are not believers, but





"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."

those deep, intimate "inner court friends" need to be people who also identify with Christ. When people speak into our lives, we need to measure what they say by the Word of God. We can't let ourselves be influenced by the world's view and values.

We talked about how our coming to faith doesn't mean that we leave our spouse or family, but rather understanding that we now become the standard, and that standard is guided by the Word of God. Cindy particularly loves the scripture in Acts 4:13, where people

saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. People were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus. Peter and John were common men influenced by God.

Peter and John heard Jesus' words, words from God, just as Adam had. Eve had been with God and Adam in the garden until the day they hid from God. Everything changed after that. Even Adam, after hearing those words from God, wasn't able to stop himself from receiving the fruit from his wife. If it's that tough for Adam and Eve, how much more difficult for us who live and walk by faith and by hearing the Word of the Lord. Seriously though, if we could have that much self-control, we wouldn't need Jesus. We need Him so much and we need His help in figuring out where we are, just as God called out to Adam, "*Where are you?*" In one of the hospice classes Cindy took in grad school, she remembers the professor saying that before we can help people figure out where they are going, we first need to help them know where they are, and for us in Christ, to know who we are.

Response:

There is sin, and it is ugly, disheartening and downright deceptive. It can be so deceiving that we may not even label it as sin, but call it something else. Cindy said she can get so discouraged and disheartened by her sin that she can believe she isn't a Christian; otherwise she wouldn't do these things. But then at times, like in preparing this devotion, we can be reminded that this is why God sent Jesus. This is exactly the reason. I cannot control myself 100%. Paul, the great theologian who wrote so much of the New Testament, says of himself in Romans 7:15, "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*" And in verse 21 he says, "*I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.*" He says there is a war waging against his mind and his members that makes him captive to the law of sin. Even though his body doesn't always line up, his mind serves the law of God. Knowing all of this in our minds, then, leads us to respond to God by admitting our sin and receiving His grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Every Sunday, after our prayer of confession, Pastor Jay reminds us that we have so many assurances in Christ because he is the One who is faithful.

Prayer:

Lord, I pray for protection against the world's deception and also my sinful nature's desire to rename or relabel sin to fit my worldly desires. Let me not be led astray. I also pray for a deeper understanding of Your Word.

- Cindy Duncan & Annette Lewis
(Covenant Office Staff)



FEBRUARY 20

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



Text: Genesis 12:1-3

¹ 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.

² "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.

³ 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:

It is only chapter twelve of the first book of the Bible when God makes this promise to Abram. These are the first recorded words that the Lord spoke to him. We will see this promise repeated several times all the way to the New Testament, when the fulfillment of the promise is revealed. It starts with a commandment and then a prophecy that comes even without Abram having obeyed or done anything yet. Let us focus on the last part of verse 3, where all the families or nations of the earth would be blessed in him. Later on, after he had obeyed the voice of God, the angel of the Lord repeats the promise and specifies that it is "in his offspring" that the blessing would come to all nations. God gives the same oath to his son Isaac later in chapter 26 and then to his grandson, Jacob, in chapter 28, when he had the dream of a ladder going from earth to heaven and angels ascending and descending on it (Genesis 28:12). Hundreds of years later, when speaking to the Israelites in Acts 3, Peter reveals that they (the Jews) were actually the sons of the covenant that God made with their fathers when He said to Abraham that in his offspring all the families of the earth would be blessed and that Jesus (God's servant) was raised up and sent first to them to bless them by turning every one from their wickedness. Paul also, in Galatians 3, explains that the promise included the Gentiles when saying "to all the nations of the earth" and that the promise was made to Abraham and to his offspring, singular, referring to one: Jesus Christ.



Jozsef Molnar: Abram's Journey (1850)

Now, this faith of Abraham was counted to him as righteousness. But it was not a faith as merely a state of the mind or only in thought. The moment when this faith is shown is when he obeys the commandment. A central issue, since Eden, has been obedience. In another passage (Gen 18:19) this promise is reaffirmed with the condition that the people of God should keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice. As the story of His people unfolds through the rest of the Old Testament we see that they broke this covenant. The good news is that Christ came and relieved us from that condition. He met the condition so that we could have the promise.

Our faith is revealed in us when our life is changed, when we repent and turn back from our wickedness. That is when we know that we believe, when we see the work of the Holy Spirit transforming us—when we are able to confess with our mouths that Jesus is who He said He is. In other words, our faith is assured as we start obeying not to earn salvation but because we are blessed by the salvation graciously brought to us by Abraham's offspring.

Response:

Ask the Holy Spirit to turn you from wickedness in all its forms and toward obedience. Ask the Lord to bring repentance to your heart, will and action. Ask for help with confidence that the Spirit was given to us to sanctify and transform us from glory to glory according to the image of Jesus Christ. Finally, ask for this help knowing we can't do it ourselves. Just like the Israelites or old, we need Him.

Prayer:

Lord, sometimes we ask You for faith not really knowing how it looks. Give us the faith that Abraham had, the faith that comes with a "Yes" to Your Word. And thank You for coming to us to fulfill the promise of Genesis in our families and in our lives. I pray in the name of Abraham's offspring, Jesus Christ. Amen.

- Samuel Dueñas

FEBRUARY 21

"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

¹ 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.”

² 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?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ 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.” ⁵ 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.”

⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

⁷ 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.”

⁸ But Abram said, “O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

⁹ 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.”

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared & passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ 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— ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”



Reflection:

Throughout the Old Testament God’s faithfulness is a common theme. Even when his people, the Israelites, are unfaithful and turn away from Him time and time again, God remains unchanging and constant. There are so many examples of how God shows his unwavering faithfulness to His children... Abram, Daniel, Moses, Esther, Ruth, David... the list continues throughout God’s love story, the Bible. When circumstances seem lost and hopeless from man’s perspective, they are far from hidden from God’s viewpoint. In this passage God

promises a son to Abram and from that son there would be descendants beyond Abram’s ability to count, like the stars in the heavens. Abram sacrifices animals to God, and God causes Abram to fall into a deep sleep where He shares with him a glimpse of His plans for Abram and those who will come after him. When Abram awoke, the covenant was made between the father of many nations and the God he served. God chose to make this covenant not only as a demonstration of His faithfulness but also because Abram was a faithful and devoted man to the Lord. Abram chose to be faithful and trust in God even when he couldn’t see how it would all work together. He walked with God and

relied on His counsel to guide him. As with so many other people in the Bible, God was faithful to Abram despite Abram not knowing how it would all come to fruition. Abram is known as the father of many nations, but he was also one of the earliest examples of how to follow God faithfully. God was demonstrating his faithfulness to all generations through his covenant with Abram long before he established His new covenant through Jesus Christ.

Response:

Throughout my life I have struggled with trusting in what God has in store for me. I often questioned if He would have good things in store for me, the job I wanted, the marriage I wanted, a loving family, etc. As Christians this passage comes as a reminder of how God is faithful in all circumstances, even when and especially when we can't see how He is working. We want to be in control because we think our way is the best way. There are many times when we are short sighted and the fear of what may or may not happen in the future creeps in. It is in those times of uncertainty that we must turn to the God who loves us and sees all things and rely on his faithfulness to us. Like He has shown us time and time again, when we choose to trust in Him and not in ourselves or our own understanding, He is faithful to us.

Prayer:

Father, thank You that You remain faithful throughout all generations. Thank You that even when we are uncertain and the road ahead seems unknown, it is not unknown to You and Your will for our lives. We are grateful for Your covenant with Abram and how it reminds us of Your new covenant that is promised to each of us through Your son Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection on the cross. Amen. - Jenny McNeely



FEBRUARY 23

"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

¹ "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.
² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.
³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope."
⁵ 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:

⁶ "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, ⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

⁸ "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you."

Reflection:

As I read this scripture I wondered, what does this have to do with Lent? Isaiah the prophet wrote down the word of God at about 700 B.C. This was long before the birth of Jesus. But it is very clear that Isaiah was announcing for God the future coming of "My Servant", Jesus. Jesus is the bruised reed and smoldering wick.

Verses 42:1-4 are repeated in Matthew 12:18-21 as being fulfilled when Jesus heals the poor and afflicted and sends them off telling them not to say who he was. He is God's chosen one who will not be discouraged and who will quietly bring justice to the nations (Islands). He also heals broken lives.

I find it interesting that we Christians try to quietly work for justice, and we try to follow God's laws. This is in contrast to what we see in the current world of turmoil where Jihadists and others pursue their faith through violence. But as Jesus' followers we know it is Jesus' sacrifice that saves us from our sins and Jesus' model that lights our path.

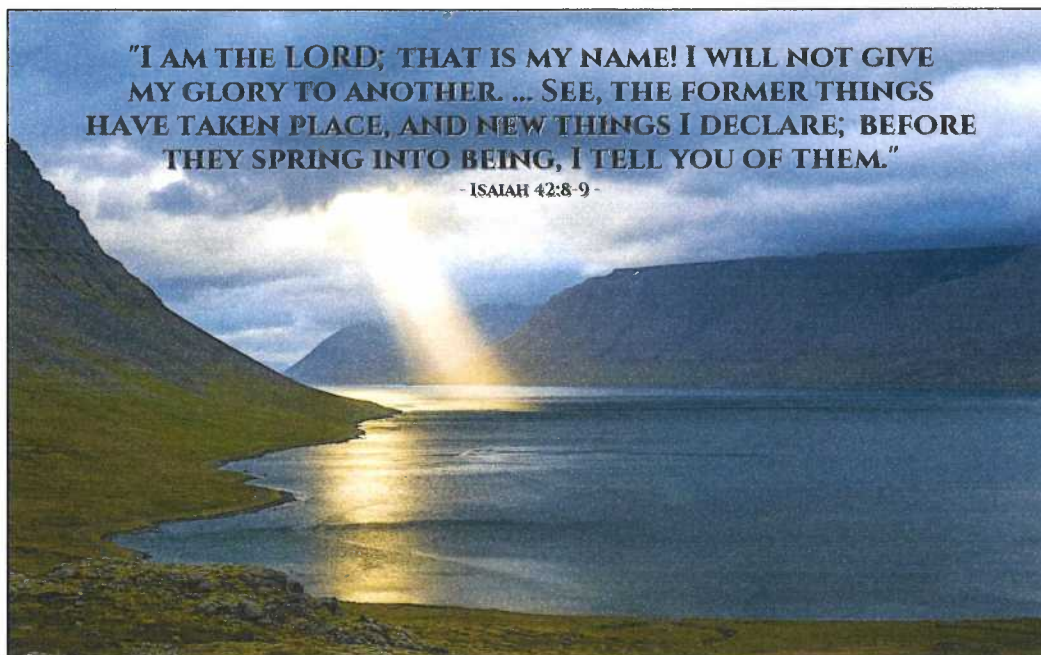
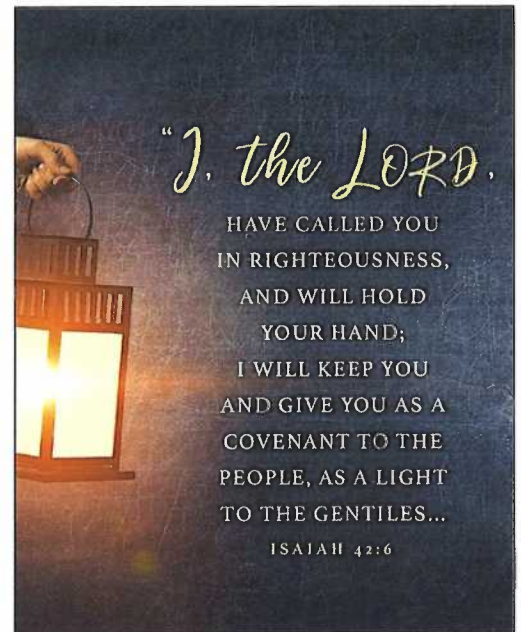
Isaiah tells us in verse 5 of the power and the glory of God. Then he quotes God saying "*I, the Lord have called you in righteousness... and will make you a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.*" We are the Gentiles. Then, in verse 9 God wraps it up for us as He declares that former things have taken place and announces new future things. Here is where God says in the future He is sending His Servant to do the things described in verses 1-7.

Response:

What are we supposed to do with this scripture and with our lives? God tells us of his greatness and tells us he is sending His Servant as a guiding light. Lent is a special time when we can think about the suffering and death of Christ and His resurrection. What does this mean for our lives?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I thank You for sending Your Son to the world and for saving us from our sins and for giving us eternal life. I pray that You will continue to bless us, our families, our friends and this world as we prepare for Easter. I pray for peace and justice for our world. I pray that we all recognize that You love us and that You want us to have a close relationship with You. You are our powerful and glorious God. Jesus' birth, crucifixion and resurrection have saved us from the penalty for our sins. You have given Your Son as the ultimate sacrifice in payment so that we can have eternal life with You. Thank You Heavenly Father. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. - Mike Blakely



FEBRUARY 24

"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

¹ "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.

² 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.

³ He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."

⁴ 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."

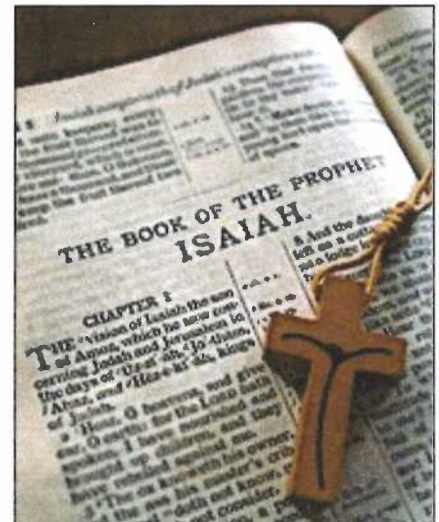
⁵ And now the Lord says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength—

⁶ 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."

⁷ 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:

Isaiah speaks for the Messiah in the first person as he prophesizes about His remarkable origin and mission 600 years before Jesus made His appearance.

He predicts His name being given to His mother before His birth in v.1. He predicts His incisive wisdom and God's protection from the numerous attempts to end His life prematurely --beginning shortly after His birth and thereafter (v. 2). He even alludes to the words of the Father at Jesus' baptism and at the Mount of Transfiguration in v. 3.

Isaiah also predicts Jesus' rejection by the House of Israel, saying He has labored in vain, and "though Israel be not gathered"; yet he also alludes to His resurrection when he writes, "For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, And My God shall be My strength."

He foretells in v.6 the formation of the church among the Gentiles, by saying, "I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth." He also predicts Jesus Himself will be God's salvation and hints of the atonement by His death. A further allusion to this atonement is conveyed in the title given to Jesus of "Redeemer" in v.7.

Further, Isaiah makes reference to the first and second advents of Jesus in verse 7, where the Lord speaks "to Him whom man despises, to Him whom the nation abhors," (first Advent) and Him whom "Kings shall see and arise, Princes also shall worship" (second Advent).

Response:

All this God does because He is faithful and Holy in the face of man's utter faithlessness and sinfulness. Our failure to please God in any way apart from God's own grace, mercy and eternal promise made Jesus' final sacrifice necessary from the very beginning of our race's fall into sin.

Prayer:

Lord, we bow before You in awe and gratitude for Your extraordinary provision for us who are all sinners. We were rendered hopeless and deserving only wrath and judgment by the sin of our first ancestor Adam. We have been given hope again through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, Whom You sent to save us from destruction and Whom we praise, worship and strive to serve. Grant us grace to do this well, for only by Your grace may we succeed. Amen.

- Jim Hemsley

FEBRUARY 25

*"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

⁴ "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.

⁵ The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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!

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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:

There are three things that stuck out to me in reading this passage: the servant heart of the Messiah, the courage of the Messiah, and the challenge of the Messiah to us so that we may submit to the Lord as did He.

God's great and powerful love is shown throughout verses 4 and 5 in the Messiah's willingness to serve and submit, as we see him trust his God-given ability to speak wisely of God to those who are weary. We also see this willing submission as Jesus spends his day to day life in fellowship with God as "*He awakens me morning by morning.*"

So how then does this submission play itself out in the life of the Messiah? Through courage! In verses 6-9 we are sent through a scene that shows just a glimpse of the horrors and sufferings that Christ had to face. From the plucking of the beard to spitting, shaming and mocking, we are offered only a small taste of the hardships leading to the crucifixion. Yet God's care and love is shown through the courage of Christ! Despite knowing all that the Messiah was going to face, he knew that the "*Lord God will help*" him while he set his face like flint so that nothing, not even pain, would turn him from his enduring faith to God. The Messiah knows that he has no need to be ashamed and shall not be condemned.

So, as we get closer to Good Friday and Easter, we must hear the challenge placed upon us by Christ in verses 10-11. Fear the Lord and obey the Messiah! Walk in the path of Light! Trust in God, find your courage in Him! Avoid walking in the fire created by your own sparks, so you may avoid torment placed upon you by the hand of the Lord.

Response: Our world has been extremely divided over the past few years. Whether it be political, religious, or social issues, we are divided. Inspired by Isaiah and his Messiah, Jesus, I would encourage us all to stay true to the word of God! Let us find our courage in Him. And let us be faithful servants, like Him, even in the midst of trial and tribulation.



the suffering
servant

Prayer: Let us pray after the Psalmist these words given to us in Psalm 1... Lord, how *blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.*

And Lord, You have warned us that *the wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for You, Lord, know the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.*

Lord Jesus, You were, You are, that "blessed man."

Help me to follow You with real faith and courage.

Amen.

- Justin Luevano



FEBRUARY 26

"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

¹³ See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

¹⁴ 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—¹⁵ 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 ¹ Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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:

God has a problem and that problem is us, the people He created to inhabit His perfect earth. We are described in this passage as sheep—stupid and stubborn. Psalm 14:1-3 goes even further- we are corrupt fools, devoid of understanding and incapable of doing good. Being “slow to anger and plenteous in mercy” (Psalm 103:8), God dealt with people in various ways. When Adam and Eve disobeyed, God chased them out of the garden. Solution #1.

Their descendants multiplied and by Noah’s time “Every intent of the thoughts of his (man’s) heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). God was sorry He made us, wiped out all but Noah’s family with a flood; and then He promised He would never do that again. Solution #2.

Next God chose Abraham and his descendants to be His special people and an example to those around them. He gave them laws, judges, kings, prophets, and even miracles to help them be faithful. Some obeyed; more did not. Men’s traditions replaced God’s laws, worship became rote and insincere, and leaders pursued their own agendas and forgot God. God took away their sovereignty. Solution #3.

Then came God’s surprise solution: He fathered a son with a virgin human woman. This child was neither good-looking nor famous, coming from a small “nowhere” village in northern Judah. He became an itinerant teacher, helping the lower classes and antagonizing those in power. In the end, he fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy of a suffering servant—despised, rejected, wounded, pierced, punished, and cut off out of the land of the living. The perfect Son of God became the perfect sacrifice, able to make many righteous. With His wounds, we are “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.” He has done it all for us. The will of God prospers in His hand. Jesus is God’s final and altogether effective solution.

Response:

How does the will of God prosper in your life? How has God made you able to serve Him well? Since Jesus’ sacrifice makes us to be accounted righteous, what does that look like? I imagine myself standing before God the Judge, being justly accused and saying, over and over, “I plead the blood of Christ” like some Mafioso pleading

the 5th amendment. Then God the Judge says, “I declare you righteous.” It takes my breath away. Thank You, Jesus.

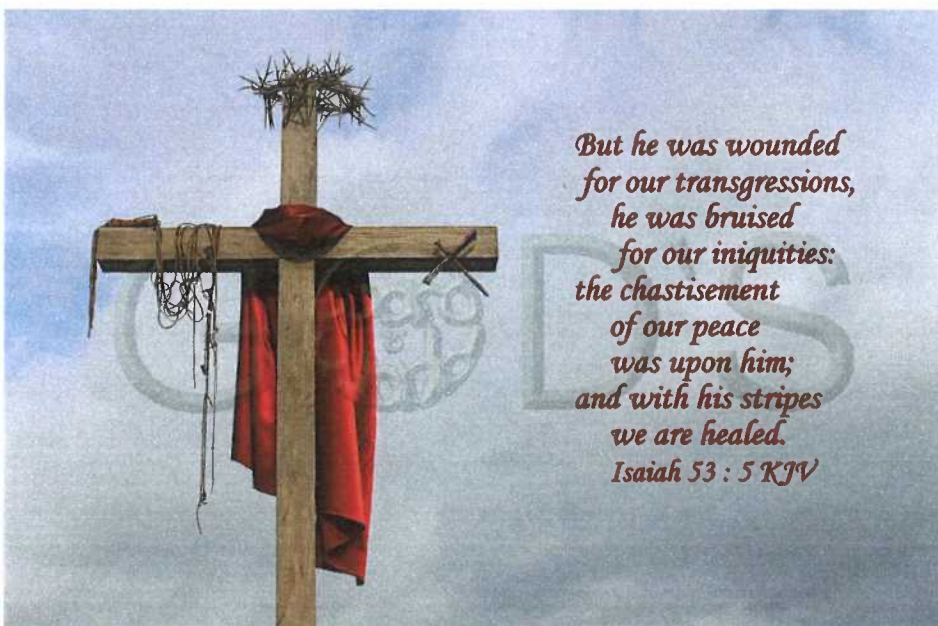
Prayer:

Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, thank You for Your sacrifice. Thank You for giving Your all so that You could give Your righteousness to us. May Your Holy Spirit empower us to be good and faithful servants. Thank You, Source of All That is Good, for the prosperity of the heart that we enjoy because of Jesus. You are greatly to be praised. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

- Dianne Billharz



**Lorenzo Lotto, Ecce Homo
(Behold the Man) – ca. 1550**



FEBRUARY 27

"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

¹ "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the Lord. ² 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. ³ "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. ⁴ 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.

⁵ "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.

⁶ 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:

Several months before the time this passage speaks about, can't you just hear

God saying, "ah come on guys, how many times do I have to tell you, how many more chances do you think you deserve!?" They obviously didn't take Him seriously because as we read in this passage, God essentially says (and with some sadness in His heart?), "OK boys, I'll be taking it over from here. I'm fixing this problem and I'm fixing it for good." Jumping forward 2000 years, how close am I to getting the "Woe,..." speech from Him? Am I "tending the flock" His way or my way? Am I protecting, training up, and nurturing those under my care in a way that brings Glory to Him? Fortunately He has put the permanent "Fix" in and those who call on His name will be saved.

Response:

Thought... Who are the people in my "flock"?

Prayer:

Our loving and always caring Father, here is another example of a human wrong and a heavenly promise. When we read, "Woe,...." in Your Word, help us to be reminded that we are probably guilty of the same sins this story is referring to. Help us also to be reminded of the promise You fulfilled through the life and death of Your Son, "the Lord of Righteousness". In the saving Name of Your Son we pray. Amen.

- Dan Carne



FEBRUARY 28

"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

³¹ "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.

³² 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.

³⁴ 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:

Living The New Covenant, Being Known By God

Covenant is an important word in the Bible. It is no accident that this local body in Reno, where we serve Christ together, is named Covenant. There were the Adamic, Mosaic and Davidic Covenants where YHWH continued to reveal His binding



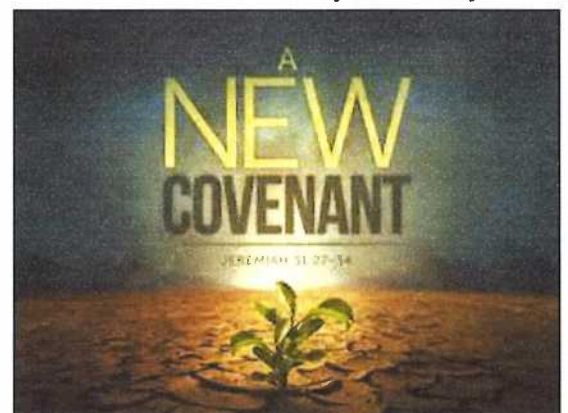
promises to His people. Jeremiah thirty-one is where God promises *the* New Covenant to beat *all* covenants. Maybe we should change our name to 'New' Covenant Presbyterian Church? (No emails and phone calls please, our name is just fine). You see, it is all about Christ who makes all things new. Especially fallen sinful people just like me and you.

Know is also an important word. It is not casual acquaintance, or just an awareness, but deep, lasting, intimate knowledge based upon care and love. God has it for His covenant people, and we are to have it for each other. If we have this love and care for one who is not yet His, God may use it to bring them to Himself where they come to know Him as well. Most importantly, those in Christ Jesus will grow intimately to know God more and more each day until they come live with Him forever in His glory.

And of course *New* is an important word. There will be a New Heavens and a New Earth (so 'Turn Your Hat Around!' as Brother Danny preached while back). Those who have been saved by Christ's shed blood and regenerated by the Holy Spirit are new creations. We who are in Christ are part of this new covenant and are not only intimately known by God, but also helped by His Holy Spirit, to become more like Jesus. Christ's death and resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit assure this new covenant to whosoever truly believes. We are eternally His and He is eternally ours. Praise His glorious grace!

Response:

The question is, are we living like we are new? The Apostle Paul said in Romans 7:18, "...I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." That sounds just like me. How about you? As long as we are in this sinful world, we will live outside of perfection and be swayed to some degree by our sin and the world around us. Don't give up! Don't give in! God made us a covenant community to love,



help, encourage, disciple and exhort each other. The Holy Spirit is working sanctification with us, His New Covenant Community, to become more like Christ Jesus who saved us, and will glorify us!

Prayer:

Gracious God, I am Your New Creation bound by Your New Covenant in Christ Jesus. Forgive my sins and renew my mind. Holy Spirit help me to be conformed to the image of Jesus; loving, helping and caring for all around me. May I live in Christ's newness and grow in His grace. May the works that I do be a proof that He knows me and that I know Him. In the matchless name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

- Gerry Dunlap

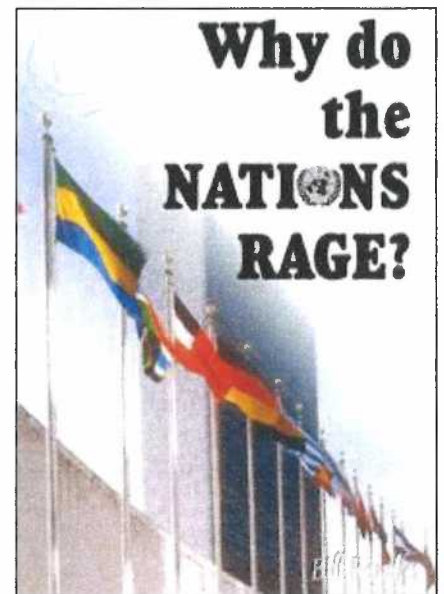
MARCH 2

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



Text: Psalm 2

¹ Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?
² The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.
³ "Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters."
⁴ The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.
⁵ Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
⁶ "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."
⁷ I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."
⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.
⁹ You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery."
¹⁰ Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth.
¹¹ Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.
¹² 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:

There is only one ultimate king. God has allowed Satan to rule over the earth for a time. Some people do not realize Satan is temporary and Jesus will be the eventual ruler. Jesus is the anointed One. The word "Messiah" comes from the Hebrew phrase "anointed one."



Here we read the nations and people are making plans that will be in vain. The rulers (kings) have no real power over Jesus (God's "anointed one"). He laughs at them. God installed the line of David to rule, and it will come to be on Zion (Jerusalem). There is no mention of how this transfer of power will take place, but if God says it, it will happen.

God declares Jesus is his Son and God is Jesus's father. Jesus can ask whatever he wants and it will be given to him. Jesus is to rule over the earth with an iron

scepter. The scepter was symbol of imperial regalia (power). Back in the time this was written, iron was one of the hardest metals known. Striking someone with iron can do a lot of damage; not something we want done to us. The passage talks about dashing the people and rulers to pieces like pottery. In Revelation 2:26-27 this Psalm is quoted, and the one who conquers with God is pictured ruling over the nations. God is all powerful.

God wants good things (Blessed are all who take refuge in God) to happen to the people and rulers of the earth, but we are commanded to serve the Lord with fear and trembling (avoiding being smashed to pieces). If we choose to try to fight with God, things will not go well for us. We can listen to Satan, the father of lies, but life will get harder if we do. When Jesus was tempted by Satan, Jesus responded with psalms for answers (on the high tower told to throw himself off and angels would catch him (perverting the meaning of Psalm 91:11), but Jesus said do not tempt the Lord your God (quoting Deuteronomy 6:16). If we read God's Word, Books like the Psalms and even Deuteronomy, we will also find a valuable tool –the Sword of the Spirit (The Bible)—to defend us against Satan's attacks.

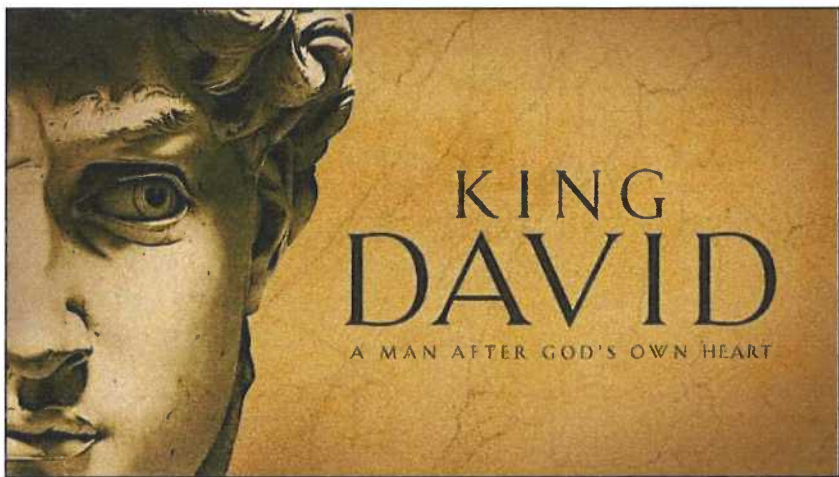
Response:

Make a decision not to spend your time in vain. Understand that to anger God will have bad consequences. King David was a man after God's heart. His sins were terrible and in many ways ruined his life, but he was willing and able to keep a right attitude towards God. God praised David for his heart attitude. We all need to be busy doing things that please God and keeping our hearts right towards God.

Prayer:

Talk to God. Pray. You might even want to read a Psalm and incorporate some of what you read in your prayer. Example; using Ps 2:11... Help me, Lord, to know what You may want for me today so that I may follow in Your will (fear and trembling to avoid God's disapproval).

- Jim Prosser



MARCH 3

"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

¹⁶ Again the word of the Lord came to me: ¹⁷ "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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. ²⁰ 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.' ²¹ I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.

²² "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. ²³ 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.

²⁴ “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. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ²⁸ You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. ³² 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:

Ezekiel wrote this book during his 22 years as a captive in Babylon where he served as a Jewish “street preacher.” He told everyone about God’s love for them, but they would not listen. His talk about an ultimate judgment for their sinful actions fell on deaf ears. In short, the people of Israel were a mess. God was concerned about the salvation of not only his people but of the entire world. The people were totally dysfunctional and ended up as slaves in Babylon. If God allowed his people to remain in sin, they would be totally destroyed by their enemies which would lead to other nations concluding that their pagan gods were more powerful than Israel’s God (Isaiah 48:11). To protect his holy name, God would return a small remnant of his people to Israel. God was not going to share his glory with false gods as he alone is the one true God. This small remnant had the responsibility to represent God properly to the rest of the world. He promised (Psalm 52:10) to restore Israel not only physically but also spiritually. To do this he would give them a “new heart” for following him and put his spirit within each of them to transform and empower them to do his will. Ultimately, He would gather Israelites from all over the world and bring them back to their homeland. A New Covenant was promised that was ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.



Response:

It doesn’t matter how badly we have lived our lives because God still loves us. We, however, must ultimately confess to our sinful ways and ask for his forgiveness. The book of Ezekiel clearly illustrates how miserable and sinful God’s people became. The New Covenant, however, in the form of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, brings love and grace to anyone who truly seeks forgiveness. The Holy Spirit will then grow a “new heart” leading to peace and light in new behavior patterns to prepare them for God’s future Judgment Day.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, Ezekiel fearlessly preached Your word to the exiled Jews in the streets of Babylon. He wanted them to hear and believe in the timeless truth of Your love and power. We ask that You help us to do the same in the ungodly world that we experience each day. Lord, help us to share that same timeless message of love and grace with both friends and strangers in our daily walk. In Your name we pray, Amen. - Larry Stockert

MARCH 4

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



Text: Zechariah 9:9-13

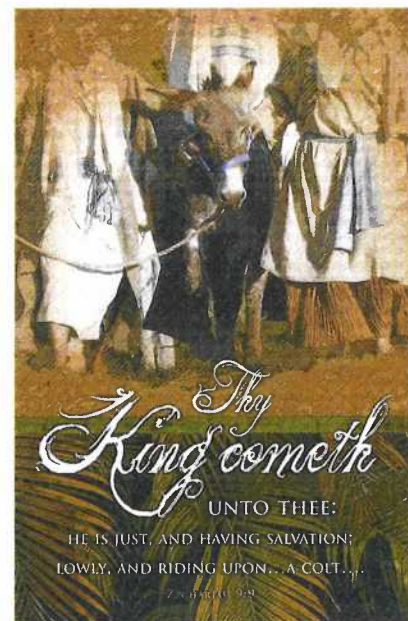
⁹ Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.

¹² 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.



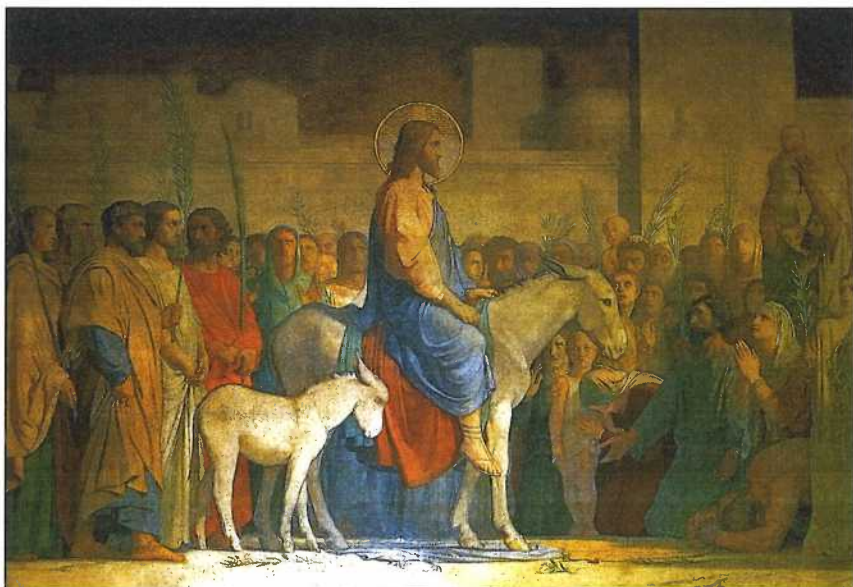
Reflection:

One of the most charming and surprising Palm Sunday celebrations I ever saw was children pulling a wheeled wooden donkey with a seated Jesus down the church's center aisle as they sang out their "Hosannas." The scriptural account of Jesus entering Jerusalem sitting on a donkey, recorded in Matthew 21:8-11, indeed shows him thronged by his followers shouting their "Hosannas" while spreading their cloaks and cut branches before him. It is a happy and tumultuous scene, but do we know all it meant?

Jesus viewed this triumphal entry as a highly significant act, a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy proclaimed over 500 years earlier. When Jesus sent his disciples to find the donkey and her colt, he quoted a portion of today's passage. What did it mean for Jesus to enter Jerusalem in this manner? The people of Jerusalem, poetically called "*daughter of Zion*" in Zechariah, recognized that Jesus was entering in majesty—spreading cloaks was royal homage and a donkey was the mount reserved for kings. The crowd acclaimed him as "*the Son of David*", the title repeatedly given the promised Messiah in the Old Testament. Their "*Hosannas*" were the Hebrew word for "save." We see the Jewish crowd excitedly hailing the arrival of their Messiah, but what were their expectations?

The radical reversal of the cries within the span of Holy Week from "Hosanna" to "Crucify him!" shows that they wanted a Messiah who would free them from the yoke of Rome. They clamored for a king who would rule a kingdom

more glorious than that of King David. But their Messiah was not the conquering warrior king they craved. Zechariah describes him as humble, mounted on a donkey, rather than a war horse. This promised king will cut off instruments of war—the chariot, war horse, battle bow—and will instead speak peace to the nations. On Palm Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem righteous and having salvation, as Zechariah predicted; but, as the events of the Passion revealed, his perfect righteousness was necessary so that he could be the only acceptable sacrifice in our place. His costly death on the cross, the fulfillment of the blood of the covenant ceremony in Exodus 24:8, makes all who believe righteous before a Holy God. "*God made him who had no sin to be sin*

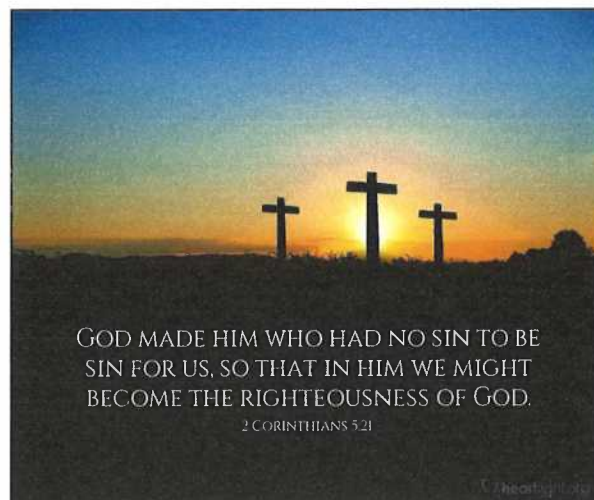


for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (II Cor 5:21). The mission of Messiah Jesus was not merely political conquest and peace for only one nation, but a cosmic event—a coming New Heaven and New Earth and “*peace to all those on whom God’s favor rests*” as the angels sang at his birth.

Response:

May we cease trying to mold Jesus into our limited expectations but worship him in his true majesty. May God help us this Lenten season to meditate on all King Jesus accomplished to bring us peace with God. May we long ever more for the day when “*his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth*”.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for coming as our humble king to make the way for us to be subjects in Your heavenly kingdom. May we, through the power and direction of Your Holy Spirit, be faithfully seeking to advance Your kingdom. Amen. - Debbie Barackman



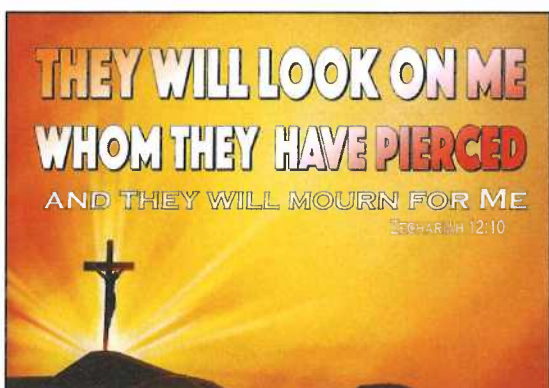
MARCH 5

“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

¹⁰ “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. ¹¹ On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. ¹² 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, ¹³ the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, ¹⁴ 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



MARCH 6

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



Text: Psalm 118

¹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. ² Let Israel say: "His love endures forever." ³ Let the house of Aaron say: "His love endures forever." ⁴ Let those who fear the Lord say: "His love endures forever."

⁵ In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free. ⁶ The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? ⁷ The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies.

⁸ It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. ⁹ It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

¹⁰ All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off. ¹¹ They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off. ¹² 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. ¹³ I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me. ¹⁴ The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

¹⁵ 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!"

¹⁷ I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done. ¹⁸ The Lord has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.

¹⁹ Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. ²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter.

²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.

²² The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; ²³ the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success.

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you.

²⁹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.



Reflection:

A flood of memories came to me when reading this chapter. First, flash back to Sunday school. I am a six year-old singing with my Sunday school teacher and fellow students the following call and response song.

This is the day (echo)
 That the Lord hath made (echo)
 We will rejoice (echo)
 And be glad in it (echo)
 This the day that that Lord hath made,
 We will rejoice and be glad in it,
 This is the day (echo)
 That the Lord... hath... made.

I read the chapter again and I was reminded of the newspaper comic strip "The Family Circus" by Bill Keane, on August 31, 1994. His comic delivered this wisdom: "Yesterday's the past, tomorrow's the future, but today is a GIFT. That's why it's called the present."

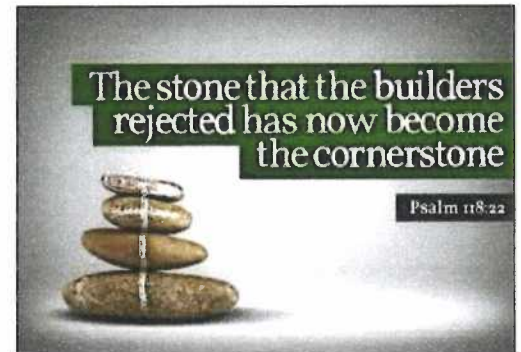
Then I read the scripture again and I was reminded of this past Thanksgiving and I was begging my sister-in-law to remember a song we sang at church camp together. All I could remember of the song was "duh, duh, duh, give thanks to the Lord for He is good." The following was the song I was thinking of that she was able to remind me of.

Praise The Lord by Dave Moody

Praise the Lord, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. (echo)
 His steadfast love endures forever, and he is good. (echo)
 We will tell the mighty deeds of the Lord,
 And show forth all of His praise, Hallelujah!

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, From everlasting to everlasting.
 Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, From everlasting to everlasting!

Let all God's people say Amen, (Amen, Amen!)
 Let all God's people say Amen, and praise the Lord!



I had no idea this chapter in Psalms would stir so many memories, thoughts and feelings. The verse that resides with me the most verse 14, ***The Lord is my strength and my song, He has become my salvation.*** I quickly interpreted ***The Lord is my Strength*** as a representation of my past. One grows strong through experiences and trials that strengthen us for current and future struggles. Therefore strength comes from the past and how God has been there with me through thick and thin. ***And my song***, I understand as somewhat present progressive, it starts, continues then ends, it represents God being present in my life right now. Finally, ***He has become my salvation***, is the promise for my future with him always.

However, what I got hung up with the most was ***The stone the builders rejected, became the cornerstone/capstone.*** I always heard this verse translated to say cornerstone, referring to the foundation of an important structure. (I also discovered that the Canaanites would perform a ceremony that included human sacrifice when laying the cornerstone. Note the parallelism to God and Christ.) Another translation is capstone, which is the finishing touch of the structure that ties it all together.

In this one word, the translation can mean the ***first*** and the ***last***. Again, note the parallelism to our God, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. He is our past, present and future.

Response:

Challenge: Who has God been to you in your past? Contemplate how He has been sovereign in your life.

Who is He now? Are you struggling to let Him be your God in all the life circumstances? What can you give to Him right now?

Who will God be to you? Are you allowing God to strengthen and mold you to be who He wants you to be?

Prayer:

Blessed be the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Thank you for being the great I Am in my life. This the day that the Lord hath made, I will rejoice and be glad in it . Amen. - Ryan Ludwig

MARCH 7

"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

¹ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, ² "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. ⁹ Do not eat the meat raw or cooked in water, but roast it over the fire—head, legs and inner parts. ¹⁰ Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. ¹¹ 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.

¹² "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. ¹³ 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:

The Israelites had been held captive in a state of slavery under the Egyptians and their Pharaoh. The Lord had asked Moses and Aaron to persuade Pharaoh to let their people go out of his country, but Pharaoh had a hardened heart. Even though the Lord (through Moses and Aaron) brought plague upon plague on Egypt, Pharaoh reneged time after time on his promise to let the people go.

One more plague – The Plague on the Firstborn – would be brought upon Pharaoh and Egypt by the Lord. This was to happen while the Israelites observed a Passover meal – with specific details given by the Lord and passed on to them by Moses and Aaron: a one-year old male lamb without blemish to be sacrificed and its blood spread on the door frames of each of their homes, the sacrifice roasted and eaten in haste, with the family members dressed as though they were soon to embark on a journey of deliverance.

The people of Israel were obedient in following the Lord's instructions and so were spared when the Lord passed throughout the area, while those who had no blood on their door frames lost their firstborn sons to death.

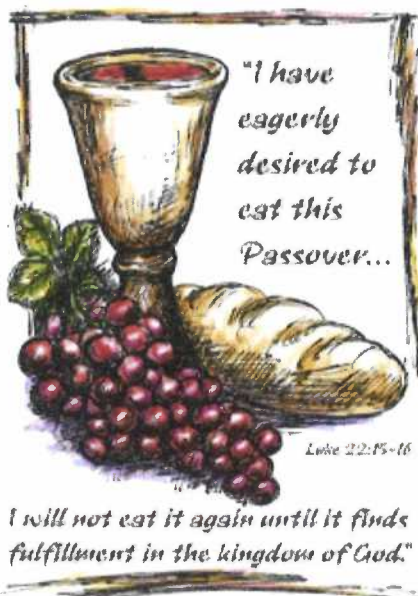
Response:

Our God honors obedience, and the people of Israel were released from Pharaoh's cruel clutches. The Gospel story of God's Son Jesus is the greater one, for Jesus lived an unblemished life to the fullest, being obedient to His Father even to death on a cruel cross. There Jesus took the sins of the world upon Himself, becoming for us our Passover Lamb. God honored that sacrifice in the resurrection and life in heaven forever at the Father's right hand.

Prayer:

Lord God, I am so grateful for Your abundant mercy and grace, for being a truly obedient child of yours is often hard. Lord Jesus, thank You for taking my sins with You to the cross on my behalf, for You are my Passover Lamb. I bow before You and praise Your holy name. Amen.

- Joyce Miers



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

MARCH 9

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



Text: Mark 8:31-38

³¹ 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. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ 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."

³⁴ 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. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ 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:

Joni Eareckson Tada has spent over forty-seven years in a wheelchair. At age seventeen she became a quadriplegic as the result of a diving accident. She suffers chronic physical pain. Recently she was diagnosed with breast cancer and went through debilitating chemotherapy suffering nausea, weakness and sickness. If you have followed Joni's life story you know she has written wonderfully inspiring books, has spoken at Women of Faith and many other conferences, and has a radio ministry. She runs a ministry called *Joni and Friends* which takes wheelchairs all over the world and runs camps for the disabled and their families. She is an amazing woman of God. Joni admits to almost cracking under her load of suffering, but says that Jesus helps her not to grow weary or lose heart. Jesus helps her persevere. Joni glorifies God in her afflictions through the strength of Christ's resurrection that gives her power to say "no" to bitterness and "yes" to grace. She says that she feels a little like Job, whom Satan used to taunt God saying, "Job doesn't love You. He loves Your blessings. You're not great enough, God, to get someone to follow you on Your own merits." She says, as Job said, "God, though you slay me, yet will I put my trust in you" (Job 13:15). Joni talks about when all the disease, disability, disappointment, heartache, suffering and affliction will seem like some long ago, faraway half-forgotten dream. She looks forward to hearing "Well done, good and faithful servant. You persevered. You endured."

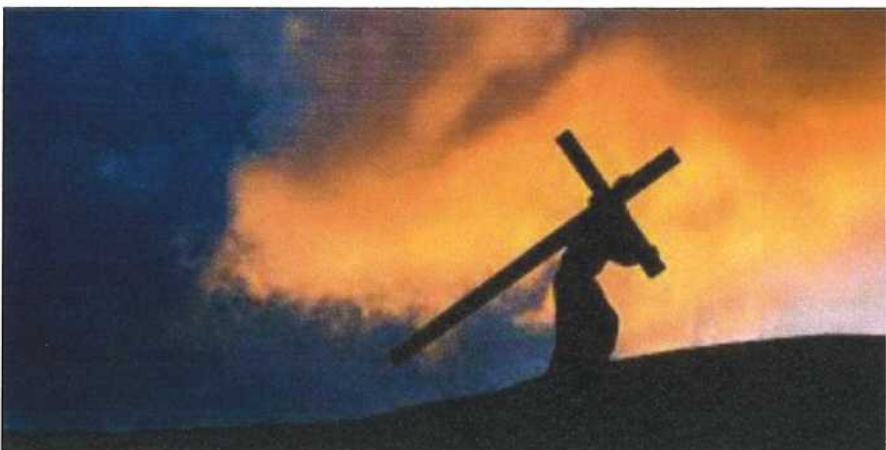


In our Mark text for today, when Jesus was having the conversation with Peter and the other disciples, they just could not grasp that rejection, suffering and death were God's plan for this Rabbi they so loved. They could not comprehend that His suffering and death was necessary for their own eternal salvation. Even more so, they could not grasp that suffering was to be in their lives as well. At this point in their journey they had a very human perspective. But when the time was right, the Holy Spirit gave them the understanding that suffering for the cause of Christ was their privilege. Looking forward to eternity with Christ enabled them to persevere and win hearts for Him. Historians tell us that all the disciples suffered persecution and most of them died violent deaths. Christians throughout history have suffered persecution. Paul said in Colossians 1:24, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in

Christ's afflictions." We followers of Christ are called to suffer for and with Christ and to do it joyfully. Our suffering is identified with the suffering of Christ. Paul rejoiced to be able to participate in suffering for God's people.

Response

There is all manner of suffering in our lives. Why do hurricanes, tornados and earthquakes destroy homes and livelihoods? Why are there senseless wars and cruelties? Why are there horrible diseases, sickness and poverty? Why do relationships fall apart? Why are Christians persecuted in parts of the world even today? Some of it is self inflicted. Some of it just doesn't seem fair or make any sense. When suffering comes into our lives the question is, "How do we respond?" We can fix our eyes on Jesus and keep serving Him with joy even in the midst of trials. When we suffer we can know by faith that Christ is with us. We can endure trials joyfully knowing that the Lord of the



universe knows and understands our suffering because He suffered. When we accept what comes without complaining we are sharing in His afflictions. As Joni says, the memory of that shared suffering will fade in heaven as we have fellowship of sharing in His joy.

Prayer:

Thank You, dear Jesus, for Your willingness to suffer and die for us. In our finite and earth-bound hearts and minds we are like Your disciple Peter who rebelled against even the mention of

suffering and death. We are able, this side of the cross, to understand and accept with gratitude Your suffering and death for our sin. But we are like Peter so often when trials and suffering come into our own lives. Help us, Lord, to know that You have purpose in our sufferings. Be with us Jesus – Emmanuel – God-with-us always and especially when life is hard. Fill us with Your Spirit not just to endure, but to persevere with joy and gratitude.

- Kay Blakely

MARCH 10

"...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. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴ But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

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

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ He is

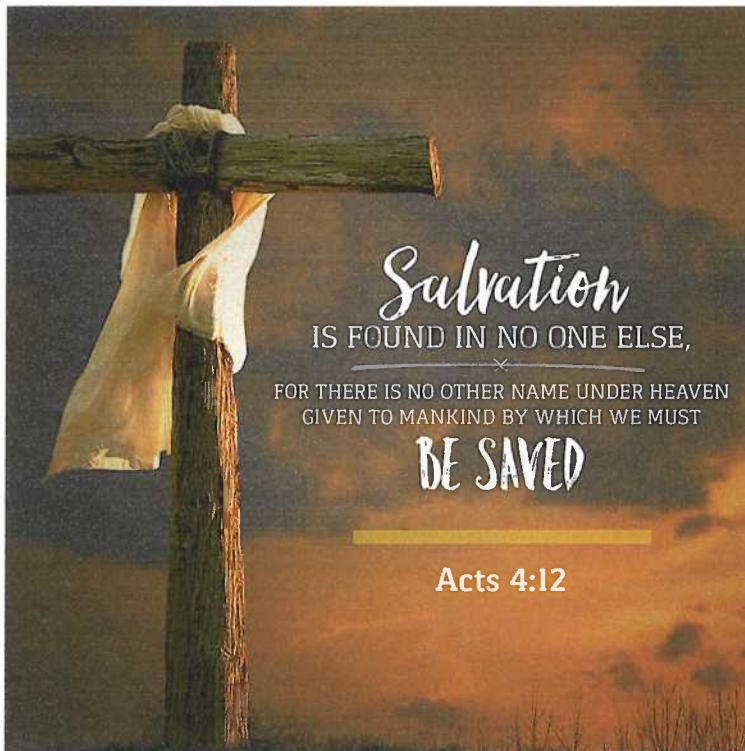
“ ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.’

¹² 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:

Peter - He was a burly fisherman who dropped his nets to follow Jesus, the first disciple to acknowledge Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God," the man who drew his sword in the garden to protect Jesus from 600 Roman soldiers and who, later that night, denied Him three times...

Today we meet a new Peter, a bold evangelist and leader who has seen the Resurrected Jesus and been filled with the Holy Spirit. Yet Luke, the author of Acts, emphasizes that all the apostles were not some "supermen" doing what we cannot: "*Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.*" (Acts 14:15)



Discussion - The day before the events of our passage, Peter and John healed a man lame since birth (Acts 3:2-11). His exuberant "walking, and leaping, and praising God" drew a large crowd around the Temple. Peter seized the opportunity to preach a sermon calling people to repentance.

And the crowds responded: We are told 5,000 "men" since the Day of Pentecost (add in even more women and children) now believed (a not insubstantial number in a city estimated by ancient historian Josephus at 25,000 to 85,000).

So, the Temple guards and Jewish authorities decided to intervene. Peter and John were arrested and detained overnight until their actions could be further investigated.

First, we cannot completely disparage the religious leaders, the Sanhedrin (made up of 71 rulers, elders, priests and scribes). Based on Deuteronomy 13, it was their duty to check out any prophets, "dreamer of dreams" or those performing signs and wonders who showed up; they were charged with determining if anyone was pulling people away from Jehovah to follow other gods.

However, it should not surprise us that the concerned group in Acts 4 had ulterior motives. The large contingent of Sadducees was especially disturbed by any emphasis on the resurrection. They were the rationalists, the aristocrats, the ultimate "modern men" who denied any hint of the supernatural, especially the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus. And they were in the ascendancy within the Sanhedrin.

But Peter was unfazed. He launched into his sermon. With diplomacy and incredible skill he unflinchingly pointed again to the rejection of the true Messiah, the reality of the resurrection, and Israel's rejection of the "chief cornerstone" on which the true Israel would be built. And then he gave us a verse that deserves to be memorized by every Christian: "*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" (v. 12)

Response:

First, please go back and read Acts 3 to get an idea of the vivid scene and events that brought Peter, John and a healed cripple to stand before the highest religious authorities in Israel. It's a glorious story! Next, read all of Psalm 118 (the Psalm quoted by Peter in v.11) for a better appreciation of its messianic overtones: The Holy Spirit brings it to Peter's mind, it was quoted by Jesus before the authorities (Luke 20:17), and it was sung by the crowds on Palm Sunday.

This passage should be incredibly encouraging to us today! Why? It shows us a relatable evangelist, Peter, and refutes by example many of the fears that hold us back from being witnesses for Christ in our own lives:

* We all know the Peter who stumbled often in the Gospels, even denying Christ three times on the night He was arrested. Yet this man at the beginning of Acts is a courageous leader who has been fully redeemed and moved into a powerful ministry. There's no lingering shame as he presses forward with Christ. Wherever you were when you met Jesus, whatever sins are in your past, if you are in Christ you are a new creation. Go forth boldly and tell people how good it feels to be redeemed!

* Through his willingness to be obedient and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, this unschooled man has already given four sermons (by Acts 4) that have astonished the most learned leaders of his day (read the rest of Acts 4). You don't need a seminary degree to proclaim Christ. Listen for the Holy Spirit, for Jesus promised: "*When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.*" (Luke 12:11-12)

* He has focused on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in his testimony before men, authorities and crowds, and so Peter has seen thousands come into the kingdom. How good it feels to see a friend's eyes light up as the Spirit causes them to grasp the truth of salvation in Christ, to hear someone pray for the first time, to work with children who so easily find joy in Jesus, to be in church during a baptism. Be like Peter! Share Jesus.

* Jesus said "*I am THE Way, THE Truth and THE Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6) Peter gives us another verse that should be in our witnessing repertoire, memorized to be used when the Holy Spirit calls it forth: "*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" (Acts 4:12) Do these words sound exclusive and thus culturally abhorrent? Memorize and use them anyway. Your job is to be truthful and let the Holy Spirit work in the hearts of pre-believers to cause acceptance of truth and deliverance into new life.

* Get out in the marketplace! In the days after Jesus' crucifixion, the apostles stayed hidden. But, once they met the Risen Jesus and were filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, they boldly went forth to where their message would be heard. Watch for opportunities to share a verse or a godly greeting, to offer to pray with someone who is hurting, to invite a friend to church. If you ask, God WILL lead you to opportunities that will grow both the kingdom and your faith.

Prayer:

Almighty God, Three in One, We praise You today with verses from Psalm 118:

The LORD's right hand has done mighty things! The LORD's right hand is lifted high;

I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done.

I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this,

and it is marvelous in our eyes. The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad. LORD, save us!

LORD, grant us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you.

The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine on us. You are my God,

and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Amen!

- Patti Hemsley



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 him, loving him, believing in him, being committed to him.

- David Watson, *Called and Committed*, p.9

MARCH 11

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



Text: Romans 5:1-11

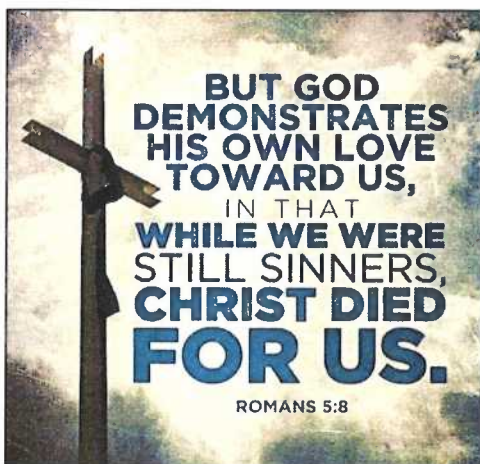
Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ 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. ⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ 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! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The List Goes On and On...

Faith, peace, grace, righteousness, love... the list goes on and on as Paul so clearly reminds us where we stand with our Lord. He gently reminds us of the peace we have with God- not just the peaceful feeling we so long for, but a new peaceful relationship with Him. Paul writes of the grace we can firmly stand upon. He writes of rejoicing—rejoicing in hope but also rejoicing in our difficulties, our trials, our sufferings. So often in a text like this, I stop here. Being reminded to rejoice in my own sufferings just seems too big at times. But thankfully, Romans 5:8 appears in the passage. “*But God demonstrated His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

So often, I hold off on doing really good things in hopes of first being able to be wiser, calmer, stronger... the list goes on and on. I wait. I have great intentions of changing my behavior, my attitude, and my actions before I do really good things for others and for God.

But God didn't wait for us to clean up our act and get it together. He died for us while we were still busy sinning. He showered his love upon us in the single action of His death on the cross.



Another reminder comes in Matthew 5:16, where Jesus is preaching the beloved Sermon on the Mount. “*In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*” Jesus commands us to shine our light, and to show our good deeds to others. There's no footnote here (I checked!) about making sure we have our act together or feel ready to shine. His command is clear: Shine and show good deeds to others! He calls us to create a list of good deeds that go on and on.

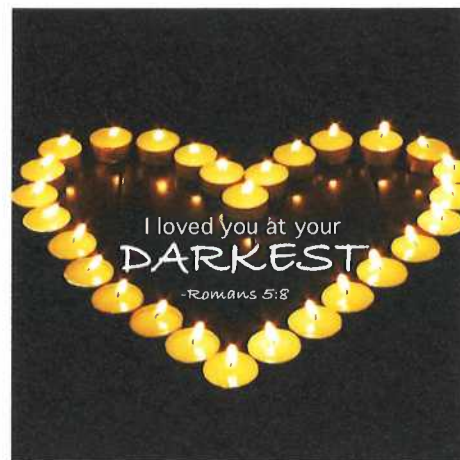
Response:

Are you waiting to clean up your act and get it together before moving forward with your faith? Or with a relationship? Or with forgiveness? “*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” While we are still sinners, what can you do for Christ? How can you shine your good deeds—right now—for others to see? Create a list of good deeds that goes on and on.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for accepting us and loving us in our sin. Thank You for dying for us, the ungodly, at just the right time. Thank You for challenging us to shine our good deeds so others may see You and praise You! Equip me, Lord, to shine in the midst of my sin. Amen.

- Kathy Ludwig



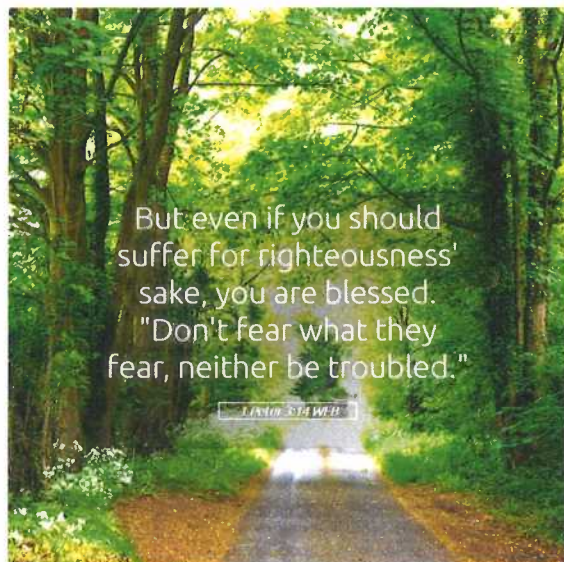
MARCH 12

"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

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰ 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, ²¹ 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, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

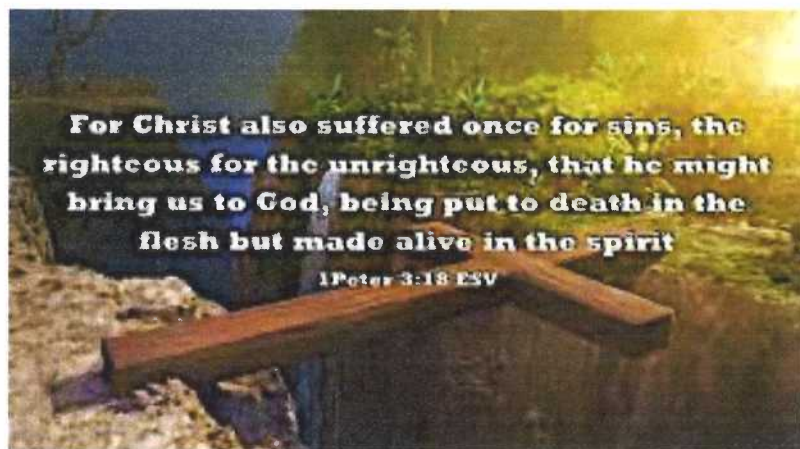


Reflection:

This passage in Peter gives us a glimpse into one of the struggles that a lot of Christians today face as we navigate our comfortable American culture. Or is it? Perhaps this is nothing new. Seems to me I remember something about a rooster crowing... (John 13:35-38). How steadfast are we willing to be in our faith? We all know that Christ made the ultimate sacrifice, being crucified and tortured to the point of death on the cross (v.18). What does that sacrifice look like for us? I think it's one of those things that looks really good on paper and we all nod our heads and say "absolutely!" But when it really comes down to it, we make rational decisions based on how comfortable we want to be here on earth. By that I mean there are often times limitations to what we are willing to sacrifice. Are we willing to sacrifice our relationships, friends, family, safety or even our career so that we can defend our faith when the time comes? Would we literally lay down our lives in order for an unsaved soul to be saved.

Response:

It has at times seemed to me, perhaps more often when my walk with Christ was newer, that when we became followers of Christ, things should get easier... better... less painful. God is now reminding us that in the same way that His Son suffered, we will too. We can expect it. We should expect it. We will be blessed by it (v.14). God is asking us not to give up, even though we will be unjustly ridiculed. In Christ's words... "forgive them for they know not what they do."



Prayer:

Lord, give us the strength and confidence to persevere as Your adopted children, standing up for what we believe and knowing that our reward is in heaven. Help us use Christ-like patience to defend our faith to the lost and broken. Thank You, God, for Your daily encouragement.

- Bob Rowe

MARCH 13

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



Text: Hebrews 10:1-25

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, ⁴ because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁵ Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶ with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.

⁷ Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.’”

⁸ 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). ⁹ Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ 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. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, ¹⁴ because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

¹⁶ “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.”

¹⁷ Then he adds:

“Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.”

¹⁸ And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² 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. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ 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:

When I signed up for this scripture, I didn't realize I had signed up for 25 verses. As I type up the scripture, I wonder if everyone who sees how much is included will say “Boy, Jock was sure long-winded this time.” But it is Paul who was longwinded, but what a wonderful description of the changing of the guard as it were. From priests and the law to Jesus.

I found a way to simplify this in the review by the Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary. They looked at these 25 verses in 4 sections.

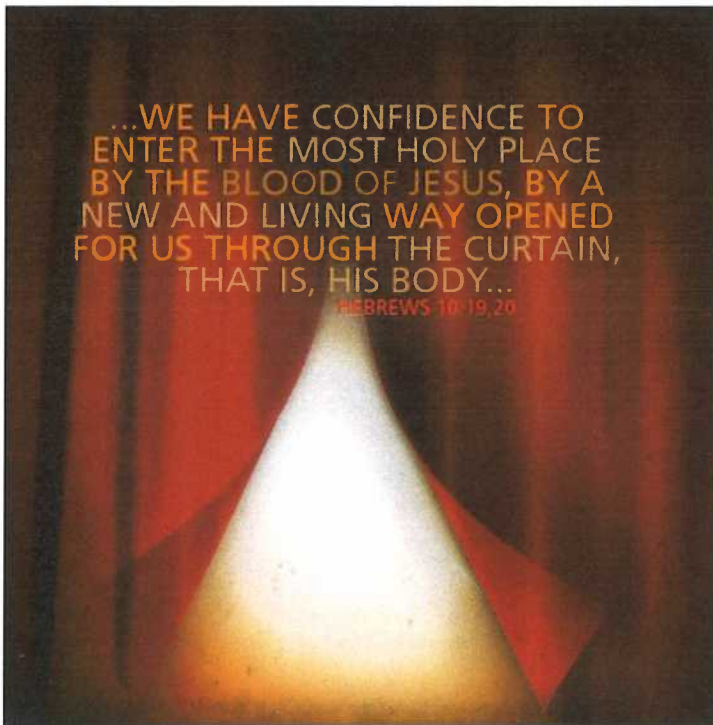
The sacrifices of the law, being repeated, could not take away sins.

“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.”



The abolition of the sacrifices and substitution of Christ's body in their stead.

In the words of Jesus "Sacrifices and offerings... You did not desire, nor were You pleased by them... Here I am, I have come to do Your will." And, by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.



need for priestly sacrifices, which were not ultimately effective in any way. Suddenly we all are connected to God through Jesus. We have been able to obtain perfect remission. In the final verses, Paul tells us what a difference this should make in our lives.

Prayer:

Dear God, what a wonderful description the apostle Paul gives us of the evolution of our connection to You. Through Jesus, we have a direct connection to You. Through Jesus, we become part of Your heavenly kingdom, even while still here living our human lives. I pray that we will recognize our calling to live as Paul has described, both as individuals and as part of Your church. Amen.

– Jock Ochiltree

MARCH 14

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



Text: Galatians 2:15-21

¹⁵ "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ "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! ¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

**Reflection:**

Every 3 years my family is required to move. We don't just move down the street or across town, we move. At the very least it is a new city, but it typically is a new state. Every 3 years our lives are disrupted from what we know, and we adapt to a new environment. New schools, a new church, new jobs, new community, new weather systems. Are you sensing a theme? It's all new. It feels like we are in a constant state of change because as we start to get settled, we anticipate

a change on the horizon.

Take a moment to think of a time you were asked to make a change; big or small, good or bad, willfully or not. Whatever memory was just stirred up I am guessing there was also a certain feeling that accompanied that memory. Change is hard. It is often psychological, emotional, and spiritual.

The Galatians were not any different, they were asked to change. The change they needed was a change that would reconcile them with Christ on the Cross. It was also psychological, emotional, and spiritual. See, the Galatians were not quite getting it. They had heard the Gospel, knew Christ died, but they thought they were justified by the old law alone and did not need to be justified by Christ on the Cross. In his letter, Paul was challenging them to change. He urged them to let the power of Christ allow them to die to their old selves and let Christ live in them. Their justification would come by faith in Christ and not the works of the law. Paul further emphasized that if the law was all that was needed to experience God's grace, then Jesus' death on the Cross would mean absolutely nothing.

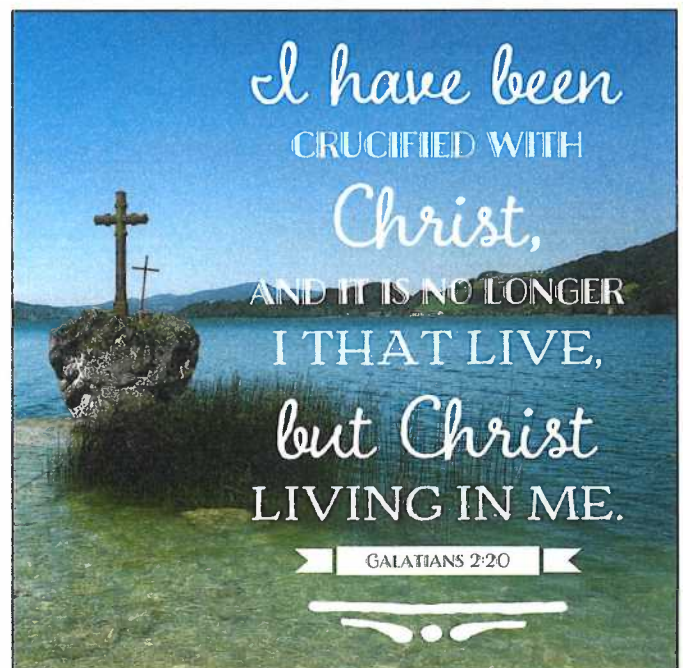
Response:

This Lenten season as you reflect on Christ's death and resurrection, I encourage you to think about a change you might need to help you better to be "crucified with Christ." What would help you dive deeper with Christ? Maybe it is as simple as beefing up your prayer life. Maybe it is finding a community organization that will strengthen your faith. Maybe it is finding an accountability partner or group to share with on a regular basis. Maybe it is a big change like a new job or career. Whatever it might be, don't let Christ's death be in vain. Let your old habits die so Christ can live in you daily.

Prayer:

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus, Your death for us changes everything. We who were locked up in sin are now free to follow Your way of faith and hope and love. We who were about to die are now living in the reality of life eternal and in confident anticipation that when we move—not just down the street or across town but away from this earth and these mortal bodies—we are coming home to You. Help us to make the changes You ask of us to make Your life in us shine more brightly that others may see You and that You will be glorified.

- Katie Guerrero



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

MARCH 16

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

Text: Matthew 21:1-11

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² 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. ³ If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ "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.' "

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ 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!"

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

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



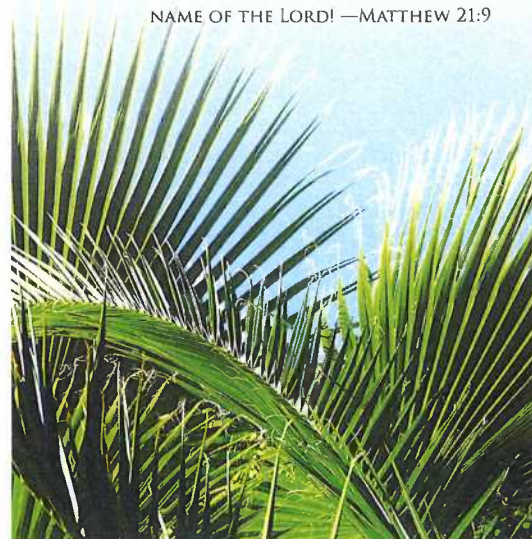
Hosanna!

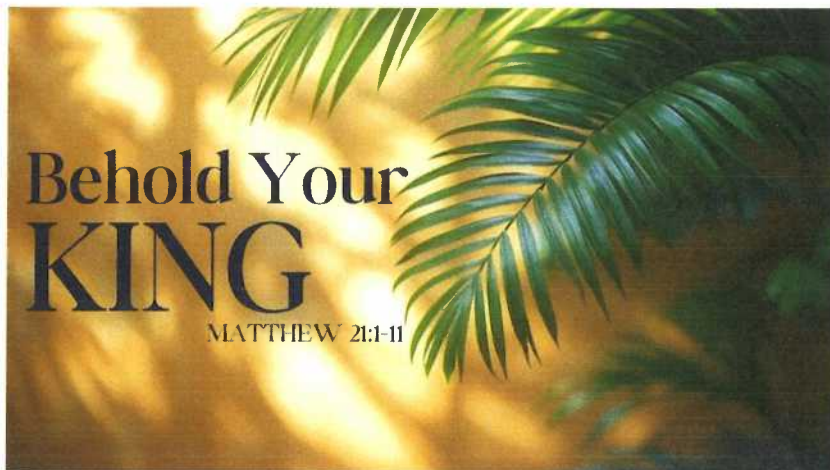
BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO COMES IN THE
NAME OF THE LORD! —MATTHEW 21:9

Reflection:

In this Lent season we are looking at connections between the cradle and the cross. As I reflect on today's passage, I wonder what the thoughts of Jesus' mother were as he rode into Jerusalem. Did she think back to what Gabriel had promised? "[Jesus] will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33). She had watched her son grow up and followed his itinerant ministry among the poor and downtrodden. She had witnessed his miracles. And she was no doubt aware of the opposition he faced from the leaders of Israel. She must have wondered when the promise of Jesus' exaltation would be fulfilled. Now, with crowds preceding and following Jesus, shouting their accolades, recognizing him as a great prophet, she must have felt that the time had finally come for Gabriel's words to be realized.

In writing his account of the Triumphal Entry, Matthew tells us Jesus' entry into Jerusalem atop a donkey fulfills a prophecy of Zechariah that proclaims God's judgement on Israel's enemies and her king's coming in righteousness and with salvation, to proclaim peace to the nations. The crowd's shouts of Hosanna, "Savior," underscore that Jesus was expected to be that victorious leader of Zechariah's prophecy.





From these reference points - my assumed musings of Mary, and Matthew's words of prophecy fulfilled—what strikes me is how wonderfully God fulfills His promises... but how often it is not in the way we would presume. We have the distinct advantage of reading this passage, knowing "the rest of the story." Yes, Jesus brought salvation. Yes, he assumed the throne of David. But not as his followers or his mother would ever have imagined. The way to the eternal throne was not from cradle to the hall of power, but from cradle

through years of obedience, to a tribunal and eventually the cross. Praise God the cross was not the end of the story. Neither was the resurrection. From Easter morning, through the ascension and the Holy Spirit's coming on the early church, the kingdom that never ends was indeed beginning - and we are living in it now. Yet to come is the truly triumphal entry when Christ returns in Glory to call His Church to Himself. God fulfills the promises of Gabriel and the words of Zechariah in ways that far exceed both the angelic message and the prophetic vision.

Response:

How easy it is for me to look at current events and think I can see how things are going to proceed. As I reflect on what it must have been like to see Jesus enter Jerusalem, presume that he was surely to be exalted, and then be crushed by the ensuing events of the trial and crucifixion, I am reminded that my anticipation of "how things will be" is often far from reality. Truly, God's thoughts are not my thoughts neither are his ways my ways (*cf Is 55:8*). Good thing. What He brings to pass, though often impossible to envision from my limited view, is always better than anything I can imagine - even if the way to His reality is fraught with trials and difficulty.

Prayer:

Father God, Righteous Son, Indwelling Spirit, thank You for the many and wonderful ways you bring about Your purposes. Thank You for Jeremiah's words:

For I know what I have planned for you,' says the LORD. 'I have plans to prosper you, not to harm you. I have plans to give you a future filled with hope. When you call out to me and come to me in prayer, I will hear your prayers. When you seek me in prayer and worship, you will find me available to you. If you seek me with all your heart and soul, I will make myself available to you,' says the LORD (Jeremiah 29:11-14).

Help me diligently to seek You in prayer and worship. Help me remember each day that despite what I assume or fear might lie ahead, You have the future in Your hands, to bring about Your eternal purposes for abundant life for all who follow You. And You do so in ways that far surpass my imagination. Help me to trust in that reality rather than in my limited view. Amen.

- Janet Goodman



MARCH 17

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



Text: Matthew 21:12-17

¹² 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. ¹³ "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.' "

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him.

"Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read,

" 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?"

¹⁷ And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.



**El Greco, *Jesus Purifies the Temple*
(c. 1570)**

Reflection:

I don't know why I've always liked this passage where Jesus is upset enough to overturn the tables of the money changers and the seats of those selling doves. Is it because I've always looked at Jesus as a passive, turn the other cheek kind of fellow? In this passage He literally turns the tables. The crowds were praising Him just prior to this. As He rode into Jerusalem on the donkey, they were shouting Hosanna. After healing the blind and the lame, the children were shouting in the temple "Hosanna to the Son of David." So, what drew this response? I believe it was because it was His Father's house and the money changers were putting a stain upon it.

It seems to me that Jesus is showing us that there are times when we need to draw the line. The House of God is one of those places. Another would be the unforgiveable sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. As Pastor Jay goes through the 10 commandments this winter, we can see other lines to be drawn.

Response:

In this world that sometimes seems a little crazy, I find it comforting to know that there are black and white distinctions and that it's not always so gray as the world would have us believe.

So how does one do that? As the country becomes more and more confrontational, shouts of racism, bigotry, closed mindedness are slung about just to see if they stick. Can one be a Christian, draw the line, and avoid these slanders? I believe they can, but it takes a very thoughtful and loving response not one that is angry. It needs to be grounded in the Bible and done with love illustrating the Fruits of the Holy Spirit.

It may sometimes take a little more as in the case of the temple tables. This was the second time Jesus had to do it. Human nature, as we are seeing more and more, is not to do what others tell us to do. Christ felt, and I believe rightly so, that another lesson was needed. After all this was His Father's House. I believe there is, therefore, a case to be made for righteous anger but it has to be well-salted with compassion, righteousness and God-honoring discernment. Christ knew how, do you?

As Reinhold Neibuhr's prayer says: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Prayer:

Lord, please give us the wisdom to know when our cause is just in Your eyes and when we need to fight for Your cause and when we need to turn the other cheek. In Your name, Amen.

- Gerry Allen

MARCH 18

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



Text: Mark 14:1-11

¹Now 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. ²"But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot."

³While 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.

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

⁶"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹I tell you

the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

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



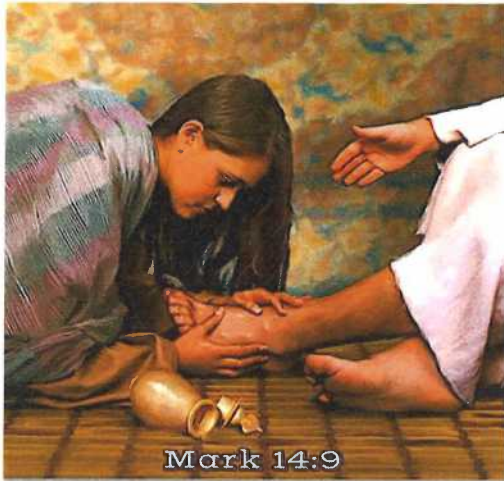
Reflection:

This passage takes place in the middle of Passion Week and offers an emotional and physical respite from a very intense and confrontational few days. Jesus is literally walking closer and closer to his death on the cross. On Sunday, the day of Jesus's triumphal entry the group walked from Bethpage to Jerusalem and then to

Bethany. On Monday, back to Jerusalem when Jesus cleared the temple, then back to Bethany. Tuesday he was back in Jerusalem for a confrontation with the established Jewish authorities who questioned Jesus' authority, and Jesus finishing off with a parable about them. The authorities understood the parable full well, and they didn't like it at all.

Now it is Wednesday, and the scene opens with the chief priests and the scribes plotting to kill Jesus. I imagine them in a darkened room, speaking in whispers, as they scheme to kill Jesus. They have had enough of him challenging their authority but are afraid of him as he is quite popular among the people. The Passover celebration is two days away and they want to kill Jesus before that to not make a scene and entice the crowd into a riot.

Meanwhile, Jesus and his disciples are in Bethany, the "city of happiness"- Jesus' happy place. He is among friends, as this is the city where his dear friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha reside. Bethany is less than 2 miles away from Jerusalem, geographically, but a world away politically. The Jewish authorities seem to leave Bethany alone. Jesus is having a nice, relaxed meal at the house of Simon the leper, surrounded by friends and likely other outcasts. Suddenly a woman appears bearing an alabaster jar of pure nard, worth a year's wages. It is probably safe to assume this woman isn't married, and it's not out of the question that she had been a prostitute. This woman likely had a life-changing encounter with Jesus, her savior, and wanted to show her deep appreciation, and she is all in. The day before, Jesus had been



**Truly I say to you,
wherever the good news is
preached in all the world,
what this woman did will also
be told in memory of her.**

questioned as to what the greatest commandment was and he replied to the questioner, a teacher of the law, “*You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your mind, and all your soul and all your strength.*” She shows the dinner guests what that looks like. With all her heart she rushes in to be near Jesus, with all her mind she is focused on the moment, with all her soul she loves Jesus and with all her strength she breaks the jar of stone and anoints his body with the costly nard. She is all in. This is true worship. She doesn’t care what others think, she loves Jesus, and wants more than anything to show it. All that exists for her at that moment is Jesus.

Some of the other guests were dismayed that such a costly gift was “wasted” on Jesus when it could have gone to support the poor. But Jesus, reprimands them. They don’t get it. She gets it. Jesus is more precious than anything. He has given her back her life, by forgiving her sins, and she wants to show her overflowing gratitude. It is unlikely she knew he was days away from death and was anointing him for that purpose, but Jesus makes that claim. She was in the moment. She seized the opportunity to show gratitude for his forgiveness, for a new life, and she stole a moment, she *made* a

moment to do that. Jesus honors her sacrificial gratitude by letting it be known that wherever the good news of salvation is preached “throughout the world” what she did will also be told—for overwhelming gratitude is the proper response to hearing the gospel.

This poignant pause in the middle of Holy Week is over. Judas has had enough of Jesus not being what he expected and goes to the Jewish authorities to scheme on how to hand Jesus over to be killed in exchange for money. The wheels are set in motion for the rest of the week. Sadly, Judas doesn’t get it.

Response.

We all live busy lives. Just keeping things going takes a lot of time and energy. It is easy to say, “I just can’t seem to find the time to really worship the Lord, our savior - to be fully with him.” During Lent I’m challenging myself to be “all in”, to *make* a moment to honor Jesus forgiving my sins at. Having served on multiple Worship Committees, and helped to plan worship in a professional capacity, I have wrestled with how to provide worshipers with a true encounter with the living God, to be “all in” like the woman with the alabaster jar. The reality is I can’t *make* it happen. Worship is a personal and powerful thing that can only happen between the worshipper and the Lord. The worshiper must bring it all: heart, mind, soul, and strength to worship the Lord. This is different for everyone. It is why I dance, it requires it all; my heart to be grateful, my mind to create a movement, my soul to be at one with him and my body to move with him. For some that may be singing, for others deep intimate prayer, for others studying Scripture, or writing and still for others visual arts. We are all given gifts, to give back to the Lord, in grateful worship. At some point, *make* a moment to lose yourself in the Lord, because He is everything. He gave his life that we may have life. The least we can do is break our alabaster jars and worship Him.



Prayer:

Dear Holy Father, thank You for sending Your Son to be with us here on earth if only for a little while, and to offer Him as the perfect sacrifice that we may dwell in Your house forever. Help me to love You with

my whole heart, to meditate on You with my whole mind, to embrace You with my soul, and use my strength to worship You – to show perfect sacrificial gratitude. Help me to take a break from my daily tasks, to fully be in Your holy presence and to truly worship the One who gave it all for me. In the name of Jesus whom You sent to save me, Amen.

- Kathy Croughan

MARCH 19

“And he said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.’”



Text: Mark 14:12-26

¹² 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?”

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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?’ ¹⁵ He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.”

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

¹⁷ When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. ¹⁸ 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.”

¹⁹ They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, “Surely not I?”

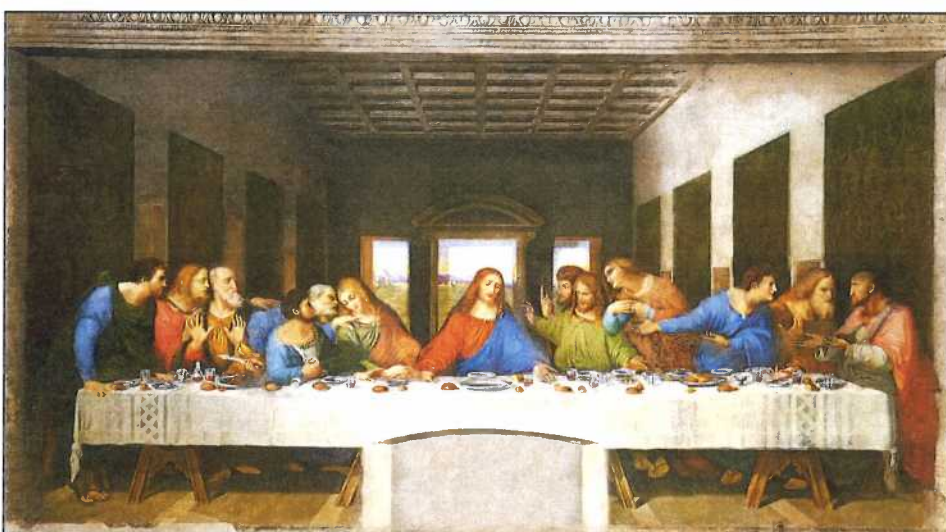
²⁰ “It is one of the Twelve,” he replied, “one who dips bread into the bowl with me. ²¹ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

²² 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.”

²³ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.

²⁴ “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. ²⁵ “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.”

²⁶ When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper* (1495)

Reflection:

Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples on the eve of what is to be the most significant day ever for Jews and Gentiles alike! This is the evening when the prophecies of the past collide with the present day and come to fruition. It is also the beginning of a new covenant as the Last Supper transitions into the celebration of Holy Communion where the elements which pointed to Jesus now actually represent Him as our Savior, as the sacrificial Lamb, the One who becomes sin so that we are washed

clean of our sins. We are passed over because of His blood shed for us. There is another piece of this passage upon which I am reflecting that explores the preparation for the meal.

For the disciples the day starts like any other day I imagine... listening to their Teacher. On this particular day He is giving them instructions as to where the meal should be set up: *“Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. 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?’ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.”* (vv.13-15). Is that enough information? I would be asking other clarification questions so as to get this assignment right. Would a man even be carrying water? What if I can’t find him? If the owner isn’t home, is there anyone else I can ask? Oh, dear. I would be fretting.



Salvador Dali, The Last Supper, 1955

This reminds me of a time I went hiking with a friend. We were heading south on the Pacific Crest Trail from the top of Donner Summit, and our destination was Benson Cabin. Because the cabin was not immediately visible from the trail, I had received directions from my mom who had been there before. Her instructions were the source of some speculation as we hiked the 7 miles along the trail. *“As the path straightens you will notice a bunch of larger rocks. Look up the hill above the rocks to a clearing in the trees—if you look closely you will see a smokestack or roof.”* (paraphrasing a bit). Sounds simple enough. But... WHICH group of rocks, or WHICH straight path? As we passed countless potential markers, we laughed and laughed and figured we would be able to get some real directions from other hikers. UNTIL... we crested a ridge. Before us as the ridge fell away into switchbacks we saw that the trail straightened out and appeared to lead to the base of a hill where it then turned west. Hmm, that got our attention. Thirty minutes later when we reached the end of the straight path there was a group of large rocks which did seem to stand out more than any other rocks we had passed. We looked up the hill (Mt. Anderson for those who are familiar with the trail) and maybe 1/3 mile up we saw a large clearing and what looked to be a roof reflecting sunlight. Sure enough this description was spot on. It all made sense when it needed to. To this day I remember that hike. My friend and I still sheepishly concede how those instructions made perfect sense.

Does it make sense that when Jesus instructs them that the disciples would not fret about the details? The journey with Jesus could not have been easy as a disciple. He challenged them, He befuddled them, He scared them, He was adored by them, and He loved them. They may not have fully understood Him, but they knew He was special and that He should be listened to. He had walked on water (*Matt. 14:25*), calmed seas (*Matt. 8: 23-27*), fed thousands with five loaves and two fish (*Matt 14: 13-21*). He healed countless times (*including bringing Lazarus back to life in John 11: 38-44*), taught daily, changed hearts, challenged religious establishment (*healing on the Sabbath in Mark 3:1-6*), condemned practices (*cleaning the Temple in Matt 21: 12-17*), and showed mercy and love to the unlovable. And on this day the Teacher gives his instructions and the disciples go. Out of their obedience and faith they were able to set up the Last Supper in that upper room on the eve of that most significant day for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Response:

This passage illustrates the spectrum of how Jesus walks with me every day. When I am at church celebrating Holy Communion – celebrating His ultimate sacrifice for my sins, which makes it possible for me, with a mustard seed of faith, to invite him into my heart and wash away my sins. He is there in this significant way. AND He is there, in the everyday while preparing a meal for family, while finishing homework, while waiting for test results from the doctor, while enjoying a vacation with family and friends, while washing dishes, even while hiking in search of that elusive clearing of trees above the group of rocks at the end of a straight path in the wilderness. He is there.

Prayer:

Father, I am in awe. You are Holy, larger than life, and yet approachable at the same time. You are present in every aspect of my life and that provides immeasurable comfort—even when I am embroiled in the day-to-day complications of this life. Whether I acknowledge You or not, there You are! Thank You for loving the *world* enough to die to save *us* and thank You for loving *me* enough to die for *me*! Thank You for walking with me. Thank You for having my life in Your hands. And thank You for the ability to share Your impact on my life with others. In Jesus name, Amen. - Jennifer Oliver

MARCH 20

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



Text: Luke 22:39-46

³⁹ Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." ⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

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



Arkhip Kuinji, Christ in the Garden, 1901

Reflection:

The Garden of Gethsemane at the base of the Mount of Olives plays an important role in the ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem. It was a familiar place for his disciples as well. In a recent visit there, I was moved by the realization that I was sitting and praying in the exact place where the essence of Jesus was most deeply revealed and where the sacrifice that God made for us in Him was set into motion. It was there that the mystery of the humanity and divinity of Jesus was powerfully and dramatically demonstrated.

It is no surprise that the clearest expression of his nature and his call occurred in the context of prayer with his Father. This short passage set in the Garden is the most poignant example of what the Apostle Paul describes in his familiar hymn in Philippians 2 of Jesus – *"being in very nature God... he made himself nothing... being made in human likeness... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death..."*

In this passage Jesus twice encourages the disciples to *"pray that you will not fall into temptation"* – at the beginning and at the end. I wonder why that is in the forefront of his mind and heart? Jesus had recently prayed against Satan that Simon's "faith may not fail." So, his worry about temptation is undoubtedly an important concern that he has for them. I suspect he has the same concern for us as well, knowing that Satan will take advantage of events in our lives to divert our focus away from Jesus and undermine our faith.

No other passage in the Gospels so aptly demonstrates the humanity of Jesus. Even after predicting the events to come, including his death, he longs to avoid such agony. Jesus prays intensely for strength to do the Father's will - so deeply that *"his sweat was like drops of blood."* And in no other passage do we see a better example of the humility of Jesus. He understands the Father's sovereignty in saying *"If you are willing..."* Though Jesus participated in the authorship of creation, he forgoes his authority and submits to the Father's will and redemptive purpose - *"yet not my will, but yours be done."*

Response: So how do we respond to such a powerful example of humility and obedience?

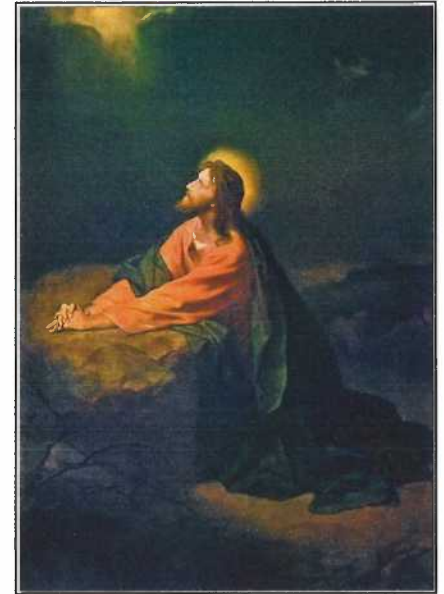
1. Keep our eyes on Jesus... God does not promise that we will not face any trials. The call to discipleship entails keeping our eyes on Jesus in those trials and trusting that he will lead us.

2. Rely on the power and promises of God... Submitting to God's divine will is a struggle, given the strong competing claims that we face from our human will. Even Jesus struggled between his humanity and his divinity as he faced the ultimate trial, but we can access the power and promise of God to give us hope and strength.

3. Maintain an attitude of humility, gratitude and worship... We can have confidence that the sacrifice of Jesus was real. The suffering and anguish experienced in the whole triune Godhead is something we cannot imagine, but it was done for us. If we can grasp the reality of that, we can do nothing but respond with gratefulness and worship.

Prayer: Sovereign God, we do not claim to understand why we experience the challenges of life, but we do claim Your promise not to leave us or forsake us. Give us the courage and fortitude to endure trials, knowing that You will work them for our good. Protect us from the lure of the evil one and from our self-centered nature. Give us hearts of gratitude for Your ultimate act of humility and sacrifice. Help us to get a glimpse of Your purpose for us and to experience the peace of knowing that we are held at all times in Your strong and loving arms. We praise You, our Rock and our Redeemer.

- Mark Eshoff, Stated Clerk for the EPC
Presbytery of the Pacific Southwest



Heinrich Hofmann, Christ in Gethsemane, 1870

MARCH 21

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

Text: Luke 22:47-53



⁴⁷ 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, ⁴⁸ but Jesus asked him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?"

⁴⁹ When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?"

⁵⁰ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear.

⁵¹ But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him.

⁵² 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? ⁵³ 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 somber scene. A mob, of threatening aspect, approaching in the darkness to carry out an extrajudicial assault upon an innocent man, basically a lynch mob; not even with a warrant from the Roman civil authorities. The people in that mob didn't even really know what they were doing. Later that same day Jesus Himself said so when He asked forgiveness for them. Only Jesus knew what was really happening. He was the one in control.

At first glance, Judas would seem to be in control, as the mob's leader, but even he didn't really know what he was doing.

We can't get into his head to know at this distant remove exactly what his intention was: most likely even he didn't know and was simply caught up in the onrushing flow of events, a tool in the hands of Jesus' political enemies. They were doing politics; Jesus was doing Atonement.

Response:

If I had been there . . . like the disciples, I would have run away. It was not their hour for action. Jesus alone could purchase my salvation, and He had to do it all alone. My soul trembles at the solemn knowledge of what He did for me by yielding Himself up that fateful day to be a sacrifice on my behalf. Believers can rejoice over the inestimable benefit to ourselves that by His stripes we are healed.

We have heard that "all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to His purpose", and indeed the crucifixion was a part of God's cosmic purpose. But this does not mean that every cloud has a silver lining. Evil remains just evil. Pollyanna is not a Christian. God's promise of perfect peace, a promise to wipe away every tear, will be fulfilled but at a time that we cannot yet see, perhaps not within the span of my short lifetime.



We are obliged to walk by faith, not by sight. It's like hiking a trail in the dark of night, relying on a head-lamp that illuminates only one step ahead. But that's enough if we just keep going forward by faith. As the Psalmist says, "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path," but not a light to shine far ahead.

We are humbled by the knowledge that God's ways are not our ways, that we don't see things as He does. It's like viewing a blaze

orange garment by moonlight: It looks white, not orange at all. Only in the light of day is the color perceived correctly. So it is with our circumstances of life. Only in God's time and providence (only in His light) will we see the full scope of His mercy.

Prayer:

O, Lord Jesus, forgive me for being no better than the disciples who ran away and no better than the ignorant and excitable people who formed that lynch mob, and even no better than the disciple who sold You out for his own misguided ambition. Like the thief who found himself placed alongside You to be executed, I ask only, "Remember me . . ." Amen.

- David MacDonald

MARCH 23

*"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

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

⁵⁷ But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.

⁵⁸ A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."

"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

⁵⁹ About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

⁶⁰ 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." ⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Reflection:

I often play the game of 'what if that were me' when I read the Bible. This is one of those passages of scripture I absolutely hate to play this game with. In this passage we read of the Apostle Peter and his denial of Christ. The setting in the scripture above is that Jesus, being betrayed by Judas, was captured and taken to the high priest's home where Peter follows. Peter is in the shadows, hiding amongst the crowds near a freshly kindled fire. Jesus is being treated as a criminal and Peter knows that to be associated with a criminal, especially at the height of this very public arrest is dangerous. It's not a great time to be an admitted follower of Christ.

Peter is my favorite apostle in Holy Scripture because I see Peter in me. Peter often gets pretty harsh treatment and is more often than not used as an example of what Christians should not do. But I've always tried to give him a lot of grace. Peter can be over confident and bold at times. His boldness is not a misplaced boldness. He was a witness to Jesus and his ministry. Peter saw Jesus raise Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mark 5:35-43). He saw Jesus heal a leper (Luke 5:12-16). He witnessed the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11), the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9), and he was the only human other than Jesus who walked on water (Matthew 14:28-33). In other words, Peter had a front row seat to the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the first to proclaim, by faith, that Jesus is the Messiah (Matthew 16:16). Peter also, though, attempts to rebuke Jesus (Matthew 16:22). I can't imagine being so bold as to attempt to rebuke Jesus, but Peter tries, and fails quite spectacularly to the point that Jesus equates him with Satan. Boldness - check.

What about Peter's overconfidence? A few verses before this passage, in Luke 22:33, we read of Peter saying that he will go with Christ both to prison and to death. And Jesus tells him '*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan would have you and sift you like wheat.*' Jesus then states that Peter will deny Jesus three times, and this prophecy comes true. Peter gets weak in the knees and denies Christ three times. I find myself here, in his humanity, in his fear. What if that were me? What would I do? Could I say with any credulity that I wouldn't do the same? Over confidence - check.

This passage serves as a warning to us to keep us in check. For if an Apostle, a man who was a direct witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ could fall in faith and deny Christ, how easy it is for us to do the same. Overconfidence



Caravaggio, The Denial of St. Peter (1610)

is cunning: It can rear its head in the most benign places. While driving around town I can't help but notice the bumper stickers on cars in front of me. Some bumper stickers are so funny that you can't help but laugh. Some are so hateful, hurtful, and/or obnoxious that they make you cringe. Then there are bumper stickers that are presumably Christian in nature. Here are some examples of what I've seen around town:

Funny = I believe in the Big Bang Theory, GOD spoke and BANG, it happened.

Hurtful = I can't fix stupid, but God can.

Hateful = Try Jesus, if you don't like him, Satan will always take you back.

Obnoxious = Do you follow Jesus this close?

Prideful = Proud Christian <political party>.

I tend to cringe at most of these, mostly because it tends to reflect a self-serving act. The real question is what if that were me? What if I were

on the other end of that bumper sticker? Would I be as confident when I have to put my own life on the line? Will that arrogant bumper sticker help me when I am given the choice to proclaim Christ as Lord or suffer? I don't think so. "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before the fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

The key parts of Peter's denial is shown in three phases:

1. Being called out as a follower of Jesus (v.56)
2. Being called out as one his people (v.57)
3. Being called out as different (Galilean) (v.59)

It's interesting to note that we are called out similarly. We are called to be followers of Jesus, we have been called out as his chosen people, and we are called to be different. In each case Peter denies that he knows Jesus, is a follower of Jesus, and is different because of his relationship with Jesus. No amount of his boldness or confidence came to his

rescue. When things are going well, it's easy to be bold, to be confident, to put our faith on display. When being identified as a Christian is tough or dangerous, it's not so easy. Peter reminds us of this exact thing, and it hits me in a way that makes me run in prayer with fear and trembling.

It is with Peter in mind I am given hope and assurance that while we may fall, it is not a total and complete fall. Luke 22:31-34 highlights this. Right after Jesus tells Peter that Satan would have him and sift him like wheat, he tells Peter, 'BUT I have prayed for you, that when you turn, not IF you turn, but WHEN you turn, strengthen the brethren.' That passage gives me hope... to know that even when Peter denies Christ, he is still going to be there to give hope to those of the faith. Peter is still doing that for all of us today. His example, while often used as a negative, is actually a shining example of the grace of God and a reminder that in all our boldness and confidence we still need Christ.

Response:

We live in a time where fundamental belief in the Christian faith is at an all-time low. Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University shows that 58% of Americans no longer believe that God and the Bible are a source for determining morality and truth. In the State of Theology survey run yearly by Ligonier Ministries, 30% of professing evangelicals believe that Jesus was a great teacher but he was not God. 42% of professing evangelicals believe that God accepts the worship of all religions. We are more primed today to deny Christ than in previous generations.

The Bible warns us of a great falling away that is to come. Boldness and confidence in our faith in Christ is necessary to withstand the influence of the world. It's not going to be easy: Being different never is. Yet, God has given us examples to follow and to learn from. He has given us time to build our faith and to run to him during tough times. In this season, reflect on who Jesus is, what he did for you, and how much he sacrificed. He who was without sin became sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Remember that even though we may fall, we have an assurance of forgiveness, and when we do fall, be ready to strengthen the brethren. Though Satan would have us, Jesus won't let his chosen utterly fail, but will get us back on our feet and return our focus back on Him.



Prayer:

Our Father and our God thank You for Peter. Thank You for using human failing to set examples for our flawed natures. Let us never be arrogant in our own boldness and confidence, but to remember that we are saved by Your grace and not ourselves or our works so that no man may boast. Help us to keep our overconfidence in check, to know that we must rely on You and You alone. Help to strengthen our faith in You and to be ready bravely and boldly to declare that You are God and that we are Your people, even in the face of tough and dangerous times. Amen.

- Preston Yoshioka

MARCH 24

"Is that how you answer the high priest?"



Text: John 18:19-24

¹⁹ Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.

²⁰ "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." ²¹ Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said."

²² 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.

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



Lucas van Leydan, Christ Before Annas the High Priest, 1521

Response:

What are we willing to do to get out of a difficult situation? We look to see what is the quickest and easiest route to take. That is not always the "Jesus way." As we strive to be imitators of Christ let us learn to stand our ground in difficult situations. That might mean that we need to go back to someone that we have deceived and let them know what we really believe. This can be difficult, but remember, the Holy Spirit is with us.

Prayer:

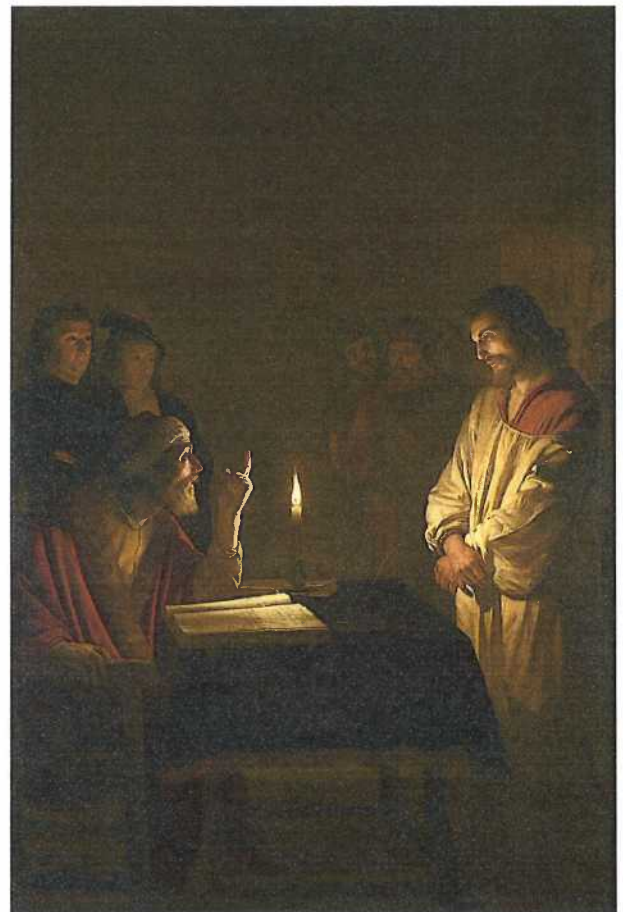
Dear Jesus: I know that I fall short of the standard to which You want me to live. I do not always stand up for the things that I claim to believe. I pray for the strength and the courage to be the witness that You want me to be. As You died for my sins I pray that I will live for Your glory. Amen.

- Chris Rhodes

Reflection:

Here we see the high priest questioning Jesus about His disciples and His teaching. It is the intent of the high priest to trap Jesus into admitting to doing something illegal. In His defense Jesus tells him to go talk to those who have witnessed His ministry. Jesus points out that this should not be very hard because He has always operated openly and in public. This infuriates the high priest because what he is doing to Jesus is being done in secret and is illegal. Jesus has turned the table on His accuser. As a result one of the nearby officials hits Jesus. He responds by demanding that if He has done anything wrong He should be told. At this point He is bound and sent to Caiaphas.

People like to cover up their guilt, mainly because they feel threatened and want to avoid any consequences for their sinful actions. When they are confronted by someone who truly is without blame often their reaction is to become even more belligerent. In this passage we see Jesus suffering for His innocence. We usually think of Him suffering on the cross, but the truth is that He suffered all through His life. We have a savior who really does know what our lives are like. He lived as a real man and knew the humiliation that comes with doing the right thing. He never gave in by making compromises for His own convenience.



Gerard van Honthorst, Christ Before the High Priest, 1617

MARCH 25

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



Text: Matthew 27:1-10

¹ Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. ² They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.

³ 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. ⁴ "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."

"What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."

⁵ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

⁶ 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." ⁷ So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. ⁸ That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ 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, ¹⁰ and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

Reflection:

When Judas, Jesus' formal accuser, saw him paraded away and taken to Pilate, he realized his plan had gone horribly awry. Judas had been hoping the arrest would push Jesus into blazing action. He was counting on Jesus to



Judas Iscariot – New World Encyclopedia

defend himself and depose the Jewish leaders. Judas envisioned Jesus becoming king and aspired to a position of power in the new government. Instead, Jesus didn't put up a fight and allowed himself to be handed over to the Romans. Standing before Pilate, once again Jesus didn't resist. Jesus was broken and scourged by the Roman soldiers and Judas' ambitious dreams of the expulsion of Rome from Judea were shattered.

It's not farfetched to imagine that Judas did have affection for Jesus. In spite of Jesus' disappointing performance on trial, Judas certainly couldn't bear to see his apparently now powerless Rabbi to suffer and die. He hadn't meant for it to go so far! He sought to undo the deed by confessing his sin of accusing an innocent man. The Jewish leadership's shocking response was to ignore their role as intermediary for the sinner and refuse to stop the proceedings against Jesus. Furthermore, their actions and words in this passage constitute acknowledgment of their guilt in Jesus' murder. This is a precursor to their accepting the responsibility for Jesus' condemnation later in Matthew 27:25.

Matthew plops this dramatic episode right in the middle of Jesus' transfer from the Jewish leadership to the Romans. It feels awkward and is not chronological. However, there is a purpose: The juxtaposition between Peter and Judas offers a stark contrast: After denying Jesus 3 times in Chap. 26, Peter repents

and eventually earns founding leadership in the new church. Judas' manipulations could not be undone and his remorse falls short of repentance. He did not trust in God's grace and he did not believe in Jesus' deity. Disillusioned and aware he had been used, he was driven to the hanging tree. Predicting his betrayal, Jesus said in Chap. 26 *"...But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."* Without the foundation of trust in God, possibly under harassment by evil spirits as depicted in movies and eluded to in some versions of the bible, Judas reflecting on these words found no hope for redemption.

Prophecy Alert: It is important to note that Matthew uses this tragic end to Judas to point out another messianic prophecy fulfilled. When the Jewish leaders used the money Judas threw into the temple to purchase the potter's field, Matthew recalls the words in Zechariah 11:12-13 and allusions in Jeremiah 18, 19 and 32. There is much debate about why Matthew attributes the prophecy to Jeremiah instead of Zechariah. On one hand it's considered an outright mistake and on the other a clever device in which to call attention to the validity of the prophecy by quoting the prophet of "blood and judgment".

Response:

Studying this passage helped to clarify the keys to repentance for me. It's easy to change one's mind and dwell in regret and remorse. We must be on guard - once something is done, usually it can't be undone! It takes action to truly repent. But more than that, it requires trust in God's grace, belief in Jesus' deity and his intercession on our behalf. Without this we are left open to unrighteous influence. We can be easily persuaded to believe that it's too late to change our character; an impossible task. Don't give in to that. Keep your focus on Jesus...trust in him. Be aware and vigilant. Your life will change for the better. It may be slow - we are so stubborn! But it is inevitable when you truly turn away from sin, follow the narrow path and lean on Jesus' strength.

Prayer:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in
me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

- Susie Rummens



Edward Armitage, *The Remorse of Judas* (1866)

MARCH 26

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



Text: John 18:28-40

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?"

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

³¹ Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."

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

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

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

³⁵ "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?"

³⁶ 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."

³⁷ "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."

³⁸ "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. ³⁹ 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?’”

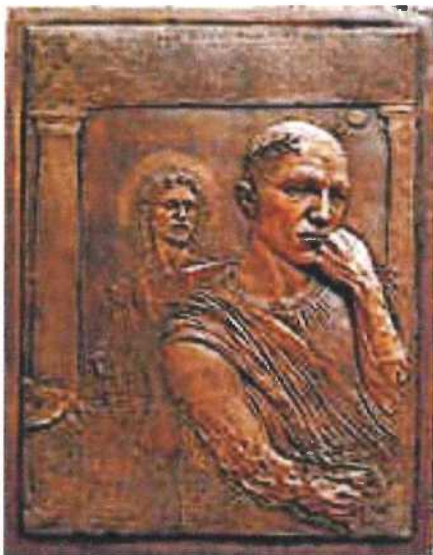
⁴⁰ They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.

Reflection:

In order to do away with Jesus, His very religious opponents do some very odd things.

1. *They seek a strong and lethal partnership with those with whom they will not associate.* Rome reserved exclusive rights to capital punishment in their occupied territories. The leaders of Jesus’ own people the Jews will not set foot in the Gentile Roman palace because it would make them ceremonially “unclean” for their impending religious rituals, but they want Jesus dead, so they need the dirty, pagan Romans to make it so. Officially, they will have nothing to do with the Romans intruders in Israel, but they will become teammates with Rome against their own Messiah. How odd. And how “unclean” do you suppose it made them to plot and drive to completion the execution of God Himself?
2. *They defend their actions with an argument of textbook illogic.* Pilate asks what charges they have against Jesus, and they offer none. Instead they say, in effect: “We are bringing Him to you because He is a criminal, and He is a criminal because we are bringing Him to you!” That is what is called “circular reasoning” in its most basic form. It’s like saying “Everybody knows the earth is flat, and the earth is flat because everybody knows it.” And these are men well trained in the logical religious interpretation of their day. How odd. But we shouldn’t be too quick to rail against them since we live in culture where this kind of groundless reasoning is rampant. Essentially, Jesus was a criminal because they wanted Him to be a criminal. How far have we advanced from this in our age of public opinion polls, mass marketing and manufactured truth?
3. *They block Pilate’s attempt to release Jesus, whom he rightly declares innocent, on a technicality by letting another man, known to be a dangerous insurrectionist, go free* (more on this in tomorrow’s devotional).
4. *They accomplish God’s supernatural will by naturally opposing God Himself.* We are told that they perpetrate all their hypocrisy and illogic so that Jesus’ own words concerning His death would come true, and this is the oddest thing of all. Jesus stands under the bent will of blind and angry men, and all the while He is in control and His will proceeds straight and true.

In order to avoid responsibility for Jesus’ unjust execution, Pontius Pilate does some odd things.



Peter Shipperheyn, *Christ before Pontius Pilate*

1. *He asks if Jesus is the King of the Jews and then explains why He cannot be.* Pilate suggests Jesus can’t be the Jews’ king because they have handed Him over for execution. If people can do that to you, Pilate reasons, than you must not be their king. Jesus declares that His is not an earthly political, social or religious kingdom but one from a place other than this world.
2. *He pretends to be an outside observer to what is essentially Jesus’ problem with His own religious leaders, but Jesus insists that the issue right now is He Himself and Pilate himself.*

Here is how I interpret their dialogue:

“Do you think you are a king?” Pilate asks.

“Do you think I am?” Jesus responds.

“I’m a Roman, not a Jew,” Pilate says, “so Your alleged kingship is not an issue for me. What is an issue for me is the trouble You and Your people are causing to the public peace. What have you done?”

And then Jesus says, in effect, “Ah, but I and My kingship *are* the issue for you, for my kingdom transcends all the kingdoms in this world. I am the King of Truth, and those who are true listen to Me. Will you do what is right and true with the power I have given to you, governor? Will you listen to Me?”

The intimacy of this encounter is staggering. And it makes me think of Jesus and me. While I might want to deflect into all sorts of questions about sociology or philosophy or morality or theology—Why doesn’t everyone believe in You? What about other religions? How good do your followers need to be? What does it mean for You to be both God and man?—Jesus in every moment brings things back to Him and me: Jay, right now, am I *your* King? Will you listen to Me? Will you follow Me?

3. *Then in the end, with Truth Himself standing before him, Pilate pretends to be an outside observer of Truth itself.* “What is truth?” he asks as though all reality trails off into the dying echoes of this unanswerable

question. And there is Jesus, as He must always be there, the still small voice still present when the echoes of every question have ceased. And there at the end and forever is not the unanswerable question but the love-filled, life-giving answer: I AM.

Response:

Find a song or hymn that presents Jesus as our King (like Crown Him with Many Crowns... Come, Thou, Almighty King... Amazing Love (You Are My King)... or Shout to the King...) and read the words—even better, sing the words to yourself. What does it mean to you that we call Jesus our “King?”

Prayer:

Jesus, You are the King of Truth. And You are my king. Thank You for Your patience with all my “What is truth?” evasions and illogical resistance to your good will for me and for Your world. Thank You for getting personal with me, for saving me, making me Your subject, by the full weight of Your Goodness and Truth, even as I, like the religious people of Your day, was throwing my light and momentary mass against You.

- Jay Hull

MARCH 27

“His blood be on us and on our children!”



Text: Matthew 27:15-26

¹⁵ Now it was the governor’s custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. ¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. ¹⁷ 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?” ¹⁸ For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

¹⁹ 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.”

²⁰ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

²¹ “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” asked the governor.

“Barabbas,” they answered.

²² “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” Pilate asked.

They all answered, “Crucify him!”

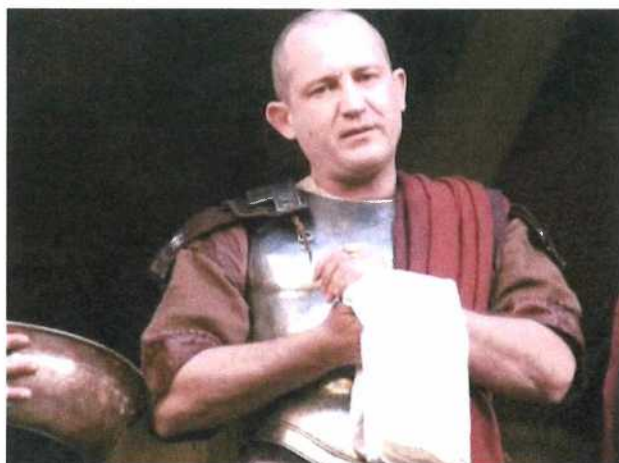
²³ “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

²⁴ 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!”

²⁵ All the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”

²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.



Prayer:

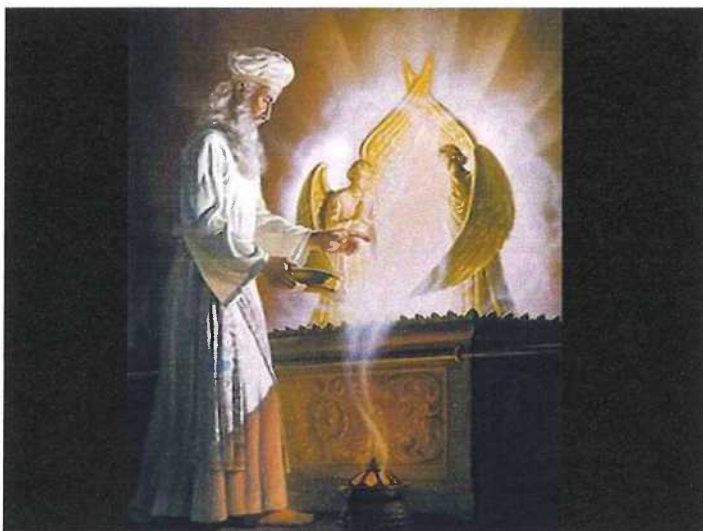
Heavenly Father, as Easter approaches I ask that You would renew my heart and mind in the knowledge of how You, and Jesus, and Your Spirit worked and provided for my salvation.

Reflection:

So the mob persuaded by the priests and elders began to riot, yelling, “Crucify Him, Crucify Him. Let His blood be on us and on our Children.”

Of course the crowd meant, “Let the guilt fall on us and our children”

But Christians know 1 John 1:7b — “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”



Does God have a sense of irony or what?

This reminds us a lot of Joseph talking to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 about the brothers selling him into slavery: *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.*

Now, let's talk about the cleansing blood. Why blood? And how does blood clean us? Specifically, how is it that His blood/the death of Christ cleanses us? Can I trust in His Sacrifice, and what exactly did His Sacrifice buy? That is the question of Easter isn't it?

Why blood? Blood is essential to life. We all know that blood carries oxygen through the body. In fact, there is a very long list of other jobs that are done by

the blood. I suspect that the necessity of blood for life has been understood at least at a rudimentary level since Cain did in his brother. Blood is what is given up when a life is taken.

The cleansing blood is the blood of the sacrifice of atonement (reparation/repayment) and of propitiation (turning away wrath). It is worth reading the first four chapters and the sixteenth chapter of Leviticus to understand the picture that God gave to Israel about the seriousness of sin and the requirement of death in payment (Romans 6:23 – the wages of sin is death). The supplicant was to bring an animal without blemish to the altar, put his hand on the animal's head (symbolizing the transfer of guilt) and slice the animal's throat. The priests were to catch bowls of blood, rubbing some on the horns of the altar, throwing some on the side of the altar and pouring the rest at the base of the altar. On Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) the High Priest was also to take the blood inside the veil to the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, sprinkling blood as he went. As Scripture tells us, the Ark held a bowl of manna, Aaron's rod which had budded, and the Tablets of the Covenant (the Ten Commandments). On the lid of the Ark were two Cherubim spreading their wings over the mercy seat. In and above the space between the wings God dwelt with His people — the Shekinah Glory — the dwelling glory/presence. As well as the bowl of blood, the priest took a censer of incense, the smoke of which was to shield his eyes from the brightness of the Glory. The priest was to sprinkle blood on the lid of the Ark both from the front and from the east side. In this way, God, looking down at



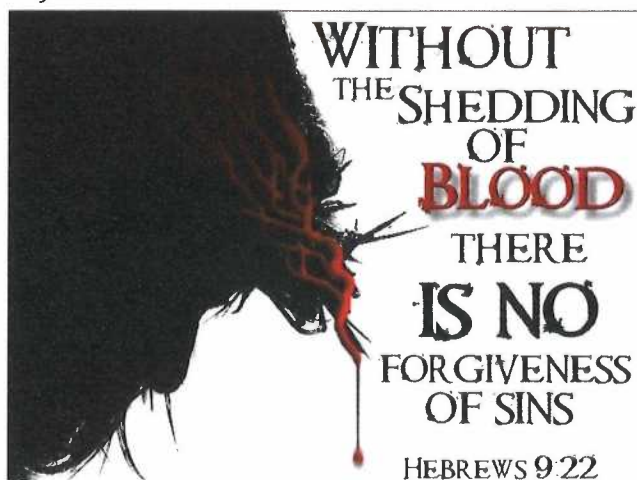
Rembrandt van Rijn, *Pilate Washes His Hands* (ca. 1660)

the Law, saw the blood of the sacrifice between Himself and the Law.

This is the pattern of what happens for us with the Sacrifice of the Jesus — the unblemished Lamb of God. When God looks at us to judge us according to the Law, Jesus stands before the Father saying, “I died for her... My blood has paid his way.” And God’s just wrath at our many sins is propitiated (assuaged).

Can I trust in the Sacrifice of Jesus? Here is what the Book of Hebrews, Chapter 4, starting at verse 13, says about that.

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God... saying, “This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.” And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins... And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.



Here is a good question. Could Judas Iscariot, Pontius Pilate, the Priests, or those people yelling, “Crucify him, Crucify him,” be saved? The answer: Absolutely if God humbled them and they cried, “Jesus don’t let your blood just be on me but rather let it cover me.”

Prayer in Response:

Lord Jesus, Thank You for courageously suffering and dying for me. I am guilty of turning from You every day. But Jesus, I acknowledge that Your death, once for all paid for me. Please Jesus fill my life and cause me to walk with You and to serve You in the good things that You have prepared for me as a service to You. - Tim Ball

MARCH 28

“The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar.’”



Text: John 19:1-16

¹ Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ² The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe ³ and went up to him again and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they struck him in the face.

⁴ 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.” ⁵ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!”

⁶ As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!”

But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.”

⁷ The Jews insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

⁸ When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, ⁹ and he went back inside the palace. “Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ “Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

¹¹ 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."

¹² 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."

¹³ 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). ¹⁴ It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour.



"Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

Reflection: "We have no king but Caesar"

In the whirling events of John chapters 18 and 19, we see the Jewish powers that be are intent on one thing-- blood. Get rid of this character who challenges their authority with wisdom unsurpassed and multiple miraculous signs. Although merely the son of a Nazarene carpenter named Joseph, he makes Messianic claims and even blasphemes by saying he is the Son of God. Yes, Jesus deserves death. Jewish authorities could not execute a death sentence and risk jeopardizing their standing under the powerful hand of Roman rule. Inciting a mob to stone him would have quickly finished the job; however the Passover ceremony at hand constrains their actions. Instead this time they follow proper channels and send him to the Roman ruler, Pilate. Let the Gentiles do the execution on the instrument of punishment for criminals, the cross.

Pilate knows from his questioning that Jesus has not broken any Roman law. He thinks flogging, a crown of thorns, a purple robe and demeaning this Jew will certainly garner sympathy from the crowd. It does not. The chief priest and officers still want crucifixion. Under Jewish blasphemy laws he is guilty. Pilate questions further and realizes Jesus is different from anyone else he has dealt with. Pilate's own authority is not just from Caesar but from someone higher, God - a frightening thought. Better to release this man, he thinks.

"Release him and you are not Caesars friend." Checkmate - the Jews bring Pilate back to the reality of politics of the day. Pilate is under a harsh Caesar who could make life very difficult. This fear forces Pilate to sentence Jesus to be crucified. Pilate's parting remarks "*Behold your King!*" and "*Shall I crucify your King?*" make no difference to the momentum of the Jews' sentiment for a crucifixion. However when the Jews answer, they reveal something deeper than just a hate-filled answer spontaneously given.

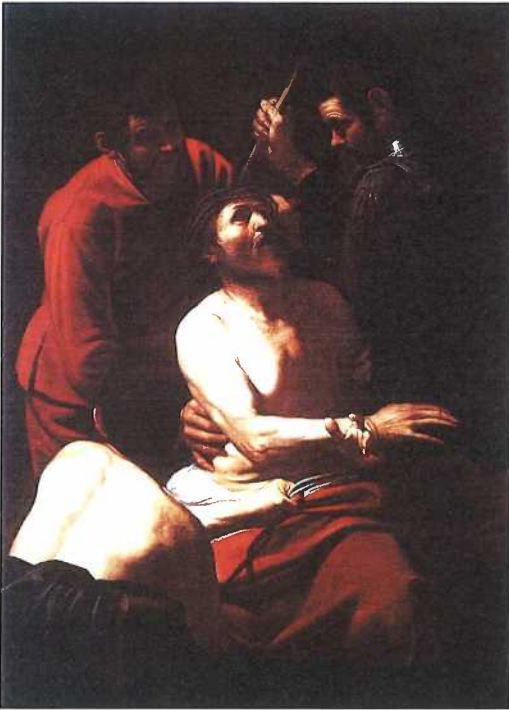
"We have no king but Caesar." At face value it seems straightforward. Israel has no present king who exercises power; their subjugation is to the Romans and their king, Caesar. He rules, his nation wields an army who follow his commands and have the power of the sword for conquest. Pax Romana, the rule of the day, did issue in a measure of peace, security, Roman law with its form of justice, and of course taxes. The Jews knew that this Jesus has some following his public teaching including a group of twelve unlearned students mostly from the lower end of the economic scale. Yet in reality without an army, forts, or palace, and in possession of but a single sword, this Jesus just doesn't fit the bill as an aspiring king. Then also as Jews know, no good can come from Nazareth. Such a man could be more productive in his father's line of work rather than making the claims about being the Son of God. He is a liar, and/or crazy, but certainly he is no lord or king. Admittedly Roman governance is not ideal, but for now it is the only game in town, therefore, "we have no king but Caesar".



Antonio Ciseri, *Behold the Man*, 1871

Mankind desires rulers who issue in both peace and prosperity even if it means giving up some freedoms. Back when the Israelites arrived in the land of Canaan they had no earthly king. As a theocracy they were under no king but God until the time of the prophet Samuel. "Give us a king to judge us," they demanded, wishing to be like the other surrounding nations (1 Sam 8:6). And so God allowed them to have a king and the parade of kings who followed

until the time of captivity. As Samuel warned, it would cost the people of Israel something when they turned their backs on God as king. The land of Israel and its people became divided, idolatrous and ultimately reaped the punishment of defeat and, yes, the costly loss of freedom – captivity. The epitaph of most Jewish kings reads, “And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God.” History confirms that kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. The transient mortal kings of Israel rarely brought peace or security; neither did Rome under Caesar as king bring an everlasting peace. No earthly king, kingdom or government can guarantee true peace and true prosperity as King Jesus does in his Kingdom not of this world.



Caravaggio, *The Crowning of Thorns* (1603)

Response: Let us make Jesus king of our lives and serve Him out of gratitude and love. He is the King of kings, the Lord of lords. No earthly ruler can stand before Him. Rejecting God as king had bad consequences for the Jews of old. Saturation in the world’s ideas that mankind has all knowledge and is the end of all things draws us from the truth of God’s sovereignty. The entire creation belongs to God from mountains to molecules. Through Christ we can have the peace that passes all understanding. We can have citizenship in an enduring kingdom which will suffer no defeat only if we have no King but Jesus.

Prayer: Lord we humbly admit to allowing other things to take on a greater place and importance in our lives than You. These little kings become our idols and pollute worship. Forgive us Lord. Create in us a clean heart, oh Lord. King of kings we love You. Amen. - Doug Heidema

MARCH 30

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



Text: Matthew 27:27-44

²⁷ Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. ³¹ 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.

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

⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ⁴² “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. ⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’ ” ⁴⁴ In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Reflection:

Have you ever wondered why the Holy Spirit inspired four different writers to pen gospel accounts, basically telling the same story? Each relates the “good news” from slightly different perspectives based on their varying experiences and the people they seek to inform.

The first, the book of Matthew, tells the “good news” from a distinctly Jewish perspective and serves as a bridge between the old and new testaments as it focuses on fulfillment of prophecy about the coming Messiah. Unique to his gospel, Matthew alludes to or quotes the prophets more than 60 times and uses the phrase (or a slight variation) “that it might be fulfilled” 38 times. Forty times he speaks of the kingdom of heaven and says (in 26:64) that the day would come when Jesus would return in the clouds to establish His kingdom on earth. And he writes to a people longing for a Messiah who would take the form of a conquering king. They want an earthly ruler, but Matthew writes to reveal One whose kingdom is in Heaven, who came not to repair a worldly political system but to change and renew hearts.

And what passages and themes does Matthew emphasize? From verse 1 onward, he introduces us to Messiah the King. In “The Gospel of Matthew” (1929), Charles R. Erdman sums it up this way,

“The figure of Jesus is painted in colors of royalty. His ancestry is traced from a royal line; his birth is dreaded by a rival king, and Wise Men offer their royal gifts; his herald declares that his Kingdom is at hand. His temptation reaches its climax as he is offered the kingdom of the world; his “Sermon on the Mount” is the manifesto of a king, setting forth the fundamental laws of his kingdom... He makes his royal entry into Jerusalem and claims sovereign power... and while facing the cross, he predicts his return in glory and his universal reign. He claims power to command legions of angels, and his resurrection is a scene of majestic glory. His last words are a kingly claim and a royal command: “All authority has been given unto me... Go ye therefore.” The characteristic and significant phrase of this gospel is in the legend, “the kingdom of heaven.” Here is a portrait in which even the minor touches are resplendent with purple and gold.”



**William Brassy Hole, *Jesus Mocked*
By Roman Soldiers**

So, what does all of this have to do with today’s disturbing passage, this horrifying picture of torture, unmerited abuse and brutish cruelty? In today’s 18 verses, Matthew advances the story with economy except when he elaborates on two particular scenes: the soldiers’ mocking (which includes placing Pilate’s revealing sign over Jesus’ head), and the crowd’s vicious taunts: both target Jesus’ supposed kingship. Even in reporting the degradation of Jesus, Matthew can’t help but tell the story of – and point us to – The King.

According to John 19:19, we know Pilate handwrote the sign placed above Jesus’ head: **Jesus, King of the Jews**. Written in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, the sign incensed the high priests – to the point of demanding it be re-worded. Why? What most of us miss is that the first letter in each of the four lines spell out YHWH, the unpronounceable, holy name of God. The King, the Son... the Truth.

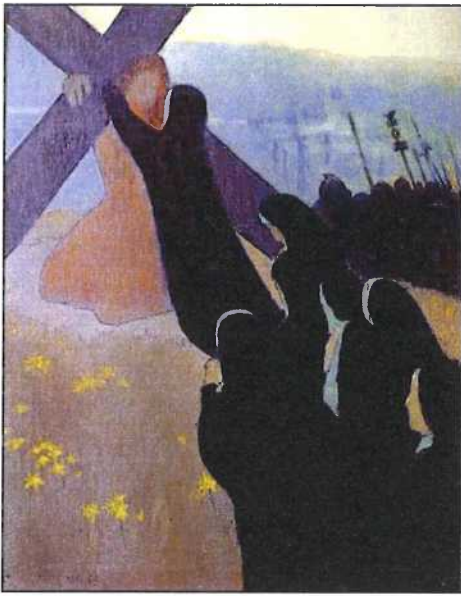
Response

Did Pilate know he was sending the Son of God to Golgotha? Probably not...just as the soldiers didn’t realize they had crowned the King of Heaven with thorns and the people in the crowds didn’t comprehend this man they mocked as king was fully in command and freely sacrificing his life to cleanse the black hatred in their hearts. As with every phase in this agonizing series of events, the truth is right there for us to see: Jesus was, even then, the true King. No matter how battered, how unjustly judged or how painfully rejected, he remained unwavering, demonstrating incomprehensible power and love every step of the way to conquering death itself. Never succumb to thinking him pathetic! At no moment in this nightmare did he cease being the King, the true Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

But yes, reading about the pain Jesus endured and struggling with the depth of just downright meanness we see in today’s passage can leave us burdened and heavy of heart. So I will leave you with this passage where we are assured that the One sent by the Father is a King like no other. Far from being aloof in his glory and inaccessibly

detached from his creation, we have a King who perfectly, gladly came for us “in the fullness of time” (Gal 4:3-5)...while “we were yet sinners” (Rms 5:8) – and who desires to give us rest and peace.

Do you know Him? Have you accepted this King’s yoke and known the blessing of entering into his rest?



**Maurice Denis, *To Calvary*
(1889)**

**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.**

- Matthew 11:28-30

Prayer

King Jesus, I confess I would have spat on You with the soldiers, loudly joined the crowds as they reviled You, and called for Your death with the murderous religious leaders on that black day so long ago. But that was before You whispered “Come to Me”... and forgave my sins.

I pray now for those You are still calling, whose hearts are burdened with regret, filled with hate, blinded by lies and empty of hope...Lord, help them see the Cross in a new way during this holy season - that not nails but love held You there! Help them realize the life they were created for, the life that will fulfill them, only comes through bowing to the King who IS “the Way, the Truth and the Life”. Draw them until they lay down their burdens and gladly yoke their lives, their souls, their eternal destinies to You, our True King and our Redeemer. Amen.

- Patti Hemsley

MARCH 31

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”



Text: Luke 23:26-43

²⁶ 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. ²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ 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!’ ³⁰ Then “they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!””

³¹ For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ 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. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵ 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.”

³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: This is the King of the Jews.

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?”

⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

⁴³ Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

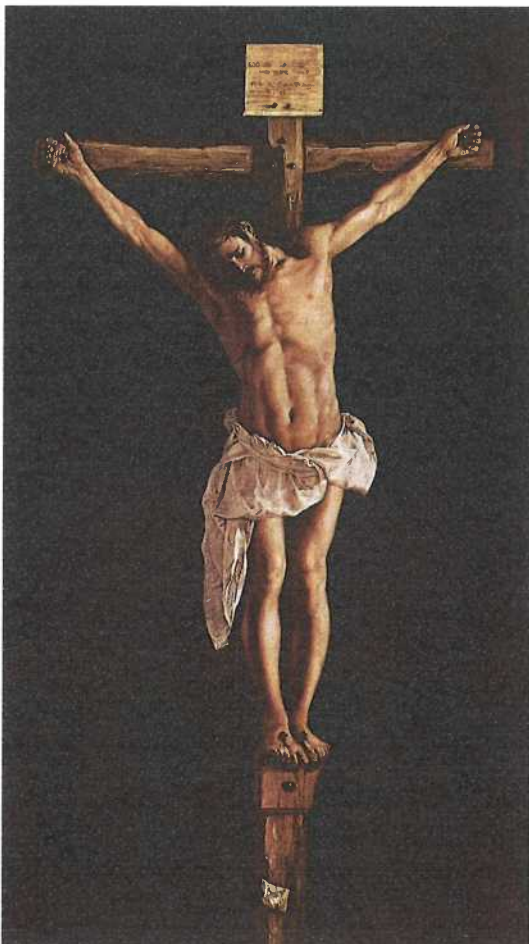
Reflection:

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 a guilty individual let alone the Jewish multitude without his continued guidance. Jesus foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming tribulation. He realized that His followers had no idea of what was coming. Again, He was attempting to make them realize how bad things would get. To say it would be better to be barren and never nurse, in that culture, was a horrific consequence which would be comparable in today's culture to being handicapped in the most debilitating manner possible. Jesus later promised

the criminal hanging next to Him that his sincere faith in Him would result in unearned forgiving grace and everlasting life (In short, we cannot earn our way into heaven, but through faith in Christ, He can and does guarantee our 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 spirit when He decided it was time to die. Even unto the end, He was always in control. His enduring love for us is simply amazing!

**Response:**

I find it incredible that after all Jesus endured, His unrelenting love for mankind and concern about upcoming 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 so freely made? His example makes me feel very embarrassed that I fall prey to sin as frequently as I do, as I realize what He gave up for me out of His unconditional love. 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, less like the old ignorant and selfish me, and more like the "new me" my Lord and Savior says I am and is helping me to become.

Jesus' message and example are especially true in today's environment of separation between those passionately preferring differing ideologies. Who these days can't find members of their own church family that have radically differing points of view? Is it hard to see how we in the church keep failing to treat others like we would want them to treat us... Are we ignoring ongoing issues that in a Christian world should have come to resolution from observance of Scripture?... Can we see our God teaching each of us that we require undeserved grace for the foolish "anti-Christ-like" things we continue to do? Will we cooperate with God and *"throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and... run with perseverance the race marked out for us"* (Hebrews 12:1).

Prayer:

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

- Brent Ford

Francisco de Zurbarán, Christ on the Cross (1627)

APRIL 1

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



Text: Mark 15:33-41

³³ At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴ 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?"

³⁵ When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

³⁸ The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ 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!"

⁴⁰ Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ 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.

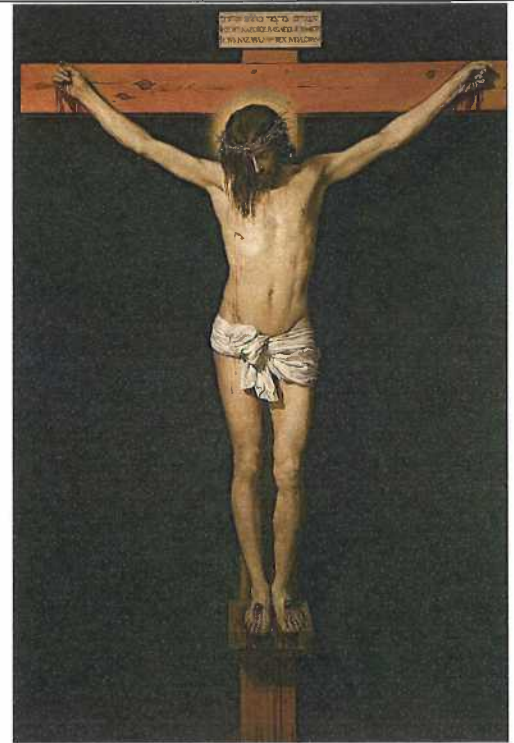
Reflection:

During Lent, when we reflect on the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, it is important to spend time reflecting on what Jesus' death would have been like spiritually and emotionally as well as physically. Obviously, none of us can know exactly what it was like, but we can see what Jesus said about it Himself.

Of course, His death was excruciating physically. The Gospel is good news for us because He paid for our sins through His death, and we rightly rejoice in what God has done to bring us to Himself. And yet, without understanding how repulsive our sin is to God, it is easy to gloss over what it means that Jesus *bore our sins* for us. Death is so horrendous because it separates our bodies from life; sin, when it has not been atoned for, separates our spirits from God, and this is worse.

When Jesus is hanging on the cross, toward the very end of His life, He cries out, quoting Psalm 22:1: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" *Forsaken* is not a word that we use often in everyday conversation; Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines "forsake" as "to renounce or turn away from entirely." In certain Bible translations, the word is rendered "abandoned." When we recognize God as the source of truth, light, life, and love, then there would be nothing worse than to be completely abandoned by Him, to exist spiritually apart from Him in a state of lies and deceit, darkness, death, and the opposite of love, which, whether defined as hatred or complete indifference, is equally terrible. Jesus, who is God's Son, has existed from all eternity in a state of perfect love and relationship with His Father and the Holy Spirit. Even during His time as a man, He knew His Father's love and enjoyed an intimate relationship with Him. Now on the cross, He is not only abandoned, cut off from that relationship, but also horribly weighed down as He bears the wrath of God for the guilt of sin.

Anyone who does not have a mental or spiritual illness has felt guilt at one point or another. Jesus loved us so much that He was willing to take on that guilt, bearing the (just) wrath of God as it was poured in righteous anger on Christ for our sins. I don't think we will ever fully understand what a sacrifice this was; Jesus bore ALL the sins of the world, which we do not have to do—we feel guilt only over our own sins. We also don't fully understand how detestable our own sins are to God, or the depth of their wrongness, and so we don't even feel the fullness of the guilt that we could. Unlike Jesus, our spirits are not eternal and infinite, so we could never bear God's full and righteous wrath even if we wanted.



Diego Velázquez, The Crucifixion, 1632



Ann Kim, *Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani* (1998)

These thoughts are sobering, but they are worth consideration because without fully thinking of what we deserve, and how much Christ bore on our behalf, we can't fully understand the great gift that He gave us in His Son, in His becoming a mediator for us because of our sins.

And His death means that we do have a Mediator, that our sins and our guilt have been paid for and wiped away completely, because Jesus has taken care of the punishment we deserved. We can see this truth reflected in verse 38: "*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.*" The place where High Priests could enter only once a year to make sacrifice for the people, the place where the very presence of God dwelt, was no longer inaccessible and separated from us. Because of Jesus, we have been made right before God, and rather than living in rightful guilt, shame, and fear of God, we can come into His presence boldly (Hebrews 4:16) and as children approach a good father knowing that He loves them (Ephesians 1:5).

Response:

In *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller writes, "The Christian Gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself

less." Being able to love God and love others requires both this humility and confidence. When we spend our time focusing on Jesus and what He has accomplished, we are drawn into worship of a God who is both holy and loving, and this can be our strength to live lives where we follow Jesus's example, sacrificing our own time, comfort, energy, and resources to spread this Good News and His Kingdom to those around us.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank You so much for bearing the weight of sin and guilt for me, for suffering separation from Your Father so that I could be part of Your family and Your kingdom. Thank You that I am allowed to approach the Father with confidence. I pray that I would remember constantly what You accomplished on my behalf, and that I would with love share this Good News with those around me.

– Melissa Bullard

APRIL 2 (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

⁵⁷ As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. ⁵⁹ Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ 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. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

⁶² The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ 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."

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

Reflection:

We humans are big on guarding things. Movies about breaking into places that are heavily guarded, I think, is a film genre all its own. We see guards all the time these days—banks, airports, sports arenas, national borders, concert halls (we had to be frisked last year before we could get into Pioneer Auditorium to hear Amy Grant).

Why this preoccupation with being on guard? I think it is because we are 1) *in the dark* (don't know when a burglar may strike or what a real terrorist looks like so our alarms are on all day), 2) *at risk* (our over-privilege means others have reasons to take from us... so our communities are gated) and 3) *under pressure* (all of this make us fearful and fear brings pressure).

As a meaningful side note: It seems to me that what we guard most may be a good indicator of what we value. Our money, for example, we keep close to us in our wallets or in locked safes or guarded banks. By contrast, we seem to allow our children plenty of unguarded time on the internet where a frightening array of bad ideas and dark influences are ready to steal their minds. Hmmm...

As with us and our guard-crazy culture, the chief priests and Pharisees of Jesus' day, after His death and His entombment provided by Joseph of Arimathea, were also *in the dark*. They had no clue who Jesus was. They deceived themselves into thinking He was some kind of hellish deceiver.

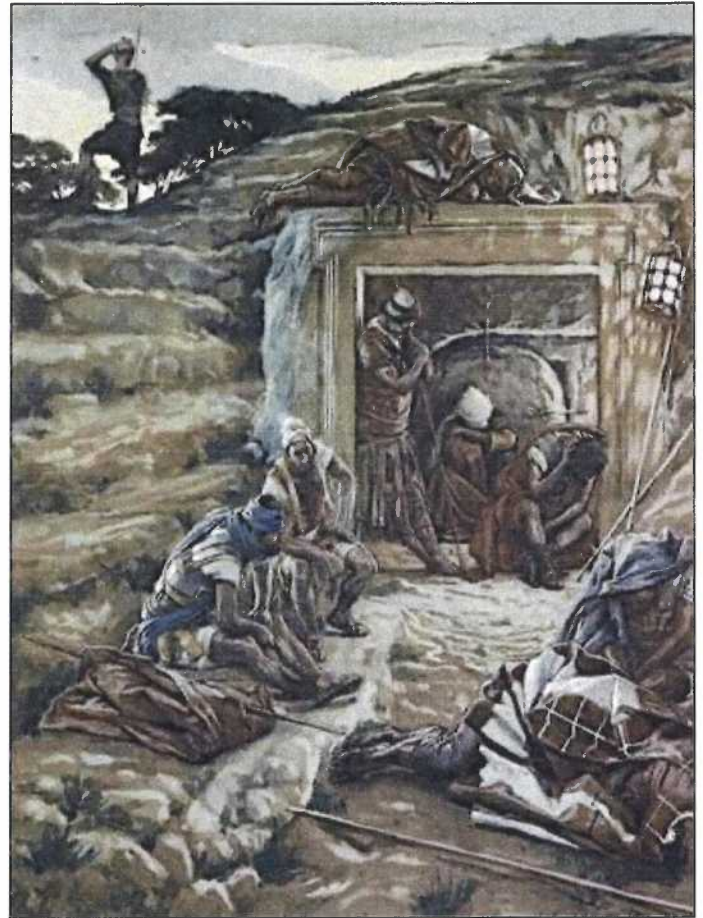
They were *at risk*. They were the religious and social elite, and they did not want to lose their place of over-privilege. They needed good guards to keep things this way. But maybe, like us Americans and our money and our children, they were guarding too well the wrong things.

They were *under pressure*. Jesus put great pressure on them. He threatened to upset their self-serving



Giovanni Savoldo, *Christ with Joseph of Arimathea*

Jesus had to have been a devil. But He just didn't ever fit the profile. But it had to be so. To think otherwise would make the chief priests and the Pharisees devils themselves. No. It mustn't be so.

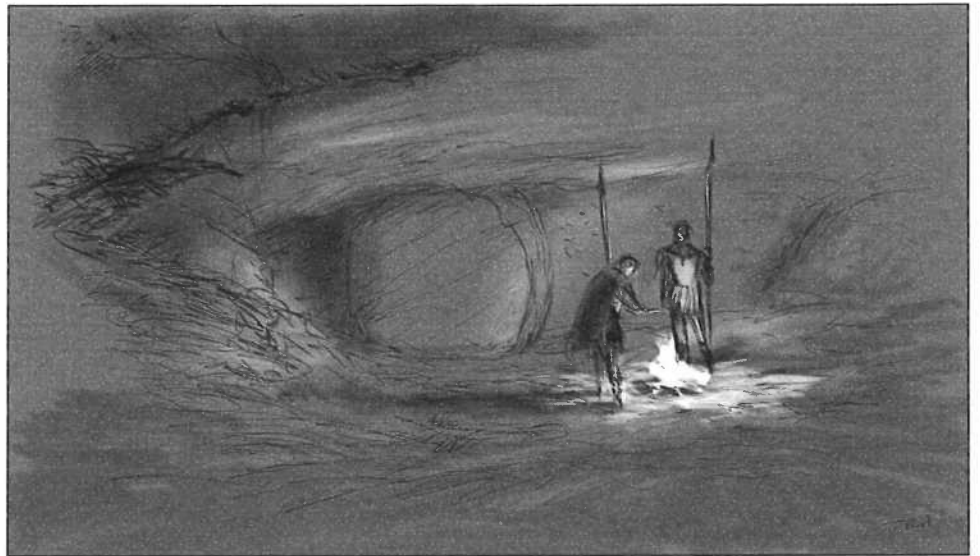


James Tissot, *Guards at the Tomb* - ca.1890

status quo, so they called Him a devil and did their best to discredit him. But everything He did and everything He said just didn't fit their "He's the enemy" narrative. Pressure increased, so they had to get rid of him. Resorting to shady and dishonest use of their own systems of law and justice, they got Jesus condemned and crucified. The depths of their clear and unlawful manipulations to take care of their "Jesus problem" must have caused the pressure for these men pretending to be the bearers of God's truth and justice to become nearly unbearable.

Now the rumor was that Jesus was going to rise from death. The in the dark, at risk and under pressure religious leaders feared His followers would steal the body and claim the miracle. So they hired guards. And despite all their efforts, they simply could not keep Jesus in the tomb. And when Jesus rose, what did they do? *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."* So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (Matthew 28:12-15) The story of deception the leaders feared is now their story. The possible lie is now their actual lie. The irony is wonderful if it weren't so terrible. Could they actually overlook the logical problems—like if the soldiers were asleep how did they know who came and took the body? Could they truly excuse their underhanded use of bribery? Apparently. Everything had to fit the "Jesus is a devil, and devils don't rise" narrative.

It is worth asking, finally, what exactly are the desperate priests guarding? If they think they are guarding the tomb of Jesus against His grave-robbing disciples, they aren't: His disciples have no such plans and are going to be as surprised as anybody when their Savior shows up again and alive. If they think they are guarding against Jesus Himself getting up and getting out, they aren't: By the power of God, His power, Jesus rose. If they think they are guarding against some undesirable inauguration of a new religion centered on Jesus of



J. R. Howley, *Guards At the Tomb* (2011)

Nazareth, they weren't: Here we are 2,000 years later writing devotional books encouraging people to look at Jesus and follow Him. So what were these in the dark, at risk and under pressure folks truly guarding? Not the tomb of Jesus, but their own! They were guarding themselves against the reality that God, their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had come to fulfill His promises to His people. They were guarding themselves against their True Lord's saving work, against the mission that Jesus had now completed by which their own tombs could be found empty as well.

Response:

What kinds of things do you see yourself guarding most passionately? Why?

Are there ways you are guarding yourself against the full freedom and rich life Jesus has brought to the world and to our lives? How can such guards be removed?

Prayer:

Lord God, I confess that I do guard myself against You and against the fullness of what life with You could look like. I am in the dark in many ways. I feel myself to be at risk so much of the time. And so I feel the pressure of fear that my ignorance and sense of vulnerability bring. Help me. I trust that You have raised me to new life by Your death and resurrection, Jesus. Make that new life a clearer and deeper and more beautiful reality in my life today. To You be the glory forever. Amen.

- Jay Hull

APRIL 3 (Good Friday)

"Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'"



Text: John 20:1-18

¹ 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. ² 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!"

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

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

¹³ 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." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ "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."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

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

¹⁷ 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.'"

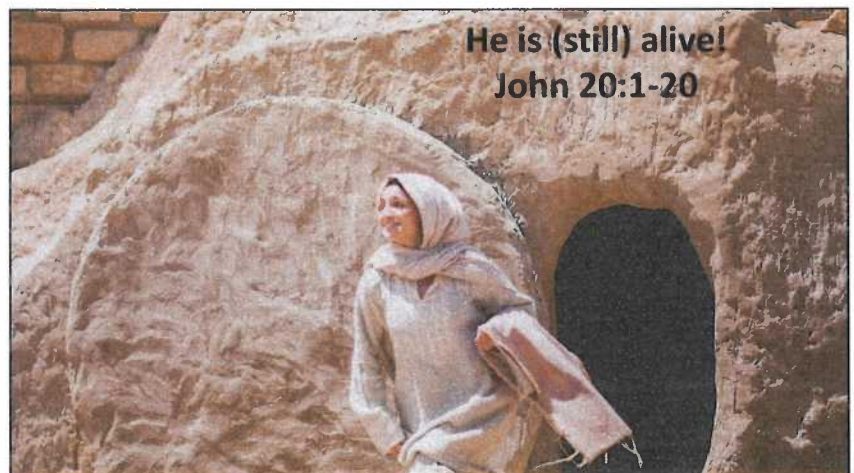
¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflection:

For some time now, I have been fascinated by the story of Mary Magdalene. What was her childhood like? What became of her parents? What contributed to her downfall, and how did she become demon-possessed? Who was she that Jesus would single her out for miraculous healing and also give her the special privilege of being the first to see him in his resurrected body? So, when I saw the title of today's devotion, JESUS SAID TO HER, "MARY", I was compelled to accept the task.

As a woman in those times, the restrictions on Mary's behavior and activities would be frustrating to our modern sensibilities, but would just be "tradition" for her. So, for Mary Magdalene to become a follower of Jesus, and later one of his benefactors was proof that Jesus had come to buck tradition and forever change people (especially their understanding of, and relationship with God) and the world. Mary was certainly changed, redeemed, worthwhile and loyal.

She proved her loyalty to Jesus when she went alone to the tomb and found that the stone covering the entrance had been removed. We all know what happened next: Peter and an unnamed disciple (John?) ran to



inspect the tomb, found it empty and returned to their homes. Mary stood crying outside the tomb, looked inside, and saw two angels who asked her why she was crying. Her response was full of despair: "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have put him!" Then she turned and saw, but did not recognize her Lord, and asked if he had carried away the body "tell me where you have put him and I will get him".

Jesus said to her, "Mary".

That's all it took for her to know him, and her joy, relief and faith were restored. Why would Jesus reveal himself to Mary Magdalene first? Could it be that the compassion Christ felt for the demon-filled woman (this woman who felt hopeless, worthless and unlovable) was the same compassion he felt for her in her distress at his "death?" Christ's compassion* assured Mary she was worthwhile, loved and had every reason to be filled with hope.

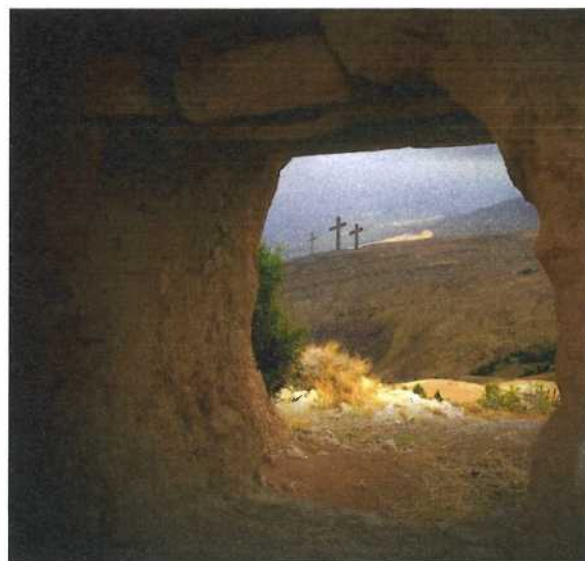
Response:

Funny thing, my search for more insight into Mary Magdalene's character actually revealed to me more about the character and compassion of Jesus Christ my Lord and Savior. That happens all the time!

*Lest you think I overused the word "Compassion", it literally means "to suffer together"; the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, I can't thank You enough for finding us worthwhile; for loving us enough to provide a way for the salvation we don't deserve and certainly could never earn. Our hope is in Jesus Christ, and in his name we pray. Amen. - Barbara Landis



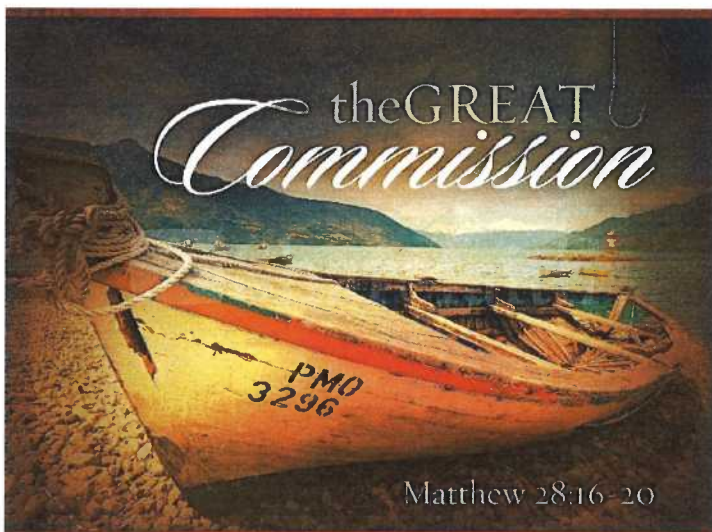
APRIL 4

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



Text: Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ 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 “*δισμυριαζ*”, 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:

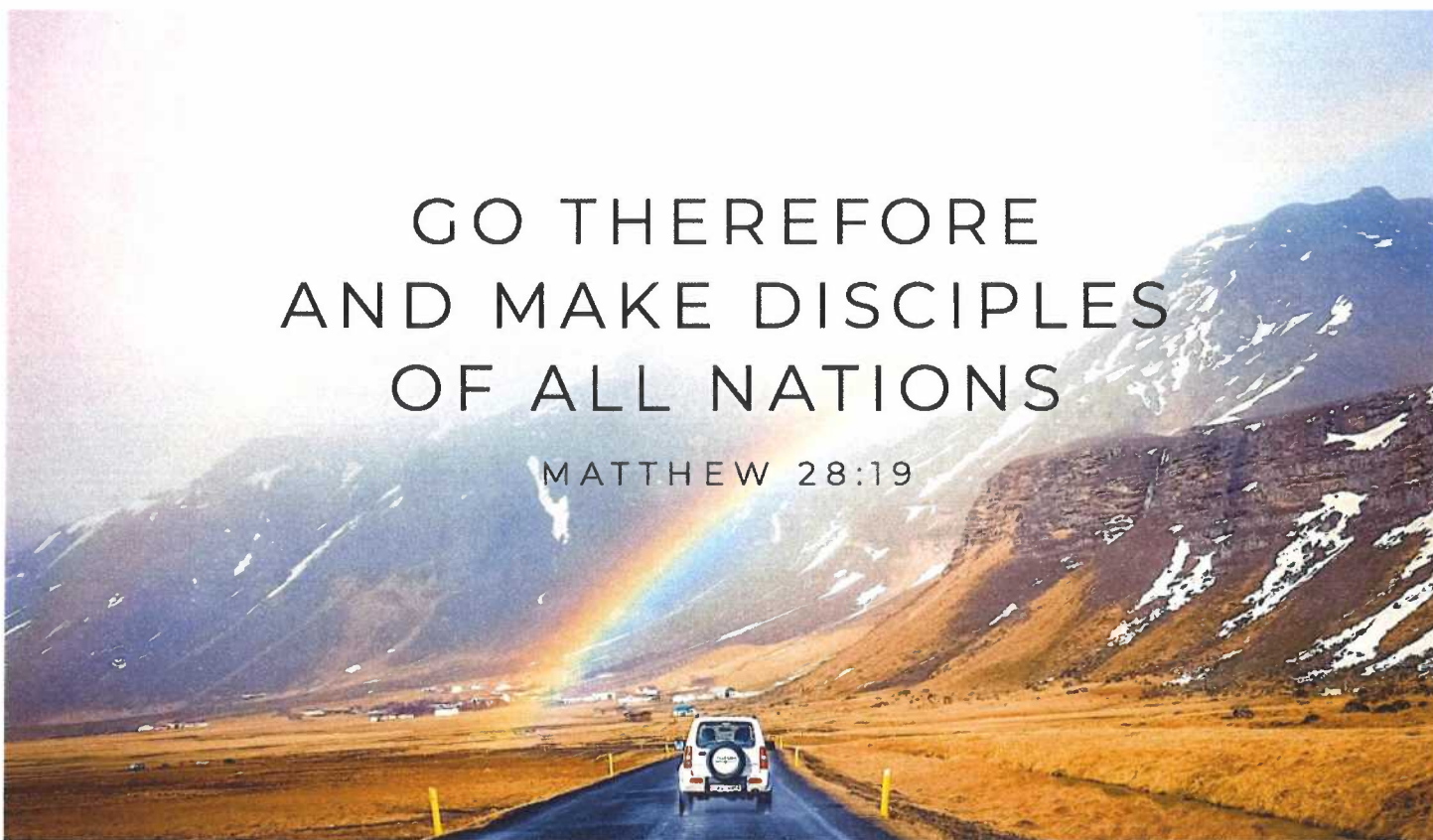
Witness Matthew’s transparency and accuracy as he notes that there are doubters (whether disbelievers or hesitators) in that confrontation with Jesus. Only one passionately concerned with giving a true account of the circumstances surrounding Jesus would have done so. Stop for a moment and thank God 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

GO THEREFORE
AND MAKE DISCIPLES
OF ALL NATIONS

MATTHEW 28:19





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