



2020

Lenten

Meditations

FEBRUARY 26-MARCH 25
FROM THE CHAPEL OF THE CROSS

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Ash Wednesday

BY THE REV. GATES ELLIOTT

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." – Matthew 6:1

It is a bit ironic that we read a passage about the need to keep our piety to ourselves on a day in which we as a church adorn our foreheads with ashes for all the world to see. But the ashes we wear are not a mark of our piety, but of our humility and even more importantly to remind us that we are all one. We are all the same.

This passage in the sixth chapter of Matthew's gospel is not specifically about Lent, but the church has chosen to read it on Ash Wednesday to help us set a very important tone to our Lenten observance. We are reminded that Lent is a very spiritual but also a very personal time. Lent is a time for us to spend some quality one-on-one time with our God. God is inviting us through our actions of prayer, fasting, and service to do some hard work on our personal relationship with Him.

We are also reminded that Lent is a great time of temptation for us as well. Lent provides us many opportunities to seek others' approval through our commitment to fasting (giving something up), attendance at regular services throughout the weeks or bible studies, as well as our stewardship of the church. Jesus is reminding us that we do not do these things to get the approval of others, but we do them to be in a closer and more fulfilling relationship with God.

These ashes that we wear on our foreheads remind us of our humility, that no matter what we do, that God will love us the same as the next person. The ashes remind us that we are no better than any other person out there. And so, when we begin our Lenten observances we do so, not to be singled out as "good Christians" but to come to a deeper understanding feeling of that wonderful love that God has for us.

JOEL 2:1-2; 12-17; ISAIAH 58: 1-12; CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10;
MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21; PSALM 103

Selflessness & Getting Over Yourself

BY LANEY CRAMPTON

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets from long ago has come back to life." "But what about you?" he asked. Who do you say I am?" God's Messiah." And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day raised to life." Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up the cross daily and follow me, For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." What good is for someone to gain the whole world, and lose or forfeit their very self?" –Luke 9:18-25

These verses show Jesus asking his disciples who the crowds think he is. Then, in wanting a better answer, he asks his disciples who they think he is. He then says that he, the Messiah, will experience great suffering as will the disciples who follow him. "Take up the cross and follow me" knowing of the great suffering to come.

We live in a culture of selfishness, looking at life through a lens of self. We even acknowledge selfishness when we witness it by saying things like: "Who died and made you queen (king)?"; "The world doesn't revolve around you."; "Get over yourself." Each of you who reads this meditation has endless stories of selfishness. But the takeaway for me about this scripture is selflessness, our true commitment where our life lens is focused in service to him, no matter what the cost.

To help you focus your thoughts on selflessness, I'll share with you a story that happened to my neighbor recently. She locked her keys and her cell phone in her car while at the grocery store. Two young boys riding bikes stopped when they saw how frustrated she was. She did not know them, but they rode three miles to her house and retrieved a spare key she had hidden outside and returned within the hour. They would not take money for their good deed. They told her that they were Boy Scouts and that they made a pledge to "help other people at all times". Selflessness is out there. We have to make choices that reflect Christ-like actions. We have to pay it forward when we are recipients of selflessness. And we have to share these stories with others to find balance in the selfishness of the world.

Dear Lord, help me daily to remember to be selfless, to focus my life in service to you. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen

Lent— the Verb

BY GREG CROTTY

And not hide yourself from your own flesh; Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you. —Isaiah 58:1-9

During the 6 weeks of Lent, most Christians will observe the tradition of fasting and reflect on their spirituality. Considered will be abstinence, acts of generosity, and what to do in addition to our normal behavior. All to recognize Christ's sacrifice for us with His death and celebrate His resurrection.

Many times, when we offer sacrifices of time, goodness, or patience, in other words take time to be Christian, we do seem to expect something in return such as an easier path or forgiveness. Isaiah points to this in verses 1-3 quoting the people of Zion questioning why they have fasted and humbled themselves, but God has not favored them. The lesson is timeless regarding spirituality and all too often at the heart of our Christian frailty based on hypocrisy and condition. We try to follow all the rules, but we still suffer and feel abandoned or empty.

It's ironic that the word "Lent" has a separate derivative in our language to include something given or contributed on condition, a condition that something of equivalence will be returned. We all know nothing we DO would be equivalent or justify Christ's sacrifice for us, but we do try. Fortunately, effort or trying is an important aspect of our faith and that which enables endurance when the human condition takes hold.

Jesus came to shift the focus from self to others with the ultimate sacrifice. The New Testament being one of faith not works, trust in place of condition. The new wine is for new wineskins, the unshrunk cloth for the new garment. Christ's unconditional love which is always available to us regardless. Faith and love beyond our circumstances, beyond our inadequacies and beyond the old traditions of Mosaic law. Always available, never tainted, perfect, and pure.

Dear Lord and Christ, thank you for your perfect sacrifice and example of selfless love. Continue to inspire us through faith and example so that while here we can effect positive change. Find your way into our hearts during this season so that our actions reflect your purpose.

Prayer for the Needy

BY SEARCY FOX

Throughout many times in my life, I have cried out to God to hear me and answer me. Not until later in life, did I realize that even though God does not respond in the exact way I asked or when I ask but he did respond in his timing. I have come to recently understand that no matter what, God is a forgiving and good Father. He is faithful and merciful throughout all the good and the bad times we experience in our lives. This causes me to constantly pray to be more like Him. Part of my daily prayers include how to help others who are actually poor and needy, and also those who are well off but need help. One of the ways I have always helped is through service. I recently became involved with a human trafficking organization in Nashville. This group goes into a very impoverished area with survivors of human trafficking but also those who may have actually been traffickers in the past. In order to get involved with this organization, I had to go through a training on how to serve this group of people. This reminds me of the verses in Psalm 86 but also Luke 5:27-32. Jesus states, he did not come for the righteous but for the sinners to repent. Therefore, this idea of helping not only individuals who have been trafficked, but those who did at one time actively traffic humans, is important to living like Jesus and acting more like him. This is just one example of how we can strive to live and act like Jesus.

By accepting people for the child of God they are and not by their actions, we are able to be more like Jesus. We are not here to judge one another like the Pharisees and teachers did to Jesus by asking why he was with the poor and sinners but to openly accept all peoples, no matter who or what they may have done. While most of us have never sold another person or caused physical harm to another person, we do various “sins” each day by judging those around us or even just talking poorly about someone, even someone close to us. So, we must always remember, even though we may have not committed what society would call a “big” sin, we sin all the time, even without being aware of it. However, God does not condemn us. He came for us to repent, no matter how big or small our sin(s) may be. He wants us to be with him and love him but also to love others as he loves us. My prayer today is:

God, please allow me to be aware of my sins and seek forgiveness from you, no matter what that may be. Please allow me to love others as you love us and share your word with anyone we may meet. Let me remember that you came to save the world, all sinners, no matter who they may be or what sin they have committed. Please allow me to leave my judgmental ways out of my every day and allow the final judgement to be up to you and not me. Lord, I pray you help me in my everyday life but also help me help others. Please allow me to be open and accepting to bring more people to you. Amen

You Shall be Holy

BY THE REV. BEN ROBERTSON

Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. –Leviticus 19:2

Lent is a complex season. On Ash Wednesday, the liturgy reminds us of the custom of the Church to prepare for the days of the Lord's passion and resurrection by a season of penitence and fasting. As we approach Holy Week, the Eucharistic Prayer instructs us to cleanse our hearts and prepare with joy for the Paschal feast. And the custom of "giving up" something for Lent, helps us turn away from distractions or frivolity and instead focus on prayer, meditation, and worship. Lent can be intense.

Some of us need Lent to be intense. Perhaps we are wrestling with a particular demon that requires the gravitas and discipline of Lent to tame. Maybe Lent is the excuse we need to slow down and focus on what is truly important. Perhaps this Lent we will find what we are looking for.

But Lent can also be a shallow excuse for self-flagellation. We wallow in our supposed sin and wickedness. We all sin, and we are all called to repentance, but we are also called to be forgiven ... and accept that forgiveness. And isn't the latter the hardest part?

Shame is a frequent topic in Ted Talks, earnest blogs, and confessional Insta stories. In all honesty, sometimes I wish some of us had more shame (you know who I am talking about ...). But a lot of us - for reasons we know all too well but are too burdensome to enumerate here - shoulder a ton of shame. Our shame can depress us, hold us back, even define us. Popular shame and vulnerability guru (and Episcopalian!) Brene Brown once said, "Life is about daring greatly and being in the arena. When you walk up to that arena and you put your hand on the door, and you think, 'I'm going in and I'm going to try this,' shame is the gremlin who says, 'Uh, uh. You're not good enough. You never finished that MBA. Your wife left you. I know your dad really wasn't in Luxembourg, he was in Sing Sing. I know those things that happened to you growing up. I know you don't think that you're pretty, smart, talented or powerful enough. I know your dad never paid attention, even when you made CFO.' Shame is that thing."

In the Book of Leviticus, the Lord speaks to Moses and says, "speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy." Not you could be holy, not you should be holy, not some of you - if you play your cards right - will end up being holy, but you (yes you! and you too!) are holy. You were made to be holy. When you entered this world, you were holy. When you did that unfortunate thing in the fifth grade, you were holy. When you cussed out that other parent in the car pool line, you were holy. And right now, you are still holy. You may not feel holy, you may not act holy, and you may need some improvement in your level of holiness, but you are holy. And you can rest and find peace in your holiness. And there, God will abide with you.

Lent doesn't need to be so complex. Find time to hang out with God. Take some of your shame and give it to him. Learn to love your holiness instead. And therein, your Lenten journey has turned from crippling complexity and intensity, to affirming productivity. The world needs more holy and the world needs you to be holy. All you have to do is accept who you are: holy.

Know to Whom You Pray

BY ALLAN COOPER

I mentioned last year about how important Father Buddy Hinton (known and loved by several Chapel members) was to me and to my older sister, Carol, during her precious weeks in a hospice. I once asked Father Buddy about my prayers for Carol, “I just don’t know what to say to God, Father Buddy. I’ve asked for healing and I’m just frustrated. I’ve asked for understanding and I don’t understand anything. What should I do or say that I haven’t said a thousand times? Should I just keep praying the Lord’s Prayer or just “Thy will be done?”

We had a long conversation about prayer and I’ve remembered many things he said. One of those things he told me was, “ ‘Thy will be done’ is a great prayer. There’s nothing at all wrong with you praying only that one simple sentence. In prayer, I often think of something that Jesus taught the disciples and the crowd on the mountain about to whom they pray. Right before the Lord’s Prayer, which by the way Jesus never prayed, Jesus indicted the religious establishment; he really roasted them if you read the chapter before up until the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6. And he taught them that God was quite different than what the religious leaders taught and practiced. He told the disciples to seek reward from their Father in heaven instead of earthly acclaim for their alms or their outward spirituality, and that their Father who sees what is done in secret would reward them. And then he told them to pray alone in their room to their unseen Father, who will reward them.”

“Did you get what he said? He was telling them, in essence, ‘you can address and talk to the Creator God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as your Father, just like I do. He is your Father, my Father; he is our Father’.”

“So I remind myself to whom I am praying. I’m not praying to an abstract concept of divinity or to a spooky ethereal force in the universe or to a cosmic karma. I’m praying to the Creator who made me and knows me; I’m praying to Jesus’ Father, to your Father, to our Father.”

Repent

BY BILL BUHNER

All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. —Jonah 3:8b-10

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind...” According to the Talmud, the source of Jewish law and religious authority, God created Repentance, Teshuva, or Return in Hebrew, before He created the physical universe—so, I would take it that He finds it to be rather important.

Note also Matthew 5:23-24 (NRSV) as to what should be done before taking Communion:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. —Matthew 5:23-24

Repent, be reconciled, and return to the Lord.

And from our Catechism:

Q. What is required of us at Baptism?

A. It is required that we renounce Satan, repent of our sins, and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Q. What is required of us when we come to the Eucharist?

A. It is required that we should examine our lives, repent of our sins, and be in love and charity with all people.

Repent, or a form of the word, appears 53 times in our Book of Common Prayer. Why? Because it's important.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on us, all sinners.

Ask, Seek, and Knock

BY BILL HORNE

Ask, seek, and knock. It's all about prayer and the promise is that it will be heard and answered, if not always just the way we might have wanted, but answered nevertheless. The Samaritan woman at the well asking, 'How can I get this water that I may never thirst again?' or the Centurion in Matt 8, asking that his servant be healed; both of them asking, seeking, knocking and Our Lord responding to their requests.

How long many of us have missed the Bible's almost constant entreaty that we pray and not just that but we have been given example after example that our prayers will be heard. We don't have to meet God on the road, in a crowd, on a hilltop, river bank or manger to ask Him into our life of need and challenge. And we don't need to ask that He be with us; He is always right here, day and night, good times and bad. Ask, seek, knock in any way you feel comfortable, in words or complete silence; He knows your every need and He will respond.

Thank God, Father Son and Holy Ghost. Amen

Waiting While Moving

BY ERIC EATON

*"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning—
Yes, more than those who watch for the morning. —Psalm 130:5-6*

Waiting. Waiting is not really in my tool belt of skills. I am not a patient person and I cannot sit still. I often find I am already looking for the next task in the midst of a current one, something that annoys my best friend to no end. As Christians, we impatiently yearn for the Lord. We seek to find Him in everything around us. We long for His return. When we see someone in pain or suffering, we say we will pray for them. We look to the Lord in those moments and wait for His reply. This Psalm stuck out to me in two ways. The first is that I think we can all relate to the portion quoted above when our actual souls are crying out for relief to God. It speaks of being in the depths and asking God to hear the cries. It praises God for His forgiveness and speaks of that abundant forgiveness we must have. I have many times found myself searching for answers and after exhausting all human avenues; I have given up and cried up to Heaven. He always hears. So I find that in Lent, I slow down and pause to actually listen for His reply. I force myself to wait and be still for the Lord. Secondly, I feel this Psalm is missing a “but”. Wait, but don’t be still. Wait for the Lord, but don’t wait to do the work He has called us to. At the Chapel, we are blessed with an abundant spirit of charity and with a congregation full of doers. God has called us to move within and build our community. He has given us arms to reach out to heal the sick. He has given us hands to feed the hungry, money to clothe the poor, and compassion to embrace the forgotten. We have been gifted a voice to speak for those who cannot, a soul to love those who are different than us, and a beautiful place to worship to welcome all to the table of Holy Eucharist. We are called to right what is wrong and to peacefully speak out when we hear the whispers of Satan in the world. Together, we can move mountains through the Holy Spirit. So, let’s arise. Let’s go and do. And while your soul is waiting, let your hands do the work.

Lord in Heaven, hear our prayers for ourselves and those around us. Enable us to do more, to welcome more, and to love more. So that through these actions, we can feel even a small portion of Your immeasurable love for us. Lord, you are a Creator. Through Your power, You made something from nothing. Grant us the strength to endure the work You have given us to do here. Show us the way to the poor, so that we may clothe and feed them. Lead us to the lonely, the marginalized, the bullied, and the scared so that we can wrap our arms around them and wipe away their tears. Give us the courage to confront the evils in this world and to wipe clean the stain of hatred. Lord, we thank You for the gift of the Chapel that has been entrusted to us. And as we preserve the old, we will work harder to make this new sanctuary more than just a building. It will be a living altar raised to Your glory, now and forever. Amen



What Oak Trees Teach us of God's Love

BY BECKY HERREN

“You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbors, and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in Heaven: for he causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” –Matthew 5:43-45

The oak trees around the Chapel produce hundreds of acorns every year. If all those acorns grew, the new trees would crowd each other out and we would have no place to walk. Not one in a hundred of these acorns will actually germinate, and most of the ones that do will be mowed down or eaten or crowded out by other plants. BUT that is not the concern of the oak tree. The oak tree's job is to produce acorns.

That is the way I think God works. God loves everywhere, indiscriminately, and “He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” God sows his love- this grace- on the evil and the good and I think He calls us to do the same.

Now, I am not talking about an emotional kind of love but a love in which we are willing to work for the well-being of someone and sometimes we are unaware of this work. “Perform random acts of kindness” we have been taught. God wants us, in my opinion, to sow our love for the sheer joy of loving. Every day I feast on the fruits of the love sown by others who came before me. Some of these seeds of love we sow will fall on barren ground and some will produce fruit. Such is the way of life and such is the God we follow!

David Christian once told a story of William Willimon who made a trip back to his old college for a speaking engagement. After the speech a young man came up and said, “Dr. Willimon, remember me?” Although he looked familiar Willimon could not immediately place him. Then the young man said, “I'm Rob.” And Willimon remembered the unruly, rambunctious little boy who had gone through a difficult time in a parish he had pastored many years before.

Now, that child was a poised, fine-looking college student. "I'm doing great here," he said. "And I am here because of you."

"Me?" Willimon asked.

"Yes," he said. "You had such an influence on my life. And I heard you say that this had been your college, so I wanted to come here, too."

"How did I influence your life?" Willimon asked. Perhaps the boy had been influenced by his sermons or the Day Camp that he had conducted during the summer. What could have caused such a profound influence?

"You remembered my name," the young man replied.

"I remembered your name?" Willimon asked. "That's all?"

"Yep, you always knew my name. I never forgot what a good pastor you were."

Perform random acts of kindness and love indiscriminately. Who knows where it may lead?

And anyway, it is good for our souls.

Help me Lord today to perform random acts of kindness to all that meet today. Let me look upon their faces and remember that they, too, are loved by You. Amen

Did he Seriously Tell us to Love our Enemies?

BY THE REV. WILL COMPTON

Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. —Luke 6:27-28

I enjoy what I do. Even when I have to preach about loving enemies on July 4 which I have done twice now. Of all days in the calendar to appear, this text comes to us on Independence Day (although it is from Matthew's account). I have often wondered what message the crafters of the lectionary were trying to convey by placing this text on Independence Day? Loving enemies is hard. Loving our enemies on July 4 is even harder. Blessing those who persecute and praying for those who abuse seems nearly impossible.

Our reality and the reality of Lent is that we fall short. We fall short of the gospel and its message. We fall short of what Jesus tells us to do and we especially fall short of his command to love our enemies. Loving our enemies is hard. It is human instinct to protect ourselves and those we love from evil. It is innate within us to strike back after we have been wronged. It is in our DNA to dislike and even hate those who have wronged us, both as a nation and as individuals.

While upon the cross, Jesus gave us a perfect example of loving of our enemies. He gave us a perfect example of blessing those who persecute and praying for those who abuse. Remember his words today, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Practicing Lent means practicing a different way of life. We give things up. Things that we like. Things that we enjoy. We also do more. We reflect more. We are quiet more. We pray more. We wait more. This is what makes this season different from how we usually live our lives.

Who are your enemies? Who are our enemies? In this season in which we are called to live a different way of life, is it possible to follow Jesus' teaching and love our enemies the same way Jesus loved his?

*O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us to all to stand reconciled before you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

Words Matter

BY SUZANNE FILES

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens that are hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in their synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructor, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. —Matthew 23:1-4, 12

This passage reminds me of my struggle with the church of my childhood. As a child, I learned about the wonderful words of Jesus and the hymns that are still in my heart. But I began to see that the folks in the front row saying “amen” were the same ones in the bars and on the dance floor the night before. I heard the song; Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow black and white, they are precious in our sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world. In that place in the town where I lived, I discovered they were only words. My rejection and judgment of that church were ferocious. And as troubled as I was with this revelation my mom never paid much attention to those details. She loved her church and lived her life being kind and good to all those members who were dancing and drinking in the bars on Saturday night. I saw hypocrisy, she saw people full of grace. She is the one who taught me what Jesus was asking of us. To decide to follow Jesus is to be called to a life of kindness and God will handle the rest. Jesus lived his life on earth loving the poor, the sinners, the dancers and drinkers; so lived my mom. I do believe that our words matter and those words must reflect our actions. But I am responsible only to our God and if I speak the truth, Jesus knows.

As we say together from our Book of Common Prayer, “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid.”

Happy Feet

BY SUZIE WEBB

*“Even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as ransom for many.”
—Matthew 20:17-28*

These words from Matthew serve as a reminder to me that Jesus was not sent into the world only to teach, but also to serve. He always managed to teach best, not with words, but with actions! One of my favorite examples of Jesus serving others is relayed later on in the book of Matthew when he takes a towel and a basin and lovingly washes the feet of his disciples.

I remember the first time the Chapel held the foot washing service on Maundy Thursday. I was curious, but a little unsure about washing someone's feet and having my own feet washed. It just seemed a little too personal! As my time came to go to the front of the Chapel to participate, I began to feel a very real presence of God in our midst. While having my feet washed and kneeling to wash someone else's feet, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of love that brought me to tears. That first experience was so powerful and the Maundy Thursday service continues to be one of my favorite services of the year.

Of course washing the feet of Chapel members, who have recently bathed (and yes, some have gotten pedicures just for the occasion!) is much different than what Jesus encountered. You can only imagine after the miles they walked in sandals on dusty dirty pathways how sore and dirty the feet of the disciples must have been. But Jesus, our Lord and Savior, knelt and washed and loved.

Jesus calls us to serve as he did. In the baptismal covenant we are asked to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. To me that means I am called to love others and do for them whatever I can to ease their burden in this life. There is no task that is too insignificant or menial that I am above doing if it helps someone on their journey. After all, if Jesus can lower himself to wash dirty feet, then I should at least be able to do as much.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. Amen

Rooted

BY MARTHA RAYNER

“Blessed is the one...whose delight is in the law of the Lord...and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree, planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season...not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.” –Psalm 1:2-4

After reading the scripture for today, there were multiple times that I found myself thinking about Psalm 1. Specifically, I was reminded of the portion that describes a person “whose delight is in the law of the Lord”... that person is “like a tree planted by streams of water.” If a tree is near a source of water, it will have the nutrients it needs to grow and stay rooted.

The psalmist compares us to a tree because whether we think about it or not, we have our roots grown into something—a job, hobby, perception of who we are, etc. However, as followers of Christ, we are called to root ourselves in His word, teachings, and who He says we are. As I think about where we may be rooted, I also think about how much stronger and deeper our roots grow the longer they are planted and watered.

One of the moments that I was reminded of this psalm was when I was looking at the trees in my backyard. There were tall, skinny trees that were swaying in the slight wind. I sat wondering how these trees withstand winds stronger than those they were currently facing. I can only imagine how deeply rooted those trees are, and they are so small in comparison to other trees!

I encourage you today to reflect on where you have planted your roots. If they are planted in the Lord, water them so that they may grow deeper and stronger every day.

Showing God's Love to All

BY SARAH ANDERSON

“He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . And a second like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”–Matthew 21:33-43

As Christians, love should be the easiest feeling we experience. We’ve been read this piece of scripture from Matthew since our earliest days in Sunday school; it’s been preached on a thousand times over our lives; and it’s one of the easiest readings to understand in the Bible- so why is it one of the hardest rules to follow? Of course, we love God and our families and our friends. It’s easy to love those that think and act like us. The call to love only becomes difficult when we realize the other people included in the term “neighbors”. They are the coworker that annoys you; the person on the TV screen that you don’t agree with; the homeless man on the street; the person who is rude to you; the people who believe in a different god or no god at all. The world is full of people who are different and odd and frustrating, yet we are all expected to love them as ourselves.

I have long struggled with the idea of loving every person as myself, as I’m sure most people do. I think of myself as generally filled with love to give, but it’s hard to give when I don’t think someone is “deserving” of it. Obviously, that’s not for me to decide and all people are worthy of love, but it’s hard to give when we are only human. This year, instead of New Year’s resolutions, I decided to set two intentions for myself- to look for joy every day and to find the good in every person. It has been a challenge to myself to get out of my own preconceived notions of others and to try to see people as God sees them. Whether I see that someone has a great laugh or a kind smile or that they did something good when they thought no one was looking, it has shown me that we are all trying our best, we all have goodness within us, and we all should treat others with love and respect. I’m not always great at this, and I still occasionally react out of hate and dislike but trying to relate to others has generally made me a more understanding and loving person. Whatever you can do to show a little more love to others is a Godly act and all of us should try a little harder to show God’s love every day.

Lord, thank you for your incredible gift of love. Help us to work hard every day to share your love with all people we encounter. Give us the grace and patience to find common ground with all of our neighbors. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we will have no room for hate or anger. And in all that we do, help us to fulfill your will. Amen

Lost and Found

BY RALPH STILLIONS

“But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” –Luke 15:32

When I first received my readings for this year, I groaned. Oh no, not the Prodigal Son. I have listened to many lectures, read many articles, and attended many Bible Studies and Sunday Schools on the Prodigal Son. I even read a whole book on it as a part of a Bible Study. And I still don't totally get it! It all just seemed so unfair to the older son. He did all the “right” things and his brother did all the “wrong” things, yet the father fetes and celebrates the younger brother upon his return. From our way of thinking, the older brother is justifiably upset by this and lets his feelings be known to his father. The father's famous reply is, of course: “But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” Interestingly, we don't know what the older brother's response to his father was. Did he reflect on and accept his father's explanation? Or did he stomp away in anger and estrange himself from his father and brother forever? We just don't know. The story ends. Just like a movie or novel, we want to know the ending. We don't like to be left hanging. We want to know how it all turns out. But maybe that is why we have difficulty with the prodigal son parable. We are maybe sidetracked by trying to locate an “ending” that doesn't exist. Maybe it is only the father's actions and explanation that we need to reflect upon, not what ultimately happened to the older brother.

This was not the first time in Luke that we have a parable from Jesus about something being lost, but found. The first is the lost sheep parable from Luke 15:4: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” Later we hear from Him with the lost coin parable in Luke 15: 8: “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”

So, we have three lost and found parables here. Interestingly, the first two deal with an animal and an inanimate object, a coin. These parables only contain a line or two each, whereas the prodigal son parable is lengthy and goes into quite a bit of detail. The first two parables also relate great celebration over the finding of the two lost items. Maybe the takeaway is that Jesus is using the first two as lead-ins to the last. Maybe He is trying to tell us that God loves us so much that, as much as we celebrate and rejoice over the finding of a lost item that is precious to us, there is greater rejoicing and celebrating in Heaven when we find a soul that is lost and help them to be found. When we do that, I think God celebrates us as much as He rejoices in the finding of the lost soul.

Father, thank you for loving us so much that you and the angels rejoice when we sin and repent and return to you. Help us to remember how important this is to you and that we need to always strive to help and assist all that are lost and aid them on their journey to be found. Amen

Against the Odds

BY LYNNE STILLIONS

“As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?”—Psalm 42:1-2

I chose these verses from Psalm 42 for two reasons. We are currently studying Psalms in the Wednesday morning Bible study, so I thought reflecting on today’s Psalms reading would be appropriate. The second reason I chose Psalm 42 is it reminded me about a book that I very much enjoyed reading for my book club recently. We read *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* by Patti Henry.

This book is about the improbable love story of Joy Davidman and C.S. Lewis. What drew these two souls together was a yearning for God and an ability to love and understand Him more. After reading this book, I have to believe it was no accident that these two people found each other. What are the odds that across two continents, and to have never met, their friendship could flourish?

It all started with a spontaneous letter from Joy that by sheer chance C.S. Lewis answered about six months later. Joy Davidman began writing C.S. Lewis seeking spiritual guidance and a desire to deepen her faith. She ended up with a profound love of God and also for C.S. Lewis. While they both shared brilliant minds, the relationship was still so unlikely. She was a divorced American woman of Jewish heritage and he a world-renowned Christian scholar. C.S. Lewis was also a confirmed bachelor of 59, 17 years Joy’s senior. Joy moved to England and they married April 23, 1956.

I believe God puts people in our lives who can make our faith grow. He often speaks to us through other people. That is one reason I believe attending church regularly is so important. Like the deer in Psalm 42, as a seeker and someone who thirsts for God, my fellow church members help my faith to grow.

*God please help my faith and love for you to continue to grow.
Quench my thirst by listening to you more and praying
more fervently. You are the living water and all that is
important in this world. Amen*



Forgiving from the Heart

BY BETTY RUTH FOX

“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” –Matthew 18:32-25

In the parable of the unmerciful servant, Jesus told about the servant whose master forgave him an enormous debt, but who then refused to forgive a fellow servant who owed him a tiny debt, so the master turned him over “to be tortured until he paid back the whole debt” Matthew 18:35, Jesus commanded that a person “forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

In the Song of Three Young Men, after King Nebuchadnezzar had thrown Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego into the burning furnace for refusing to bow down to his image, God saved the three from the fiery furnace and Azariah (Abednego) offered a prayer to God and asked for forgiveness. In verse 19 Azariah prayed: “Do not put us to shame, but deal with us in thy forbearance and in thy abundant mercy.”

Pope Francis reflected that although Azariah is innocent of the crime he is condemned for, his attitude of recognizing his own personal sins is the same attitude Christian men and women should have when approaching the sacrament of penance.

Finally, in Psalm 25, the psalmist prays: “do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.”

So what does it mean to forgive? And how does one forgive completely, from the heart without reservation? The root of “forgive” is the Latin word “perdonare,” meaning “to give completely, without reservation.”

C. S. Lewis wrote: “In comparison to sins like adultery, murder, theft, etc., unforgiveness might seem relatively minor. But Christ does not see it that way. Of all the serious sins he could have possibly mentioned in the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus focused only on forgiveness (Matthew 6:12, 14-15).”

Over the years I have struggled with forgiveness, particularly when the consequences of someone's actions cannot be fixed. In other words, we must continue to live with those consequences for our lifetimes. Many times I get caught up in thinking ahead ... what should I expect next year? ten years from now? I have to refocus on the present. I have to remind myself the present is all that we have.

Recently I attended the funeral of a twenty-six year old. Why did he die? He had just started his life. I cannot imagine the grief of his parents and his spouse! I think about and pray for his family every day. I have never experienced that. I am sure the family is asking why, why did this happen to us? I wish I had an answer. I have no answers. For some reason, I continue to focus on the uncertainty of our lives. What really matters to you? It is important to focus on that question. Tell the people you love that you love them. Support those around you who are hurting.

And most importantly forgive. Let go of that anguishing binding noose that will not let go.

I think it is critical that we focus on God's forgiveness of our sins through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, His only Son. The details of Jesus's death are brutal. We relive them every Good Friday. God gave His only Son in the most brutal way to save us. This is amazing grace!

Beyond, it is a mystery I cannot answer. What I can do is be a friend and lend support to those hurting around me. We are all created in God's image. We are the hands and feet of God on earth. And I believe that God works through people. And God's gift of forgiveness is for every single person.

God, please help us support and comfort those around us who are hurting. Please help us focus on your gift of Forgiveness and to Forgive through Jesus Christ and accept Forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Amen

Philosophy

101

BY DAVID ALLEN

As we grow older, and hence wiser (wisdom), we very slowly realize that whether we wear a \$300 or \$30 watch -- they both tell the same time.

Whether we carry a \$300 or \$30 wallet / handbag -- the amount of money inside is the same.

Whether a house is 300 or 3000 or 30,000 square feet -- the loneliness (so true) is the same.

And we realize our true inner happiness does not come from the material things of this world.

Whether we fly first or economy class-- if the plane goes down--we go down with it.

Whether we fly first or economy class-- if the plane reaches its destination-- everyone reaches it at the same time.

SIX UNDENIABLE FACTS OF LIFE

- 1. Don't educate your children to be rich. Educate them to be happy, so when they grow up they will know the value of material things, not the price.*
- 2. Eat your food as your medicines. Otherwise you have to eat medicines as your food.*
- 3. The only one who truly loves you will never leave you because, even if there are 100 reasons to give up, he or she will find one reason to hold on.*
- 4. There is a big difference between a human being and being human. Only a few folks really understand that.*
- 5. You are loved when you are born. You will be loved when you die. In between, you have to manage.*
- 6. If you just want to walk fast, walk alone; but, if you want to walk far, walk together.*

The six best doctors in the world? Sunlight, rest, exercise, diet, self-confidence, and friends.

And finally: The nicest place to be is in someone's thoughts. The safest place to be is in someone's prayers. And the very best place to be is in the hands of God!

Divine Protection in Times of Trial

BY MARIDINE WALL

The Lord heard her cry. Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, "I want to part in shedding this woman's blood!" –Susanna

We, as human beings all face trials in our lives. Sometimes they are because of something we did, and sometimes because of something others did to us. In all of these instances our need is to rely on God for strength, courage, and the ability to persevere. By trusting in our Heavenly Father and seeking forgiveness for our sins and guidance in the face of unjust acts, we will face the future with the gifts we need.

In the fascinating story of Susanna in the Apocryphal addition to the book of Daniel, we learn of a woman falsely accused of indecent acts by the elders and judges in the community. Susanna cries out to God, citing that He knows all things and knows that the men have given false evidence against her. At that point God puts Daniel on the scene to demand that the Israelites return to court and allow the evil accusers to be questioned.

In some of the other readings for today, there are examples of God's intervention in times of trial. In John 8:1-11 there is a story of a woman caught in the act of adultery and Jesus's instructions to her accusers. When He tells those without sin to cast the first stone, we are reminded that we should consider carefully before accusing others of wrongdoing. In John 8:12-20, Jesus speaks of validity of his testimony because God stands with him. Psalm 23 also tells of divine protection throughout life and even as we approach death/

Throughout scripture we are given examples of our need to seek God and depend on Him in times of trial. Let us be grateful that we have an advocate who will never leave us to face our troubles alone.

Almighty God, thank you for the assurance that you are always with us. We need your help as we face life's challenges, but we also need to remember to give you thanks and praise for all of the blessings you have given us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen

Priorities

BY LISA STUTZMAN

“To love God with all your heart, all your understanding and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” –Mark 12: 28-34

“You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not bow down to an alien god. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it” – Psalm 81:10

How many of us have found ourselves with our priorities out of alignment? I know I have several times in my life and it is normally a big wake up call to me to get my priorities back in alignment. Today's scripture reminds us how much God doesn't want us putting other gods first. Family, work, friends, even volunteer work—our God should come before all of this. And how exactly do we keep God first? Stay in the word, listen to podcasts of Biblical teachings, YouTube favorite Biblical speakers, travel to see them, have a group of friends that help keep you accountable—there are many ways to keep God first. Christian speaker/writer Joyce Meyer talks about how our world is full of distractions and how the evil side of life uses these distractions to keep us from putting God first. During this season of Lent, how will you put God first in your life?

...Here I Come Again

BY ELLEN O'NEAL

“Let’s return to the Lord. He will bandage our wounds and make us well...and restore our strength that we may live with him. Let’s do our best to know the Lord. His coming is as certain as the morning sun. People of Israel and Judah, what can I do with you? Your love for me disappears more quickly than mist or dew at sunrise. I’d rather for you to be faithful and to know me than to offer sacrifices.” –Hosea 1:1-6

In this and the other passages of Hosea, Hosea is addressing the people of Israel and Judah who, after having come to the Promised Land, have slowly started turning away from God – the God that delivered them out of bondage. Hosea is frustrated and trying to convince them that God is angry with them, but that there is hope and that the Lord has promised to forgive them if they ask for it and turn back to him.

How many times have we prayed for relief, for just that one more thing that will make everything alright and then, then we can be good Christians and follow God? Or we’ve committed to try harder; we join a Bible study; we promise ourselves we’ll do better at praying daily and reading His Word, only to fall off the wagon. It’s not unlike my New Year’s Resolutions to eat healthier and exercise. That’s what folks Hosea is talking to have done. For centuries they prayed for deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Now after God delivered them, they have begun to turn away from Him. Hosea says their short-lived faith “disappears more quickly than mist or dew at sunrise.” My favorite part is when Hosea speaks for God and says to them “What am I going to do with you?!” Can’t we just see God saying this to all of us when we’ve turned from him?

But what does Hosea say to them? Come back! It’s not too late! It’s never too late! “In two or three days he will heal us and restore our strength! ... He will refresh us like rain renewing the earth in the springtime.”

Lent IS the season of redemption. We come back to the Lord, tail between our legs, confessing our sins, knowing full well He is there, waiting to forgive and welcome us back to Him with open arms. Just like the old saying,

O God of second chances and new beginnings, . . . here I come again!

Lord, help me to turn back to You. I am a sinner and try as I may to be like Jesus and to follow your teachings faithfully, I am always going to fall short. But help me to remember that, no matter how many times or how badly I sin, no matter how many times I turn from you in favor of earthly pleasures, You will always forgive me. You will always welcome me back with love, so that I can, once again, pray for guidance and grace and follow you. Amen

HOSEA 1: 1-6; LUKE 18:9-14; PSALM 51:15-20

Transformation

BY WHIT RAYNER

See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. – Isaiah 65:17

I never was much into Transformers—you know, the toys that turned from something like a car or helicopter, into a battle action figure. My sense of imagination is not such that I can appreciate how a vehicle can be transformed into something with human characteristics. Imagine my difficulties with today's lessons.

First, the prophet Isaiah promises of new heavens and a new earth. One where the wolf will feed together with the lamb, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. One where the sound of weeping and crying will be heard no more.

Then, the Psalmist praises God for transforming “my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy...” “You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead; you spared me from going down to the pit.”

And finally, in John, Jesus is shown to be the ultimate Transformer, transforming water into wine, but more importantly, transforming the son of a local official from near death to among the living. And while this miracle was a literal saving the life of the young boy, it is more a manifestation of the eternal life offered through Jesus. It is the Psalmist's fulfillment of being brought up from the realm of the dead and being spared from going down to the pit. It is the fulfillment of the promise of new heavens and a new earth. God's promise to us is the transforming power of Easter.... Victory over death and creation of the freshness of life anew.

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the transforming power of your Son.
Transform us, not only in this life, but in the one to come. Amen*

The Living Water, Jesus Christ

BY NELWYN MADISON

Water, the sustainer of life, is used symbolically and powerfully throughout the Bible. In Genesis it takes on a rather negative connotation in the story of Noah where God used the waters to literally cleanse the earth of all that was evil and unholy.

But, for the most part the Bible presents us with the Living Water, Jesus Christ, and the promise of cleansing and healing of the earth, body and spirit. Without water we cannot survive physically and without the Living Water of Jesus Christ, we cannot hope for eternal life. That is what makes Baptism such an important part of the Christian sacraments, whereby the water is administered and the recipient is “sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

I hope you will take the time to read today’s scriptures, as all three passages refer the healing waters. Ezekiel 47 tells of water flowing from the temple. At first it appears to be a flowing trickle, but rapidly gains volume to become a deep, wide river as it flows toward the sea.

Ezekiel 47:9 tells of God’s promise of healing waters; “And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the river goes, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes.”

As you pray today, ask God to continue to help you hold strong to the faith that led you to embrace the Grace offered by Him and the affirmation of that faith through the Healing Waters of Baptism.

Lent

BY FREDERICK BUECHNER

In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness, where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are suppose to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.

If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?

When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?

If you had only one last message to leave a handful of people who are the most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?

Is there any person in the world or any cause that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?

If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are, but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be pretty depressing all in all, but if sack-cloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.

*The remaining Lenten Meditations will be available in the
Parish Office in early March.*