

ST PAULS MEMORIAL CHURCH

at the UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



Lenten Devotional

2020

February 26, Ash Wednesday

Psalm 51:1-7 • Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 • 2 Corinthians 5:20b –
6:10 • Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Lead us, Lord,
these 40 days
through the thick darkness
take our hands
help our hearts
return
to you

— **Anna Askounis**

February 27, Thursday

Psalm 37:19-40 • Habakkuk 3:1-18 • Philippians 3:12-21
• John 17:1-8

What a gift it is to me to have this passage from Habakkuk 3 as a reading for this day. “Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; . . . yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.” v. 17-19. It was new to me a year ago and is now deeply rooted in my mind and heart.

Last year my husband and I traveled to Michigan to attend the funeral of Hannah, a friend dear to both of us. He and Hannah shared a deep and abiding love of the garden. She and I spoke weekly on the phone covering a range of topics. When we first knew Hannah as our next door neighbor, she was a scientist with little time to devote to her own garden. Thankfully, she took time to let our friendship blossom. When she retired, her devotion was to gardens, her own and those of others through her business, avidly studying plants and garden design. When we first knew her, she had many questions about faith. It was a troubled time. More than thirty-five years ago she found a new life partner and with him found a deep and abiding love of the Lord that they nurtured together in their daily lives and in their Third Reformed Church. “Meeting Jesus in the Garden” was the title of the funeral message. We were told by the preacher that Hannah had requested the first reading to be the Habakkuk passage, an unusual choice, but he understood. He knew her as a gardener who knew her Bible and rejoiced in the Lord, regardless of weather conditions.

May this Lenten season nourish and strengthen the roots of our gardens, our faith, and the friendships that sustain us and remind us to “Wait on the Lord and keep his way” (Psalm 37: 34).

— Doris Greiner

February 28, Friday

Psalm 95 • Ezekial 18:1-4, 25-32 • Philippians 4:1-9 •
John 17:9-19

“Jesus Prays for His Disciples.” This is the heading for chapter 17 of The Gospel According to John in the NRSV translation. I have long felt a particular poignancy in reading this heading—perhaps because of the timing (just before Jesus’ arrest/kidnapping), or perhaps because Jesus is preparing the disciples for life without him. It’s likely both and much more, but regardless, the heading feels quite tender, and today’s verses feel infused with Jesus’ deep love for them. We read that he prayed that they may be protected; that they may be unified; that they may have his own joy; and that they may be set free by God’s truth. What impact do you imagine Jesus’ petitions had on the disciples? After all, they weren’t made for God’s benefit, right?

I have often wondered what prayer really is. I firmly believe that I have nothing to say that will be news to God; so, deep heart-listening feels right to me. Of course, I do make my own requests, and I lovingly offer praise and thanks, but I think it’s in those times when I’m quiet that I am truly ‘praying.’ It’s then that I feel I am more likely to get a sense of how God desires for me to live.

I like to think that after the disciples were able to reflect on Jesus’ prayers that they made a marked difference in their individual lives and in the lives of those they counted as their community. Maybe they redoubled their efforts to look after each other (the protection that Jesus wanted for them). Maybe they worked a little harder to understand one other when they disagreed (the unity that Jesus desired for them). Maybe they were more intentional to celebrate small moments of wonder and delight (the joy Jesus hoped they would have). And maybe they tried harder to live the way Jesus lived (that’s God’s truth that will set us free).

— Christie Thomas

February 29, Saturday

Psalm 30 • Ezekial 39:21-29 • Philippians 4:10-20 •
John 17:20-26

The four readings for today are remarkably similar, and they speak of the ways in which God protects his people and supports them. Taken together, they show a loving God who is always ready to help us.

The Psalmist says to the Lord that “Joy comes in the morning.” John says to the Lord that “These people know that you have sent me.” Paul says to his followers that “My God will supply all your wants.” God speaks through the Prophet, who quotes Him as saying that “I am taking care of the Israelites; I will restore their fortunes; I will bring them together on the soil of their own Land.” And read together, they emphasize the extent and duration of God’s care.

It’s hard to elaborate on the meaning of these selections; they are crystal clear. God loves His people and will always look after them. That is quite apparent. And it’s always useful to keep God’s care of us in mind. We can’t do that at every moment, of course; and there are times when our troubles, or those of other people, can make us wonder “where is God when we/they need Him.” I certainly don’t have an answer for that question. However, I think it is useful, and a good idea, to attempt to be aware of God’s love and care even when things look hopeless.

A recent event in my life gave me a new look at being shut out. My newly installed computer—which had worked very well at first—refused to let me sign in, or in fact do anything. I spent a lot of time struggling with it; I felt separated from my email family and friends, my bank account, shopping with Amazon, reading the current news, all sorts of connections that I take for granted that the computer does for me. Finally, I backtracked and redid one of the installation steps; and much to my surprise, the computer came to life and behaved itself. The relief and freedom were wonderful.

I’m certainly not trying to compare God to a computer, in case that’s what you’re thinking. But I did learn that the appearance of being shut out is often transient; and that learning to take a different line of thought can sometimes be very helpful in a difficult situation. After all, as these scripture passages emphasize, just because life is not going well does not mean that God has forsaken us.

— **Ginger Greene**

March 1, First Sunday in Lent

Psalm 32 • Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 • Romans 5:12-19 •
Matthew 4:1-11

The Genesis stories are not history, but an explanation of our relationship with our Creator. Thus, I don't see Adam and Eve as distant ancestors, but as examples of our own condition. Hence, my use of the pronoun “we.”

The phrase translated as “know good and evil” is a merism, a figure of speech that combines two contrasting words to refer to an entirety. It means “know everything,” rather than “know right from wrong.” It's like saying “kit and caboodle” for “everything.”

Thus, the choice was between wisdom and life. God meant for Adam and Eve (us) to live, but we chose to be wise, to know, to understand. With that choice came mortality. How much of our great literature dating back to the oldest tales contains stories of immortal creatures who chose mortality for whatever reason?

Was there a right or wrong choice? Had we chosen to live rather than to know, the Garden would have been a static paradise for us. Sure, a place with no conflict, no suffering, no discord. But would we have known what conflict was, or peace, or pain, or love?

God created us as free-will creatures. That we might choose other than what God wanted was part of the deal. To choose ourselves does not diminish God at all. It also does not diminish God's love for willful men and women. After every choice we make, God is there asking us to choose again. And so it goes, choice after choice, until we run out of choices and are reunited with our Creator.

And stuck as we are in a world that always ends in death, how miserable are we, who can discover the secrets of the cosmos, compose great music, love each other, and worship our Creator in so many varied ways?

Thanks be to God, Who gives us the Creation to discover and preserve, and Who never stops loving us despite our choices.

— J. T. Hine

March 2, Monday

Psalm 52 • Genesis 37:1-11 • 1 Corinthians 1:1-19 •
Mark 1:1-13

All four Gospels include some version of the story of Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, and all four Gospels invoke some version of Isaiah 40:3. In Mark, the Gospel starts in Chapter 1, verse 2 with:

I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare
your way—A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for
him.”

I can't read those words without thinking of singing the *Messiah*. Every December, Don Loach would tell the tenors in the auditorium to stand up for their big moment:

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; prepare ye
the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.
Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made
low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain.

(Isaiah 40: 3-4, set out almost verbatim in Luke's telling). After doing this for 50 years, when I hear the Gospel lesson of John the Baptist talking about making straight a highway for our God, my mind starts the music, and I don't think of Jesus being baptized—I imagine that I am again in Cabell Hall, standing with the tenors to sing in the Christmas season.

— Lloyd Snook

March 3, Tuesday

Psalm 45 • Genesis 37:12-24 • 1 Corinthians 1:20-31 •
Mark 1:14-28

I've been thinking a lot about who is called to serve vs. who gets the opportunity to serve. What we know from this passage, in Mark and many others, is that Jesus looked for common, ordinary and especially marginalized people to be part of his work, even leaders.

What I witness every day is that the same people are given the chances for a seat at the table, for involvement in committees and on boards. Most often, it is people with positional leadership and perceived authority versus those with authentic influence and wisdom through their lived experience.

What if?

What if people like you and me, who through systems designed to elevate some and slight most, chose to share the power we have been afforded with others who won't have it by design. What would it look like to say "no" to something so someone else can say "yes." And more importantly, to advocate for a different set of norms when selecting who is going to have a say.

Rather than one's affiliation with a particular organization, what if it was about the person's connection to the people ultimately being impacted. Rather than one's education and credentials, what if it's about the person's lived experience and related expertise. Rather than name recognition, what if it's about new names, including some you can't pronounce.

Let's imagine what it looks like to shift long-standing structures of control and influence and to instead share power. From the very beginning of time, that was God's intention. Along the way, and even in those times, people abused and misused their power to exclude others.

During Lent, and beyond, what if we all practice giving up some of the power we have, and when we can, creating opportunities for others to lead, inform and choose who are usually led, told, and given.

— Erika Viccellio

March 4, Wednesday

Psalm 119:49-72 • Genesis 37:25-36 • 1 Corinthians 2:1-13 • Mark 1:29-45

Mark 1:29-34. “As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. ³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. ³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ . . . Jesus healed many who had various diseases.” (New International Version)

I like this story because Jesus cured a woman in one of his earliest miracles and because he touched her. He took her hand. Back in those days, those with fevers were scary. She could have had a very dangerous disease. And yet Jesus held her hand. It is significant that he was touching a woman who was not his relative. In Jesus’ time, it simply was not part of the culture for a man to touch a woman unrelated to him. Even in his earliest days, Jesus took actions outside of the cultural norms. Jesus led with courage and his followers often displayed great courage.

I witnessed people being courageous during the civil rights struggle, and they were usually people of great Christian faith. It was often an incredible experience. Of course, Christians have always been involved in other movements, such as the anti-war movement and more recently protecting undocumented immigrants, but they have not been the dominant leadership as Christians were in the civil rights movement.

When word got around that Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law, people came from all around with their sick family members and Jesus healed many. And then Jesus would withdraw with his disciples to rest.

That too reminds me of the civil rights movement. Dr. King would come to town and we would all gather to hear him, sometimes waiting for hours in advance to get into the church. It was an affirming evening; we left feeling inspired and determined to continue the struggle. Dr. King had great energy but it took all his energy and he too would sometimes retire to rest. Dr. King was just a man; he wasn’t the son of God. However, he displayed incredible courage based on his faith and gave encouragement to many of us.

— Lynne Weikart

March 5, Thursday

Psalm 59 • Genesis 39:1-23 • 1 Corinthians 2:14 – 3:15

• Mark 2:1-12

(I hoped to channel a poem for today but I wasn't a-mused; I was cribbing verse from the Psalms and ignoring other selections for the day. Likewise I can't fathom Joseph's terror in the pit as his brothers lunched or the agony of Jacob's broken heart [Genesis]. I don't know the history of OT wars [Psalms] nor can I contribute to our understanding of miracles [Mark]).

So what remains? Threading through these laments, tales and wonders is the eternal incongruity of our life with and without God, of our own wandering in the desert but yet of God's ever faithful loving presence and deliverance.

Joseph is envied by his brothers. They seek to kill him but sell him into slavery instead, not to save him but to take the opportunity to profit from his disappearance. Their faithlessness extends to their father who will not be consoled even were he to rejoin Joseph in death. But God is present; God does not interfere or rescue Joseph. As we will later learn this is an early step to the exodus and to the land promised to the Hebrews' forbears. *God with us.*

The psalmist is gripped by enemies and fears. (Descriptions of a warlike, wrathful God, one beseeched to avenge and subdue one's enemies "with god on our side" justification for war such as in this psalm are always dissonant for me. I am challenged to reconcile that with a God incarnate in Christ, a God of perfect creation, of unfailing love.) Beyond the pleas to *slay them*, to *show no mercy* we hear a quieter voice, one of trust and confidence: *For you have become . . . a refuge in the day of my trouble. For you, O my strength, will I sing.* In our own submission we can find peace and express our praise and gratitude. *God with us.*

Mark's tale has a wonderful image of the faithful who *removed the roof* [!] to present a paralyzed man to Jesus. The pronouncement that *your sins are forgiven*, simple yet profound, is the extreme and supreme manifestation of God's love and mercy. *God with us.*

Paul tells the church in Corinth that God's love can be known and that the church, the body of Christ, has been granted grace to receive God's Spirit, to build upon Christ's foundation. As with Joseph, the psalmist, the paralytic, and the church, our spiritual life will be ever tested, forged by fire, dulled by doubts and honed in prayer, community and love. *God with us*

— Peter Dennison

March 6, Friday

Psalm 51 • Genesis 40:1-23 • 1 Corinthians 3:16-23 •
Mark 2:13-22

The March 6 readings point, in different ways, to God's omnipotent power and the corresponding need for Christians to accept that all things are possible through an abiding trust in God's will.

In Psalm 51, often referred to as the penitential psalm, David cries out to God and asks for forgiveness of his sins. *For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me (3-4). Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me (10). Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. (12).*

In Mark's Gospel, when Jesus is questioned as to why he would have dinner with sinners, he answers, *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but (to call) sinners.*

In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, he refers to the young church as *infants in Christ* and urges them to understand that they are indeed the foundation of the church. *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? Let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours . . . all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*

Perhaps the words of the hymn *How Firm a Foundation* most eloquently define this good news that God has bestowed upon us.

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in his excellent word!
What more can he say than to you he hath said,
to you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

*Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed!
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.*

— Steve Bevis

March 7, Saturday

Psalm 55 • Genesis 41:1-13 • 1 Corinthians 4:1-7 •
Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is periodically reprimanded for “working” on the Sabbath; his primary Sabbath labor is healing, but in this story, a passing Pharisee reprimands him for plucking some grain as he and his disciples are walking through a field. Jesus takes this opportunity to remind some strict “letter of the law” religious leaders what the Sabbath is really about, and how to apply Sabbath laws to our daily lives.

The commandments about the Sabbath are found in the same part of Leviticus as the laws commanding farmers to leave the gleanings of their fields for the poor, the widow, and the foreigner, and the laws forbidding the people to deal falsely or pervert justice. On the Sabbath day, not only are we to give ourselves a rest from our labors, but also we are forbidden to demand service from anyone else, from our neighbors, to the stranger living in our land, all the way down to our livestock; in certain years in the Sabbath cycle, we’re even told to let the land itself lie fallow, in order to replenish itself after many plantings (we’re specifically allowed to pluck any grain that grows on its own, though). In the fiftieth year, the Jubilee, the people are commanded to free everyone—again, even foreigners—from the burdens of debt and servitude. The Sabbath isn’t merely a reminder that even God needs a day off after creating the entire universe, or a practical way to prevent burnout. In one day, it shows us a miniature of God’s vision of liberation and redemption for all creation. The Sabbath laws are meant to encapsulate the entire mission of the people of God: “to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Isaiah, Luke)” This day of freedom is not a time to demand that people continue to be hungry, ill, or homeless; rather, it’s a time to remember how expansive God’s justice is, and to delight in the opportunity to share that justice with the whole of creation.

— Beth Molmen

March 8, Second Sunday in Lent

Psalm 121 • Genesis 12:1-4a • Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 •
John 3:1-17

What familiar riches lie in these readings: the never-stale beauty of Psalm 121, the startling clarity of Abram/Abraham's faith, the complex conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. We could simply rehearse the surface messages of divine comfort and assurance they bring us, but it's worth asking if there is anything deeper, anything fresher to see here.

John 3:16, for one, can be trickier than we think, the insipidity of those placards waved by football fans notwithstanding. A few years ago an old friend, an Episcopal priest named Jack, said that in these troubled times he has taken to citing "Jack 3:16." He bases his variation on the observation that, in its original Greek, John 3:16 says God comes to us as Jesus because that's the way God loves the *cosmos*—that is, the universe and everyone and everything in it. Hence "Jack 3:16": "For God so loved [insert name of despised or marginalized—or annoying, strange, etc.—person(s) here] that he gave his only Son. . . ." This is not a gimmick; it's actually what the verse means, like it or not. Jack's reading made me think again about another favorite consoling passage, Romans 8:35-38, and recognize that, in the exuberant and unfathomable love of God revealed in Jesus, it must also be the case that nothing can separate [insert name here] from the love of God. This is a startling and, if I'm being honest, not altogether welcome realization. But there it is, yet another challenging expansion of my faith.

Today's passages speak to each other in ways that put such a challenge in perspective—at least I'm not being asked, like Sarah, to leave everything behind in my 70s and then bear a child in my 90s!—and that demonstrate that faith can handle the test. For, Psalm 121 assures us, God will *keep* our life (the word translated as "keep" denotes protection, safety, and preservation), our going out and coming in now and forever, whatever trials come. We are kept securely in God's hands, in God's heart, because God loves all of us, the whole *cosmos*, that way and that much.

— Margaret Mohrmann

March 9, Monday

Psalm 57 • Genesis 41:46-57 • 1 Corinthians 4:8-21 •
Mark 3:7-19a

When reading 1 Corinthians 4:8-21 for the first time, I read Paul as desperately imploring those listening to understand how lucky they are to not be apostles themselves. His message was one of “you just don’t know how bad we apostles have it” with passages such as “To the present hour, we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands.” Of course, I had to re-read Paul’s words to better discern what I apparently (and hopefully) was misunderstanding. After three or four tries, I finally started seeing his brilliant deceit—he was awakening his audience to the opportunity they have to be loved and saved by Jesus, while the apostles had received those gifts but now were engaged to do God’s work. The apostles had to pay it forward, so to speak, by turning their individual gain into individual effort on behalf of humankind, to live up to and be worthy of the grace that they had received by helping others come to Christ—“We are weak, but you are strong.” I find myself re-reading these words even now, questioning whether I am fully understanding the meaning. I appreciate how Paul and Jesus chose to frame the opportunity of Christianity to their potential followers—how the apostles are there to serve rather than lead and aid their fellow persons rather than acting as kings. Entering the Lenten period, I will work to remember that being fortunate in Christ should not be about succeeding or receiving, but rather about trying and giving. We should not see our goal as that of accepting Jesus and then we’re done. Instead, I believe that Paul’s words tell us to see the climb before us, reach out to others in need around us, and realize that our place is in service to humanity through Christ and our church.

March 10, Tuesday

Psalm 62 • Genesis 42:1-17 • 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 •
Mark 3:19b-35

Waiting can be hard. When things seem tricky or difficult sometimes it is hard to have patience that God will show up. We can see this by the example of Joseph's brothers. The famine they were experiencing left them not only hungry but also without their livelihood. I would imagine they felt afraid and maybe even abandoned by God. Going to Egypt was likely their last hope to survive. Once there, they were greeted skeptically, but ultimately taken care of. Their brother recognized them, but not the other way around. This is how God is with us. Sometimes God sees us but we can't see him. He ultimately sees our needs before they even are apparent to us and prepares to take care of us. Then, when we are in the seasons of what seems like extreme waiting, God will be there and provide for us. That is why he alone is the one our souls should wait for.

— **Megan Bower**

March 11, Wednesday

Psalm 119:73-96 • Genesis 42:18-28 • 1 Corinthians 5:6
– 6:8 • Mark 4:1-20

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus tells a story about a farmer sowing seed, seemingly heedless of the rocks, the thorns, the depth and moisture of the soil. The seed sown on rich, cultivated soil thrives. The seed falling on rocky, thorny, inhospitable ground does not. Responding to His disciples' question about the meaning of this story, Jesus starts by paraphrasing Isaiah 6: 9-10:

“To . . . you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that ‘they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’”

Then Jesus connects the seed in His story to the word and those who hear it. For some, the word is choked by cares and concerns, and does not last. Others hear the word and it bears a rich harvest.

To me Jesus' reference to Isaiah 6 sounds harsh, dismissive, maybe despairing. But Isaiah 6 concludes on a hopeful note. In a field of desolate, empty, inhospitable land a tree stump remains standing. A tree stump still alive with the power to send forth new growth. And “[t]he holy seed is its stump.” (Isaiah 6:13.)

So perhaps Jesus' response reflects His trust that although His word may not always fall on fertile ground, it will not pass away. As verse 89 of today's psalm affirms:

“O LORD, your word is everlasting;
it stands firm in the heavens.”

And maybe Jesus is inviting His listeners, including us, to help foster the growth of His word, to let it take root and grow. Maybe He's saying, “Come, let yourselves be good soil for My word. Soften your hearts and let My word nestle and take root in you. Pry out the rocks and cut down the thorns, the worries, the fruitless desires that might hamper its growth. Trust in the power of My word to produce fruit in your lives, and the lives of all around you.”

— Karen Mawyer

March 12, Thursday

Psalm 71 • Genesis 42:29-38 • 1 Corinthians 6:12-30 •
Mark 4:21-34

Mark 4:33-34

“With many such parables he spoke to them as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his disciples he explained everything.”

Am I one who is given a parable or, possibly, could I/we be the ones, as disciples, who privately have everything explained? If we are the latter, how can that happen? Is Christ speaking to us today? I believe the answer is yes. As Christ is in all and IS all, we can access understanding through Christ in US . . . right now and always.

1 Corinthians 6:15 and 17

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.”

We can unite by choosing to sit and listen within . . . to place ourselves in a position to become more aware. Richard Rohr writes, “We do not hear silence; rather, it is that by which we hear.” We can open ourselves to a form of “knowing beyond thinking.” From this space we are guided into discernment and action which can be very different from rational understanding and doing.

I have found that by joining with others in a small group with the common practice of listening within and sharing insights, new understandings (and meanings) are born. I believe the Christ in you can enlighten the Christ in me.

I am grateful beyond words for the people from our community of St. Paul’s who weekly gather in a group to sit in silence to listen and share. Together, with perseverance we find that, like the disciples experienced, much is privately explained.

— **Brenda Peterson**

March 13, Friday

Psalm 73 • Genesis 43:1-15 • 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 •
Mark 4:35-41

When the disciples follow Jesus onto small boats after days of travelling with him throughout Galilee, Jesus promptly reclines on a cushion and falls fast asleep as the winds and seas rise, threatening to swamp their tiny crafts. The panicking disciples wake him, asking, “Don’t you care about us?” Jesus calms the winds and the seas. His well-known question to them is, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

I am curious about the disciples’ question.

They don’t scream, “Wake up! We’re going to die! Help us!” Instead, they seem to expect that, just as he has shown he can save people from blindness, disease, and death, Jesus will—and *should*—save them, too. “What about us? Aren’t you going to protect us?”

In the crisis, the disciples do what I so often do: strive for (and even demand) a savior in the form of a solution, a fix for the immediate problem or danger—and usually from someone, something, or anything handy or convenient or easy. I look outward, often unwilling to confront uncomfortable truths—especially the seemingly unbearable experience of my own utter vulnerability.

And yet.

In my life, over and over again, I have experienced that the waters are calmed, and the winds do subside. Slowly but surely, I am coming to know that

*If the Lord had not been on our side . . .
We’d be swallowed alive, tossed by raging waters,
Overwhelmed, when troubles rise against us,
Praise to the Lord,
He’ll never let us be torn from his loving hands . . .*

(“My Help,” by Michael White, sung by MLK Community Choir,
January 2020)

— Leslie Middleton

March 14, Saturday

Psalm 76 • Genesis 43:16-34 • 1 Corinthians 7:10-24 •
Mark 5:1-20

This passage is the story of Jesus expelling the Legion from the man in Gerasene. He helps a man who is plagued by spirits and sends those spirits into swine which then drown themselves. Everyone nearby (except for the man that he has helped) is angered that their swine have died and they send Jesus away.

This story sends an important message to me about the true nature of heroism and what Jesus was trying to accomplish. To me, the true nature of heroism is doing the right thing regardless of the consequences, even when there is no one around to commend you, or punish you, for that action. For instance, it is heroic to pick up litter in a park even if there is no one around to make you feel good for helping protect our planet. This notion is seen in this passage as Jesus does the heroic and right action by expelling the demons out of the man. He helps this man in Gerasene return to normal and become a better person even though his actions bring on the rage of the townsfolk. He performed the right action even though he knew that the people may have an issue with him. That, in this case, makes Jesus a hero. Not in the way we traditionally think of him as a religiously superpowered superhero, but in the way that he was just a person doing the right thing regardless of the consequences. I think we could all take a note from this more simplistic approach to the notion of Jesus as a hero and do the right thing, even when no one is looking.

— Cabell Eggleston

March 15, Third Sunday in Lent

Psalm 95 • Exodus 17:1-7 • Romans 5:1-11 • John 4:5-42

The refugee travels through the desert in search of a better life, needing, in the moment, water. I travel through the desert(s) of my life, in search of faith, needing, in the moment, to quench my spiritual thirst. The Samaritan woman speaks to the Jew, who then speaks of giving living water, knowing her story. With refugees and others, we share our stories of suffering, perseverance. . . .

God is the rock of our salvation. There is water from the rock for those who thirst in the desert. Jesus gives the living water that we may have within us a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Worship God in spirit and in truth. Come share your stories. Come drink of the living water, receiving hope, reconciliation . . . building a better life, a stronger faith, quenching our thirst.

Water

Water from the rock

God is the rock of our salvation

For the sea is His and He made it. . . .

Water

Living water

Jesus at the well

Speaks to the Samaritan woman

Water

Pure fresh water

Quenches our thirst

Satisfies a need

Water

Living water

Leads us to faith

Giving us hope, reconciliation

Water

Drink pure fresh water

Drink of the living water

Quench the thirst.

— Anne Cressin

March 16, Monday

Psalm 80 • Genesis 44:18-34 • 1 Corinthians 7:25-31 •
Mark 5:21-43

When I was a little girl, I would spend days amazed at the stories of Jesus' miracles. Now, as a young woman, I am less quick to marvel and wonder. By the time I get home from church, I am already preoccupied with my to-do list.

I recently went to a lecture by Cyntoia Brown, a woman who was sentenced to life imprisonment when she was just sixteen years old for killing a man even though she was a sex trafficking victim. She spent long dark years in solitary confinement. Her faith in God was her only comfort. Yet, as the years passed, that faith dwindled and then disappeared. She saw women around her planning their lives after release—a luxury she did not have.

However, a couple of years ago Cyntoia received a letter from a man in Texas, Jamie Long, telling her to have faith. As they corresponded, Cyntoia began to have prophetic dreams of her release. After years of being told by the attorneys, judges, and prison officials that she would be relegated to a life in prison, Cyntoia believed that only God could release her. She dreamt that she would be released in the middle of a dark, stormy night.

In January of 2019, she was granted clemency by the governor of North Carolina. In the middle of the night on August 7, 2019, in pouring rain, Cyntoia Brown became a free woman. Now, she is happily married to Jamie, the man who helped her find her faith again, and travels the country spreading the good news of God's love, mercy, and grace.

Just as the woman's faith in Jesus healed her disease just by a touch of his clothes, Cyntoia's faith set her free from an unforgiving criminal justice system. Cyntoia Brown's lecture was my impetus to again be amazed at the miracles that come from faith.

— Sophie Gibson

March 17, Tuesday

Psalm 78:1-39 • Genesis 45:1-15 • 1 Corinthians 7:32-40
• Mark 6:1-13

Families are tough to get along with these days. Sibling rivalry, blended families, difficult financial circumstances. That seems to be true now, as it was thousands of years ago. Why so? Jealousy, envy, feelings of inadequacy, perceived differences in love and respect from parents, inability to accept differences in each other—many reasons, both real and imagined. In two of today's readings (Genesis 45:1-15, Mark 6:1-13), there are instances in which rejection of a kin and what that kin represents hold the spotlight.

In Mark, Jesus returns to his hometown, amongst his family and his neighbors. As he begins to teach in the synagogue, there is resistance to him and to his wisdom: "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

In Genesis, one of the most well-known stories is found, that of Joseph, son of Jacob. Jacob's second wife Rachel bore two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, who had several step-brothers. Joseph was favored, as the child born in Jacob's old age. That blended family, especially with Joseph as a favored child, was the source of jealousy, anger and misdeed. The other brothers sold Joseph into slavery—which led to the rest of the story where Joseph saved his father, his brothers and their families from drought and famine many years later.

"Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.'"

How do these two passages relate? They both involve rejection of goodness and truth. The teachings of Jesus were rejected by people who knew him—but could not recognize the spiritual transformation that had occurred in him—that he was the same in body but not in spirit. Joseph was rejected because of jealousy and envy. But he did not act with spite toward his brothers. He had also had a spiritual transformation. He understood that God had sent him on this journey to save his family from famine.

What message to gather from today's readings? Seek goodness and truth, and do not reject them. And love your brothers and sisters.

— Diane Wakat

March 18, Wednesday

Psalm 119:97-120 • Genesis 45:16-28 • 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 • Mark 6:13-29

In this passage from 1 Corinthians, chapter 8, Paul tells the Corinthians that their spiritual lives are not measured by what they know or by their personal piety. All of us possess knowledge, Paul argues, but the true measure of our spiritual lives is whether or not we love. The foundation of our faith is not rooted in knowledge of one's spiritual life but rather in unconditional love for ourselves and others.

As I think about what Paul says in this passage, it's not difficult to see the connections to my life in the context of the UVA environment. While I've found groups rooted in community and fellowship, there is also a constant culture of competition that exists, as it does at many schools. We compete for jobs, internships, major programs, even community service. It is difficult to escape the idea that my future in part depends on a single-page resume. As a society, we strive for tangible achievements in the hopes that we may be rewarded later in life. And while academic success and the pursuit of knowledge is certainly something to be proud of, it seems insignificant compared to the extent to which we love.

As Paul says, knowledge is essentially a useless tool in God's eyes. While knowledge puffs up like smoke, love has the power to build strong foundations. It is only through love that we can know and be known by God. To grow in faith and spirituality is to love one another as God loves us. In that sense, our spirituality ebbs and flows and cannot be graded on a point scale as knowledge often is. Why compare our knowledge and pit ourselves against each other when we can embrace each other as God's children and share God's love? Growing as Christians is something we must do individually and in communion with others. For in loving ourselves we can begin to love others as God loves us, and by doing so, we will grow in faith together.

— Julia Burke

March 19, Thursday

Psalm 42 • Genesis 46:1-7, 28-34 • 1 Corinthians 9:1-15
• Mark 6:30-46

At first, the fourth and fifth grade Sunday school class was very confused by how 5,000 men--women and children, too--were able to eat and be satisfied when Jesus only started with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Parables can be vague about the details of exactly *how* something happened and that can be frustrating for inquisitive young minds. But Ainsley Rightmyer noted, "I guess it's so people in Sunday school get to figure it out."

We tried to figure it out. Perhaps Jesus set a good example of sharing with those around him, so other people that had brought food (probably loaves and fish) decided to be generous. With all the generosity in the crowd, there were even leftovers! When we follow the example of Jesus, thanking God and sharing love, we can help nourish those around us. We can be kind, share what we have, play with a new friend on the playground, or comfort someone who looks sad. By doing those things, we share God's love.



— 4th Grade Sunday School Class

March 20, Friday

Psalm 88 • Genesis 47:1-26 • 1 Corinthians 9:16-27 •
Mark 6:47-56

A ghost He is not.
He can cease the strongest wind.
The sick have been healed.

It is pretty amazing that Jesus walked on water and made the wind stop blowing. We also wouldn't have believed what we had seen if we were the disciples. With our modern, scientific minds, we can be pretty close-minded when it comes to miracles. When something doesn't make sense to us or doesn't happen in the way we think that it should, we tend to reason our way out of it. Maybe this is what the Gospel means when it says: "And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." The disciples' hearts had been hardened, which is what we call being "close-minded" today. We wonder: How do we let our own narrow worldviews harden our hearts to more expansive and inclusive possibilities in our lives today? Just because we have greater scientific knowledge and a better understanding of how the universe works does not mean that we should abandon the possibility of miracles. Science itself is a miracle! No matter how much we know, we should always leave space to be surprised by God and by each other. As Jesus encourages us, let us soften our hearts and broaden our minds, and may we not be afraid to do so.

— Youth Group

March 21, Saturday

Psalm 87 • Genesis 47:27 – 48:7 • 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
• Mark 7:1-23

When we pull the threads in today's lessons, we find the values of family and faith in action, and the question of what makes a community of sincere faith. Do you need to be born into the tribe or can you be adopted? What practices are required for entry? Are we changed by our faith?

The Genesis story shows Joseph's loving duty to Jacob/Israel's desire to return to ancestral sacred places for burial. Jacob is seen adjusting the family/tribal allotments by adopting Joseph's Egypt-born sons. The Psalm glorifies Zion/Jerusalem as the home of the faith, but it is also the adopted home to those of other lands who acknowledge the Lord.

Paul counsels the Corinthians, who are themselves adopted Christians living among pagans, to avoid pagan practices. Even though the Corinthians may be faithful Christians, they "test" God by being present at pagan rites. Such testing can be fatal for even the Exodus era Israelites, as Paul instructs.

In the lesson from Mark, Jesus is confronted by Pharisees sent from headquarters to spy on him and test him. The Pharisees are the insiders of society, the religious elite; the disciples are outsiders, common men. The questioners object to the disciples' failure to observe Jewish ritual washing before eating. Jesus rebukes the Pharisees, contrasting their concern for outward religious observance with their hypocrisy in the way they care for their parents. Jesus cites the Corban maneuver which pits two commandments of Mosaic law against each other—duty to God versus duty to parents—allowing a crafty son to pledge money to the Temple and avoid paying for parental care. He teaches that external practices are barren without integrity and purity of heart. Nor will observing rituals alone heal a tainted conscience. Jesus wants changed lives. He wants us to avoid temptation and sin, to leave behind distorted desires. What matters to Jesus is what's inside, within a person's heart.

— **Charles Lancaster**

March 22, Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22

Psalm 23 • 1 Samuel 16:1-13 • Ephesians 5:8-14 •
John 9:1-41

Jesus teaches his disciples, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world,” just before he gives sight to the man who had been born blind. Then some 20 years after Jesus’ death, Paul writes to the Ephesians, “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.” What does this mean for us? With Jesus no longer physically in the world, we ourselves, living with Christ’s spirit in us, are the light of the world, the light of Christ.

Jan Richardson gives us the poem, *Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light*:

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes ---
your heart
a chapel, an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

— Deborah Healey

March 23, Monday

Psalm 89:1-18 • Genesis 49:1-28 • 1 Corinthians 10:14 – 11:1 • Mark 7:24-37

Today's meditation includes 1 Corinthians 10, discussing the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, and two episodes of miraculous healing in Mark 7. In the first of Mark's episodes, Jesus initially declines to heal the daughter of a Greek woman—"It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it unto the dogs." However, Jesus relents when the woman says, ". . . yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs." The second healing episode, a deaf man, is one of only three examples in the New Testament where Jesus heals with spittle (Mark 7, Mark 8, John 9). In that time and place, bodily fluids, including spit, were considered unclean, as were dogs. Here we have an unclean animal feeding on crumbs of food devoted to a higher purpose, and an unclean substance used for healing. Jesus asks the witnesses not to tell anybody; the seriousness of this request is clearer in light of the spittle-healing in John, when Jesus is dangerously accused of violating the Sabbath.

The paradox of the "clean" food falling to the unclean dogs and the "unclean" spittle used for healing becomes a little clearer in light of the "unclean" food consumed by the blood-sanctified Christians in Corinthians. In that time and place, blood too was unclean, a lowly bodily fluid and potential source of defilement. Yet in Corinthians Paul writes, "The cup of blessing . . . is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?" In the place and time of the New Testament, Jesus sometimes seems a transgressive figure, whose practices at the very least exposed a lordly indifference to the prevailing rules about what was clean and what was defiled.

Mark's link to 1 Corinthians 10 is clearer if we look back briefly at the first verses of Mark 7, which also discuss food rules. Mark 7 and 1 Corinthians 10 both prioritize social good—feeding people and healing—over more exclusive social rules. For the poorest people, temple meals were the main or only source of expensive meat. Thus Paul's Christians in Corinth are free to share the communal meals of the pagans; indeed freer than the pagans themselves.

— Gary Mawyer

March 24, Tuesday

Psalm 97 • Genesis 49:29 – 50:14 • 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 • Mark 8:1-10

Psalm 97 is a vision of the realization of God’s Kingdom on Earth. It is what we are praying for in the Lord’s Prayer when we say “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.” What a wonderful promise we find in verse 11: “Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.”

In the passage in First Corinthians Paul is addressing problems he sees in the manner in which the members of the church in Corinth are observing the Lord’s Supper. Probably the problems he saw then are not relevant to our present community. We must, however, always be aware that when we come to the Lord’s Table we are expected to be “in love and charity with our neighbors” (stated specifically in the Church of Scotland’s order of service). We may note that this expectation is also a foundation stone for the realization of God’s Kingdom on Earth.

“But let a man examine himself,” Paul says. It is important, then, for each of us to examine herself or himself regularly to be aware of whether we are “in love and charity with our neighbors.” We remember that Jesus drew a very large circle when teaching about “who is my neighbor?”

What have I been or done today to bring God’s Kingdom on earth closer to realization? Our thoughts, choices, and actions matter. The words of the Philip Wilby anthem recently sung by our Junior Choir challenge us:

Make me a light to lighten the world,
make me a star to lighten the darkness,
make me so bright with your living word,
that I may shine with your love.

— Betty Kerner

March 25, The Annunciation, Wednesday

Psalm 45 • Isaiah 7:10-14 • Hebrews 10:4-10 • Luke 1:26-38

Luke 1.30: “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have been favored by God.”

The message *noli timere*, “fear not,” is a through-line through both the Old and the New Testaments, from Genesis (15:1) to Revelation (1:17) with well over a hundred recurrences in between. It is at the heart of all the “tidings of comfort and joy” we celebrate when we sing “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.” But tinsel aside, the Feast of the Annunciation is calendrically Lenten in almost all branches of Christianity, the incipit of the tetrptych sequence *incarnatio - passio - crux - resurrectio* in the life of Jesus. Without Mary, in other words, no Second Person of the Trinity.

But how sad, how dolorous, how *empty of grace* I feel when I measure the grandeur of this theology against all the ways men have written women right out of history! Two thousand years of praying the *Ave Maria* haven’t been enough to change our hearts.

In the sere vineyards of Lent, will we repent of our misogyny?

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us.

— Matthew Carter

March 26, Thursday

Psalm 73 • Exodus 1:6-22 • 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 •
Mark 8:27 – 9:1

“YOU MUST LOSE YOUR LIFE TO SAVE IT.”

The Word made flesh, through whom all things are made, spoke these words. God from God, light from light, true God from true God, spoke with human lips. With these words the imprimatur of Christ, the seal of self-emptying love, which underlies the structure of our world, sounds upon our ears and we ask that it be pressed upon our hearts. Yet, Lord, how do I lose my life? Teach me, show me.

Perhaps we are not simply being asked to get over our ego. There is a deeper tendency in all of us to grasp a false self. Do we seek refuge in our own knowledge or plans for self-development? Do we seek refuge in the world, in worldly security and gain, rather than seeking refuge in the Cross? And in what way is the Cross a refuge?

While we can take comfort that Christ’s words confirm the mystical teachings of all the world’s religious teachings on self-negation, or kenosis, we are never able to pry from the gospels a program, a system by which to reach this spiritual goal. It is by faith that we allow Christ to do this mysterious work in us. It is by faith that the intellect ascends and is cleansed of prejudices and assumptions. It is by faith that we do not make ourselves the measure of all things, but rather lean on God. While one may take up practices and acts of self-denial, we are not to rely on them.

YOU MUST LOSE YOUR LIFE. What is God saying? You must lose the belief that you are not worthy of love, of God’s specific love for you? You must let go of the belief that you can make yourself worthy of such love? Maybe. Or, perhaps, we offer up our efforts in the darkness of faith, in a certain hope that our God is faithful, and that the transcendent joy and eternal bliss promised us will surely come to pass?

— Kevin Warren

March 27, Friday

Psalm 107:1-32 • Exodus 2:1-22 • 1 Corinthians 12:27 – 13:3 • Mark 9:2-13

Peter, James and John are alone with Jesus hoping perhaps to pray with and learn from him. And suddenly the teacher is transformed as his clothes turn a glistening white. And the prophets Moses and Elijah appear. Whoa, what is happening?

Peter suggests erecting three booths (memorials perhaps) to the holy men. A voice from a cloud says “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” A mystical experience surely. But Jesus tells them only to keep this experience a secret until the Son of man has risen from the dead. (They have no idea what he means by that.)

Last week, I viewed the film, *Emanuel* about the execution of nine persons in a Charleston church. A minister whose wife died remembered that earlier in their last moments together, she emanated an unusual light and fullness. After her death, he realized that she had already been transfigured by God’s love. She was already in His arms.

The Mark passage on transfiguration is paired with an Old Testament story of Moses’ mother placing him in the bulrushes hoping that the Pharaoh’s daughter, on finding him, will protect him from the order to kill all Hebrew children. Many enslaved men were named Moses. I imagine enslaved mothers hearing the story of Moses in the bulrushes and praying that naming the son after the prophet might protect them. Did they also dream that their children—like Moses—would rise up to lead their people out of bondage?

1 Corinthians reminds that “If I am a great orator even speaking angelic tones or thoughts but have not love, I am a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal.” Central to the mystery and mysticism of this feast day is the important truth: love. The Psalter rejoices that God finds those in trouble, in darkness and distress, in illness, and gives them love. Likewise, in my daily despair about the world, I ask how I can be transformed by God’s love to give that love to my world.

I think again of the survivors in *Emanuel*, who, as they mourned loss, also sought to recognize God’s love, and some of them, inexplicably, find the way to forgive.

— Kay Slaughter

March 28, Saturday

Psalm 33 • Exodus 2:23 – 3:15 • 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
• Mark 9:14-29

How easy it is to hide from God. Or more truthfully, how easy it is to hide from our need for God.

I had this not so original epiphany during Holy Week last year, at the service of Tenebrae. As the lights were put out, and we were in the dark, I looked out the windows, and saw lights and heard cars and voices, the absolute opposite of what we were experiencing in the church. As we commemorated the nadir of the church calendar, just feet away people were experiencing all manner of ease—flick on a light when it is dark; turn up the thermostat when it is cold; turn on the television or call a friend when loneliness strikes. The times in my life that I have endured as “an owl in the wilderness, like a little owl in the waste places” have been few, thankfully, but during them I became intensely aware of my own limitations of power and control. I have prayed in those moments, fervently and whole-heartedly, for some manifestation of God that showed I was not alone. And afterwards? Well, let’s just say that I am not averse to making great use of distractions so that the memories of these times are not too much with me. This is a comfort that is at once a blessing and an impediment. Who needs God and the Church when things are easy? Well, I do. Much is made of those who turn to God in times of trouble, but I would argue that it is in times of ease or plenty that God (and the Church) can open our hearts in preparation for those dark times. If I am not a person of Israel crying for relief from the pharaohs in Egypt, or the man in Mark’s gospel who is desperate for some respite for his son, the church with its insistent calendar will not allow me to hide in my good fortune, but will instead insist that I look and remember, prepare, and, ultimately, rejoice.

— Michele Allen

March 29, Fifth Sunday in Lent

Psalm 130 • Ezekiel 37:1-14 • Romans 8:6-11 • John 11:1-45

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (John 11:21,32)

Both Lazarus’ sisters say this to Jesus when he arrives in Bethany. My husband died last November, and like them, I know the temptation to complain to Jesus about the heart-breaking suffering and death of a loved one. In some ways it feels that if Jesus had really been present with our family and me, the loss would not have happened.

How can God be all-powerful and yet allow so much trouble and loss to occur in our lives? This question has troubled the centuries. Perhaps a response is suggested in today’s other readings which evoke hope and the paradoxical action of God’s loving spirit.

Ezekiel confirms that even when hope seems to be lost, trust in the Lord’s greater compass of knowledge reveals God’s promise to share the divine Spirit within us. The book of Romans declares that the very same Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead continues to bring life to all. Is there a way we, here and now, can allow our lives to be Spirit-formed so that major losses do not divert us from God’s trajectory of hope? Even grieving and crying out, we remain in God’s steadfast love (Ps. 130).

The contemporary twelve-step programs have helped many of us learn that loss and brokenness can be allies not of death, but of new life. Sometimes what feels like unbearable loss can offer a way to break through a cherished self-sufficiency which in fact prevents openness to a whole-hearted life. The Spirit pours into us to meet our need, with qualities such as vulnerability, ability to laugh at ourselves, and willingness to receive help from unexpected sources.

This is indeed paradox, a way of living at the heart of the Gospel, learned day by day and week by week in our beloved community.

— **Norvene Vest**

March 30, Monday

Psalm 35 • Exodus 4:10-31 • 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 •
Mark 9:30-41

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest." Mark 9:33-34

I walk on the way with the other disciples. We stir up the dust of the beaten dirt path with our feet. We are arguing about which one of us is the greatest. When we reach the house in Capernaum, Jesus asks us what we were arguing about on the way. His manner is casual and intentional. Each of us is silent. I am silent. Jesus has not shamed us, but we are ashamed.

He gives us little time to dwell on the shame he knew we felt. He sits down and calls us to him. Women and children are settling around us.

Jesus says to us, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant* of all."

Reaching out and nodding an open and warm gesture, Jesus motions to a mother and her little child. The mother hands her child to Jesus, and he places the child* among them. Then he cradles her in his arms.

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

A silent holy place, except for the sound of the children.

—**Betsy Daniel**

* "*Servant* (9:35), an exhortation to prepare for a lower-status position is followed up by the example. The *child* did not represent innocence but, a secondary status, a lesser human. Symbolically, accepting a child *in my name*, as a true human representative, is analogous to receiving Jesus as sent by God (9:37 and 10:13-16)." Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 9-80.

March 31, Tuesday

Psalm 125 • Exodus 5:1 – 6:1 • 1 Corinthians 14:20-40
• Mark 9:42-50

The New Testament has many comforting passages; this is not one of them. But we should meditate on what Jesus meant by this intentionally shocking metaphor. First, “cut off your hand” does not mean simply “do not sin”; there is nothing sinful about having hands and feet and eyes. It is only some people, those whose hands cause them to stumble, who are told to cut them off. He probably had in mind any practice, however innocent in itself, that may lead a particular person astray. To take a modern analogy: There is nothing inherently wrong with alcohol, and many people enjoy social drinking; but if I’m an alcoholic I had better avoid it. What is healthy for others would be dangerous for me; I would have to “cut off” that part of my life. Most of us probably have something like that. Jesus says it should go. He does not promise it will be easy; indeed, it may feel like cutting off our hands and tearing out our eyes. But he does promise it will be better for us. “Take my yoke upon you . . . and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29).

As an interesting parallel, this wording occurs also in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, but there the order is reversed, and eyes come first. The context makes it clear why: “Everyone who looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:28). This is still, sadly, relevant today: Those whose lust causes them to sin—sexual predators included—may excuse themselves by what their victims looked like or were wearing but are told unequivocally that the blame is theirs, in their own eyes and hands.

April 1, Wednesday

Psalm 130 • Exodus 7:8-24 • 2 Corinthians 2:14 – 3:6 •
Mark 10:1-16

Today's readings are about desperation and deliverance. "Out of the depths I cry to you," the Psalmist says. "Lord, hear my voice!" We have all prayed words like these. *Lord, can you hear me? Do you know what I suffer? What I need?* In Exodus, we see God responding: "I have heard their cry . . . and have come to deliver them." (Ex. 3:7).

Today's Gospel can also be read as an answer to a desperate cry. In a day when divorce was only available to men and left a wife banished, destitute, and vulnerable, Jesus condemns those who frame marriage as a legal contract to be wriggled out of, instead of a God-given responsibility to care for those in one's power. His reminder instead that marriage was intended as a gift—the gift of being "one flesh"—is not unlike the move we see in Corinthians: "the letter of the law kills, but the spirit gives life." Of course, we know that it doesn't always work out that way, and whatever our circumstances, we all have places in our lives that have fallen painfully short of the wholeness we desperately crave. What, then, are we to say about these things?

Here, the Exodus story offers some encouragement. In reading it, I found myself wondering: why did Pharaoh's heart have to be hardened *so many times*? Surely God knew that the first miracles—a stick becoming a snake, turning the Nile to blood—wouldn't do the trick. So why not skip right to the Passover, and then part the Red Sea? Boom, mission accomplished. But it occurred to me that with each demonstration of God's power and presence, Moses' and Aaron's faith grew, too. Could they have handled it if God had *begun* by parting the Red Sea? And maybe as God walked Pharaoh through the plagues—giving him chances too—God was also steadily demonstrating to the people that not only was He "a" God who could rival the court magicians' powers, but that He was the true God, come to set them free. We also see that after each failed plague, God is undeterred in His redemption—a microcosm of the steady renewing of covenants and giving of new life that we see in scripture as a whole.

Lord, today may we see your deliverance in what seems impossible, redemption in what feels hopelessly dried, and the ever-renewing fullness of your assurance that you make all things new.

—Jessica Lowe

April 2, Thursday

Psalm 142 • Exodus 7:25 – 8:19 • 2 Corinthians 3:7-18
• Mark 10:17-31

And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”
If Jesus denies that he is good, this challenges any thought that we could accurately consider ourselves good. And Jesus’ declaration also challenges the church’s creeds and Christological formulas which declare trinitarian equality. But that is just theology. . . .

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom.

People have responded to this challenging teaching, saying that it is okay to be rich, and that Jesus didn’t mean what he was plainly saying. And other people have responded by pointing out that all of us, reading these words here and today, have more valuable possessions than the young man. But that is just economics. . . .

With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.

So, Jesus tells us that we cannot be good. And Jesus tells us that with our wealth, it will be hard for us, the wealthy, to enter the kingdom of God. But then Jesus tells us that we have hope with God. And these words are life.

We know that there is no life in the pride of the things of this world. All will be forgotten. While we should build up treasures in heaven, there is no life in any ensuing spiritual pride. There is only life in God making the impossible possible, by grace.

April 3, Friday

Psalm 143 • Exodus 9:13-35 • 2 Corinthians 4:1-12 •
Mark 10:32-45

Meditation on Psalm 143

I am truly blessed. I have a husband who loves me, a nice home, and a dog and two cats whom I love and cherish. I have the money to put food on my table without worry and not so much money that the challenges of poverty are so distant as to not be understandable. I lead a comfortable life. But it was not always so. Like so many people, I had a long period of trials and troubles, starting with an ill-fitting master's degree program and ending with a series of diagnoses that changed what I can expect for the rest of my life. An abusive boyfriend left me sure that I was unworthy of love. My illnesses have left me in pain, unable to work, and unable to pursue what I thought was my calling. I was lost and unsure of where God was in all of the turmoil. I lost my faith.

I still struggle with all of this. It's a heavy burden. Like the psalm-writer, I ask God often to show Their face to me, tell me where to go and what to do, to make me safe. God does not work that way, sadly. There wasn't a burning bush or angels with messages for me. What saved me was my family and friends. They all rallied around me, helped me get therapy, and helped me get to the doctors who could treat my conditions. They continue to help me find the strength to fight for treatments and demand that I am treated as a human. They are God's face for me. They show the light of the divine by pulling me out of the grave and helping me find the will to live. Without them I would not be here.

— Emily Merkel

April 4, Saturday

Psalm 137 • Exodus 10:21 – 11:8 • 2 Corinthians 4:13-18
• Mark 10:46-52

Psalm 137 reads:

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs,
Our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
They said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?*

Mark 10: 46-52 contains the familiar story of Bartimaeus, a blind man, calling out to Jesus who is passing by. Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus responds, "Rabbi, I want to see." When Jesus returns his sight, Bartimaeus joins the crowd and follows Jesus.

Both stories call on us to recognize the marginalized, to feel their heartache and longing, to connect with their wish to feel at home, to be included, and to be known and whole in the presence of the Holy.

Richard Rohr suggests that to be Christian is to see Christ in everything, and everyone. In this time of Lent, let us reflect on what it means to be fully included, and to know we are all welcome at the table. Let us reflect on how we can manifest Christ and see Christ in everything and everyone.

— Jim Plews-Ogan

April 5, Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 • Isaiah 50:4-9a • Philippians 2:5-11
• Matthew 27:11-54

The air electric with joy and hope!
We shouted hosanna
To the one who comes
To set us free.

I walked with Jesus
I cried hosanna to
The one who comes in
The name of the Lord .

I walked with Jesus
I threw my cloak
I cut down palms
To make gentle his way.

I walked with Jesus
Amazed as he rode
Astride a donkey
And her colt.

Triumphant we came
Even the animals
Knew we brought Light
To Jerusalem.

Later we heard they
Took him and stripped Him
Judged him and denied Him
On a cross they crucified him.

I was not there so
I went and saw the empty
Tomb and I knew I had
Walked with my Lord, God.

— Alice Meador

April 6, Monday

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

Anyone who has sat near me in church has probably noticed my weakness for perfume. (My sense of smell has declined with age, giving me an unfortunate tendency to go overboard.) Perfume is a perfect small luxury, with its evanescent, unique smell, exotic ingredients, and beautiful packaging. Like bread and wine, it is a Biblical substance whose meaning is still perceptible to us who live in a material world unimaginably different from that of the Gospels. Even the packaging is there in the Synoptic version of the story (an alabaster box). But perfume does nothing if it is kept in its beautiful bottle. It is meant to evaporate from our skin or to burn in the form of incense. As at the Easter Vigil, it permeates the atmosphere and cannot be ignored. So it is with Mary's extravagant and public gesture of applying a pound of precious nard to Jesus' feet rather than his head, as one might anoint a corpse. Like many of the prophets, Mary is acting out her faith rather than talking about it. (Perhaps as a woman of the time, she would have found it difficult to join the conversation.) She touches Jesus with an intimate gift in front of everyone and "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." She foretells his death and comforts him with an embodied love.

The sacrifice of nard recalls the daily offering of incense in the Temple. As Hebrews 9 points out, the death of Jesus replaces the old system of sacrifices and enacts a new covenant of transforming love. Sweet odors continue to be a powerful symbol of the invisible but all-pervasive Spirit. "But thanks be to God, who . . . through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him" (Ephesians 2:14).

April 7, Tuesday

Psalm 71:1-14 • Isaiah 49:1-17 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 •
John 12:20-36

Today's readings invite us to consider doubts, fears, faith and the vitality of intimate trust.

Psalm 71:1-14.

The psalmist beseeches God, *"Do not cast me off in the time of my old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent."* The psalmist does not ask for a magical change or eternal youth. He pleads for companionship. He appeals to a profound physical intimacy: *"It was you who took me from my mother's womb. . . ."* He hopes this closeness is inviolable. He wants faith.

Isaiah 49:1-17.

Isaiah voices his fears and, like the Psalmist, claims intimacy with God. *"The Lord called me before I was born, while I was still in my mother's womb he named me."* God answers generously, *"I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands."* This lavish gesture invites Isaiah to rest in faith.

John 12:20-36

Jesus is facing his own passage from life to death. He is not without trepidation. He finds comfort from nature as he contemplates a grain of wheat. *"Very truly, I will tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."* Still, he seems afraid, *" . . . now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason I have come to this hour."* He strengthens his wavering faith. He knows he has come as light. *"While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light."*

May we walk in the light. May we have faith in the love we are offered. May we nurture our connection to God, each other and our beautiful world.

— Nan Mayer

April 8, Wednesday

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

Judas' story has been interpreted very matter-of-factly, at least in my journey as a Christian so far. Betrayers are “bad guys” and deserve the worst possible punishment for their betrayals. Dante's *Inferno* has one of the more horrific visuals of such a punishment, as Judas is eternally masticated by Satan in the deepest bowels of hell. The lesson is clear: never, ever mess up *that* badly.

I wonder, though, about Judas the human being. He was one of the Twelve—chosen by Jesus to follow him. What qualities of Judas made him worthy to be called one of Christ's most intimate friends? Or was he simply hand-picked to be the instrument of Jesus' earthly sacrifice, because he was shrewd and greedy? At one point I would have accepted this—but a god who would use the precious lives of human beings as pawns is one I struggle to find worthy of worship. Jesus must have regarded Judas with compassion. In this passage, he even identifies Judas with the passing of bread—the sharing of food, an ancient act of human bonding. With this intimate gesture, Jesus shines light on Judas' intention, and bids him to respond—to make a choice about his next actions. We know what happens next. We know what Judas chose.

It is easy to dismiss Judas as a “bad guy” (nothing like us!) and move on. But, I think we too are directly confronted by the intimate light of Christ to face our sins—our vices, our pettiness, our willingness to stand by while others suffer. We, too, must make choices in the light of our Eternal God: to carry on with our sins, or to change—possibly risking every comfort in our lives. Judas' legacy is to choose earthly comfort. What will ours be?

For me it is easier to feel compassion for Judas in this last interaction with Christ more so than any other. I wonder, in the moments before Satan took the reins, if he felt small—if he struggled at all to cast away earthly rewards in favor of what is right. I know I struggle with this daily, as a mortal creature. And I know God sees me struggle, and loves me dearly, all the same—as I suspect Jesus loved Judas, too.

— Virginia Greene

April 9, Maundy Thursday

Psalm 116:1-2, 10-17 • Exodus 12:1-4, 5-10, 11-14 • 1
Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.” The word “Maundy” is an older English word derived from the Latin, “mandatum,” meaning “commandment.” Maundy Thursday refers to the commemoration of the night on which Jesus gave his disciples his new commandment—that they love one another—the same night that Jesus and his disciples share a last meal together before Jesus’ passion. Jesus interrupts the meal to wash the disciples’ feet. He then sends Judas the betrayer on his way and then delivers his final instructions to the remaining disciples. Among all of Jesus’ teachings, the only commandment he gives is love. We usually consider a commandment an order that must be obeyed, and if not obeyed, it will be enforced by some form of coercive, negative act. But love cannot be coerced; it has to be freely given, freely received. Jesus’ commandment, therefore, is at a minimum ironic because love cannot be commanded in any known sense of the word. In effect, Jesus tells his disciples to carry on with living fully, and in so doing he sheds his light on the nature of love—that it does not seek to control, but seeks the flourishing and well-being of another, of all. Such an imperative on Jesus’ part is particularly startling because he knows that Judas has departed to betray him. But Jesus’ faith in love—the love he knows by abiding in the Creator’s love—gives him such a generative view of existence that it leads him to challenge everything which threatens and undermines life, even sickness, hunger, poverty, prejudice, shame, a trumped-up trial, crucifixion, and death itself.

— The Rev. Dr. Heather A. Warren

April 10, Good Friday

Psalm 22 • Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 • Hebrews 10:16-25 •
John 18:1 – 19:42

Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk living in Australia, writes in his book on humility, “One thing I have found necessary for myself is to keep in mind the fundamental dialectic of life and death in the Christian experience. There can be no genuine spirituality that does not take seriously the gospel imperative of the paschal mystery. *We enter life through the doorway of death* It could be said that it involves a loss of self (p. 15).”

The story of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection boldly declares what Casey calls the fundamental dialectic of life and death. They are inseparably intertwined. There is no having one without the other. The message of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that this process is part of the very nature of God. The cycle of life and death is divine.

We see this process of living, dying, and living again in the world around us. We see it in nature, we see it in human society, and we see it in ourselves.

It is a stark reality of the spiritual life that some of our greatest periods of spiritual growth involve pain, suffering, and loss. While there is no indication that God afflicts us with those things, there is plenty of evidence that they are opportunities to grow spiritually.

The alcoholic and addict accept new life and possibilities when the pain gets too bad. We break through into new horizons in our relationships when we come to the limits of our self-centeredness. We find deeper connections with other people when we lose ourselves in love and service to them. Our hearts open to divine grace when our efforts at controlling things leave us helpless.

Receiving something new often means losing something else. Receiving more life and more love means that old habits, patterns, and behaviors have to go. That is the fundamental dialectic of life and death. Resurrection assumes there has been a death.

— The Rev. Mark Wastler

April 11, Holy Saturday

Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16 • Job 14:1-14 • 1 Peter 4:1-8 •
John 19:38-42

“Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.”

Among the laws set out in Exodus 22 is a provision about what happens when “a thief is found breaking in.” The law makes a stark distinction between a nighttime break-in and one that occurs after sunrise: In the dark, you may be excused from beating the thief to death, but in daylight, “bloodguilt is incurred.” The rationale seems to be that lethal force is a reasonable response when you can’t see who’s who or what’s what; in the daylight, perhaps you have more information and more options.

In Bible stories, many mysterious things happen in darkness. In the beginning, darkness covered the face of the deep when God spoke light into being. When Israel, fleeing Pharaoh’s army, reached the Red Sea, God “drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night,” allowing them to pass safely through. “At dawn, the sea returned to its normal depth.” Although it’s not explicit in the Gospel accounts, we think of the birth of Jesus as happening in the night. And we know that the mystery of the empty tomb lives in the pre-dawn darkness.

In these days of conflict, tragedy, cruelty, mystery, and death, the execution of Jesus takes place at midday. There is no mystery about this death. And when the sun comes up on Saturday, if there’s a sense of peace in contrast to the angst and terror of the previous days, it’s cold comfort because the powers of death have clearly won. But then here comes Nicodemus, who first came to Jesus under cover of darkness, aligning himself publicly and openly, in broad daylight, with the dead, defeated Jesus. Maybe he felt he had nothing left to lose? Or did he somehow trust or know, that God’s mysterious power would come by night, in triumphant reply to the Empire’s blunt-force midday power, and turn everything upside down again?

This is the night.

— The Rev. William Peyton

WORSHIP SERVICES IN LENT

Ash Wednesday (February 26)	7:30 a.m., 12:15 p.m., 6:30 p.m.	
Sundays @ 8 a.m., 10 a.m., 5:30 p.m.		Holy Eucharist
Mondays @ 8 p.m.		Compline
Tuesdays @ 12:15 p.m.		Holy Eucharist in Chapel
Wednesdays @ 5:30 p.m.		Evening Prayer in Chapel

HOLY WEEK SERVICES

Palm Sunday (April 5)	8 a.m., 10 a.m., 5:30 p.m.	
Monday in Holy Week	8 p.m.	Compline
Tuesday in Holy Week	12:15 p.m.	Holy Eucharist
Wednesday in Holy Week	7:30 p.m.	Tenebrae
Maundy Thursday	6:30 p.m.	Eucharist w/ Foot Washing
Good Friday	noon, 6:30 p.m.	
Holy Saturday	7:30 p.m.	Easter Vigil
Easter Sunday (April 12)	7:30 a.m., 9 a.m., 11:15 a.m., 5:30 p.m.	