

*2022 Lenten
Meditations*

Wednesday, 2 March: Ash Wednesday

Greg Crotty

The Lord is merciful towards them that fear him and like a father that pitieth his children He removes our transgressions from us and remembereth that we are dust. Psalm 103:8-14

The Lenten Season is a time for reflection. As we began the new year with rejuvenated physical health goals, we may also see this season as a time to reconsider our spiritual health goals as well. We can use this time to repent and focus on the relationship between sin and death. Not only the death associated with our physical being, represented with the ashes today, but also the spiritual decay we experience as a result of sin.

It is a tradition to burn last year's palms from Palm Sunday to create the ashes the following year for Ash Wednesday. I love the symbolism which reminds us of our temporal bodies and existence (dust to dust) but this also represents the beginning of Holy Week (in using the palms) when Jesus entered Jerusalem knowing He would die for us. It's no stretch to see the relationship between His death providing us the path from temporal finality to spiritual and everlasting life. This is another example of how wonderful and meaningful our Christian faith is.

Today is such a special day for many reasons. Full of symbolism, reflection, regret and forgiveness. We are also reminded that God loved us so to give his son for our salvation. We know more than ever that life is but a flash in the pan, but everlasting life awaits us through His mercy.

I pray that through God's mercy we recognize our sins, His forgiveness, and strive to improve our lives and those of others. While we thank God for his mercy and forgiveness, we pray for the wisdom to extend the same to those in our lives who are also struggling with the human condition. Amen.

Thursday, 3 March

Martha Rayner

“Take delight in the Lord and He shall give you your heart’s desire.” Psalm 37:4

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 3:12-14

“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” John 17: 3

As I read today’s passages, I noticed a connection among them—knowing God. In John 17, Jesus prays shortly before His death, stating the way to eternal life is through knowing the Lord. This is something that many of us know, but as I read this multiple times throughout today’s passages, the importance of striving to know God more deeply everyday stood out to me.

Today’s scripture from Philippians begins with Paul discussing his goal, so I found it important to go back and read the beginning of Philippians 3 to learn more about the goal he is describing. Paul addresses his achievements but then follows them by stating “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (Philippians 3:7-8). Paul states in today’s reading that he has not yet reached his goal but keeps his eyes ahead, pressing towards his goal. This serves as a reminder to me of the importance of seeking to know God more each day.

Psalm 37:4 states “Take delight in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.” The notes in my Bible explain that delighting in someone means having joy when in that person’s presence, which occurs when we know that person well. Here is yet another portion of today’s scripture pointing us towards growing in our relationship with God through knowing Him more! What a joy it is to read in Psalm 37 how God is a stronghold for those who trust and delight in Him!

I pray that we all seek to know the Lord more and more each day, seeing the joy and delight He brings to each of His children that know Him!

Friday, 4 March

Meg Kilgore

“Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; for the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed. O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts.” Psalm 95

Every Lenten season, I struggle with examining my relationship with God both on the interior and exterior...caring **for** people instead of competing with them and at times, my inability to distinguish between important and urgent (to borrow a concept introduced to me by Carol Mead). Can I accept one more thing to do instead of allowing time for pursuits that matter? Especially in Lent, we are called to ask questions about the way we spend our precious time. Life’s “stuff” always pushes to the **foreground** and our knowledge of God’s grace/presence lies patiently in the **background**. We think of Lent as a time for fasting, giving up...I was thinking before this season began that I will most likely “fast” or give something up (an outward symbol reminding me of the season), but I will more strongly focus instead on pushing God to the FOREGROUND and remember to push life’s “stuff” to the background. By doing that, I will hopefully lessen my dependence on anything that is NOT God. I will “not harden my heart”, and I will pray for deliverance from those enemies (seen and unseen) that threaten to remove God (even if briefly) from my heart this season. {Psalm 31 & 35}

In this season, we especially need to make a conscious effort to make EXTRA room for God to direct us and fill us with forgiveness, mercy and grace. We must deal with earthly things every day, but we don’t have to fill our heart with them. Strive to begin the day emptying your heart of earthly “stuff” and to let God stay in the foreground this season.

The beauty of each word in so many of the scriptures that I read is so remarkable to me. That is how I feel about the verses for my meditation today. My closing prayer offers the verses in Philippians 4:4-9 from the New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV. There are no words I can create in prayer with such a beautiful message as this:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus....whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Saturday, 5 March

Grace Simmons

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; I will guide you with my eye." Psalm 32:9

"Put your trust in God; for I will yet give thanks to him, who is the help of my countenance, and my God." Psalm 42:7

I like to have a theme for each year. It's kind-of my New Year's Resolution. Last year, my theme was: *Year of Reflection*. This year, my theme is: *Year of Action*. We continue to live in uncertain times; I am exhausted. I had to order more gloves, hand sanitizer, and masks. Last week, I had my *fourth* COVID test. I know we are all thinking, "When will things be normal again?" It's hard to carry out my theme (*Year of Action*) when we seem to keep taking two steps forward and ten steps back...When I look at the readings for Lent, I am reminded that we must put our trust in God. Not only when times are difficult, but always. Once again, I turned to my students to get their perspective. Children always have a unique way of making us see things in a different light. I asked them how they put their trust in God. Here are some of their responses:

"If you are in hard times, just pray and He will lead you to better times."

"If you are going down the wrong path, trust Him to lead you down the right path."

"He put his trust in us by creating us, so we must return the favor."

"He will always be with you. If someone knocks you down, you get back up."

"God won't let the people who hurt your feelings get to you."

"He will teach you to do better things."

"If you believe in God, He will help you."

"When you know it's wrong, step away from it. He will guide you."

I am hopeful for things to get better soon. New seasons always seem to bring a new, brighter attitude. We need a little skip in our step! I leave you with a prayer from my students:

Lord, I am thankful for every morning. We pray for our family and friends; we pray to stay safe. We pray that God will be with us, because we can't really live our life in fear. We pray for our house, our family, our friends, hot water, our beds, and our pets. I pray for teachers to help us learn so we can get smarter. I pray for the homeless and those who have been in accidents. We pray to show that we love you and we don't want to have the guilt on our backs. We are thankful that Jesus wanted to spend time with the not so good people, because we are all sinners. We are sorry for some things we did. If we are sad, we will trust God- He will forgive us even if we did something bad. I hope people remember they are perfect just the way they are! Just look around- He made all of us! God will always be with you and will guide your path. Amen.

Monday, 7 March

Bob Williams

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Mark 1:1-13

The logic of the passage seems to be that by casting out demons, Jesus is effectively liberating the world from Satan. Mark's Gospel also stresses the deeds, strength, and determination of Jesus in overcoming evil forces and defying the power of imperial Rome.

As I reflect on the passage, I believe Jesus is telling us - you will face stress at home and at work. You will face the death of the ones you love. You will face disease and old age. Despite these adversities in life, Jesus has shown the way. He as a human man knew the weary road we all must travel; however, through the Holy Spirit he overcame those obstacles in his way. He showed us there is light and happiness along the byway. We must follow his path, be brave and trust in him.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your word and the wonderful truth that it contains. Thank You that Jesus set aside His heavenly glory and took upon Himself the humble status of a Servant of all so that He could identify with our humanity and pay the price for our sin - a price that we are unable to pay. I pray that I may follow in His footsteps and live in humble submission to Your Holy Spirit all the days of my life, and only do those things that I hear from You - this I ask in Jesus' name. AMEN

Tuesday, 8 March

Sarabeth Clark

Through Jesus Christ we have the opportunity to know God and to be redeemed in God's heart. All things in our life, great or small, are from that connection. No deed we can do on this earth can compare to what Jesus did for us. Therefore, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Just because we may think we cannot make a difference, God has a plan that we cannot imagine. Think about how in today's scripture Joseph's brothers abandoned him to become a slave or how the first of Jesus' disciples were simple fishermen.

My how our Lord works in his infinite wisdom to use those that others would condemn or think foolish! Could any of these people imagine what God had planned for them? Can you imagine what God has planned for you?

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. 1 Corinthians 26-28

As we continue our journey through Lent, remember to pray for strength, fast to remember the sacrifice given for us and give to share the love of Christ with others.

Lord God Almighty, shaper and ruler of all creatures, we pray for your great mercy, that you guide us towards you, for we cannot find our way. Guide us to your will, to the need of our soul, for we cannot do it ourselves. Make our mind steadfast in your will and aware of our soul's need. Strengthen us against the temptations of the devil and remove for us all lust and every unrighteousness and shield us against our foes, seen and unseen. Teach us to do your will, that we may inwardly love you before all things with a pure mind. For you are our maker and our redeemer, our help, our comfort, our trust, our hope; praise and glory be to you now and forever. Amen.

Wednesday, 9 March

Dick Lawrence

Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces." Genesis 37:31-33

Are you willing to listen to others in order to “rethink” your beliefs and opinions? By “rethinking” I mean the process of doubting what you know, being curious about what you don't know, and updating your thinking based on new evidence. In the informative book *Think Again* Wharton professor of management and psychology Adam Grant, discusses the value of “rethinking” both in our personal and professional lives which can be a pathway to a more fulfilling life.

Think Again discusses several reasons why most people are not willing to rethink their positions. The primary reason is that every person has some learned knowledge that he/she regularly relies upon. As a result, people develop “attachment biases” which keep people from recognizing when their opinions are off the mark. And we get very defensive when our core beliefs about ourselves are questioned. For example, most people will get very upset if it is suggested that they discriminate. But if we are candid, we recognize that all of us have conscious and unconscious biases and stereotypes. And when I think back over my life, I sometimes wonder: “What was I thinking?”

So, what does the above scripture from the story of Joseph have to do with “rethinking.” The story has many lessons including how God miraculously saved his people despite their making poor choices. But the story is also significant for showing how people continue to engage in making poor decisions by not rethinking their choices. For example, perhaps Jacob should have rethought whether it was a good idea to show favoritism to his son Joseph by giving Joseph a multicolored coat and treating Joseph better than his brothers. Second, perhaps Joseph should have rethought whether it was a good idea to arrogantly tell his dream to his brothers about his brothers’ bowing down to him. Third, maybe the brothers should have rethought their decision to sell Joseph into slavery. Next, why didn’t any of the brothers rethink the question of whether it was a good idea to deceive Jacob into believing Joseph was dead by showing him the multicolored robe with cattle blood placed on the robe by the brothers. If Jacob, Joseph and his brothers had just rethought any one of their decisions, perhaps this fiasco could have been avoided at any point.

During this Lenten season, may we reflect upon what we need to rethink in our lives. I pray that God gives us the calm strength, courage and wisdom to rethink our opinions and beliefs so that we may better follow the example of His Son Jesus Christ.

Thursday, 10 March

Betty Ruth Fox

And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Mark 2: 3-5

Has anyone every fallen through the ceiling in your home? Several years ago, while working in our attic, a contractor stepped through the dining room ceiling. I was in the kitchen (adjacent to the dining room) and heard "OH NO"! and the next thing I knew, I saw my contractor's legs fall through the dining room ceiling. Luckily he caught himself on a rafter and was not hurt. As you can imagine, sheet rock, dust, and insulation went all over the place. It was a mess!

That is the only experience I have that comes close to our scripture today. I thought it would be interesting to view this event from the perspective of the homeowner. First, you have to imagine more people in your home than you have ever had. Imagine if you are a perfectionist how stressful it would be trying to keep everything straight. Then suddenly your roof caves in and a person is lowered in your midst. Home roofs in Jesus' time typically were flat, substantial, had wood rafters as a base and were covered with clay and lime. Roofs of many homes were used in the evenings for families to gather to enjoy the cooler temperatures. Imagine someone digging through a roof like that and the mess it would create. The opening in the roof had to be large to lower a person on a cot.

Despite the MESS, Jesus performed the amazing miracle, so the paralytic walked! The parable does not say anything about the mess that was left or how it was cleaned up or how the roof was repaired. I think the takeaway is that there will always be messes, but we must keep our eyes open for the miracles that happen every single day and every single moment. From healings; to babies being born; to flowers growing; to every breath that we take. They are all miracles.

One cannot think about this scripture without mentioning the friends of the paralytic. They were absolutely committed to their friend and getting him help. They were willing to do ANYTHING. And it worked.

Finally, how does the Old Testament and Psalms scripture readings tie into the gospel?

In the Old Testament, it does not matter to Joseph where he is – he keeps doing what he does – which is to obey God and do the best he can – and he turns out being placed in a position of authority even in prison. Talk about viewing the glass half full!

Psalm 46: 1-2 reinforces that God is with us:

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, God is with us at every step and never leaves our side.

Dear God, help us to know and feel your presence and to trust that you are by our side no matter what.

Friday, 11 March

Allan Cooper

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins." Mark 2:13-22

Sinners and Tax Collectors?!?!

In this passage Jesus is in the early days of his public ministry and has performed some miracles and called four fishermen to follow him, which surprisingly they did. Those were Simon Peter and his brother Andrew and also James and John. And now Jesus calls a man who was despised by conscientious and observant Jewish leaders. Tax collectors were considered traitors since they worked for profit collecting taxes from the people of Israel for the despised Roman government. This tax collector is identified as Levi by Mark (he is also called Matthew, see Matthew 9:9) who also follows Jesus.

So, Jesus starts his world altering mission with four fishermen and a social outcast tax collector. And Levi then invites Jesus to his home for dinner and invites his tax collector friends, and to make the scene even worse invites an assortment of others identified only as 'sinners'. In any event, the respectable Pharisees considered all of them as deplorables and would have nothing to do with such people, and would especially avoid such intimate contact as a dinner in a tax collector's or sinner's home. But Jesus went to Levi's home "eating and drinking" with them all.

(It's also interesting that a similar event is described in Luke 19:1-10 happens later with Jesus in Jericho when Jesus calls out to a wealthy tax collector, much to the shock of the crowd, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today".)

Jesus heard the Pharisee criticisms and he responded with one of my favorite scriptural quotes. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." In Revelation 3:20, Jesus again states, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."

Apparently, Jesus' idea of a good time is a dinner party in the homes of people like me.

Saturday, 12 March

Lisa Stutzman-Graves

Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my pleas, hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught, because of what my enemy is saying, because of the threats of the wicked; for they bring down suffering on me and assail me in their anger. My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee far...

*I will give You thanks with all my heart;
I sing praises to You before the [pagan] gods.
I will bow down [in worship] toward Your holy temple
And give thanks to Your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth;
For You have magnified Your word together with Your name.
On the day I called, You answered me;
And You made me bold and confident with [renewed] strength in my life.
All the kings of the land will give thanks and praise You, O Lord,
When they have heard of the promises of Your mouth [which were fulfilled Yes, they will sing of the ways of the Lord [joyfully
celebrating His wonderful acts],
For great is the glory and majesty of the Lord.
Though the Lord is exalted,
He regards the lowly [and invites them into His fellowship];
But the proud and baughty He knows from a distance.
Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You will revive me;
You will stretch out Your hand against the wrath of my enemies,
And Your right hand will save me.
The Lord will accomplish that which concerns me;
Your [unwavering] lovingkindness, O Lord, endures forever
Do not abandon the works of Your own hands. Psalm 138*

An acorn has adorned the dashboard of my car, right at the speedometer, for several years. I put it there years ago as I longed to be out in nature, away from my grueling, computer tied job. It rolled around my dash from left to right with each turn of my vehicle, but it never fell off the dashboard--rolling around like working in corporate America. It seemed like every week there was a new "initiative" every day and I would be 'herded' off in another direction, often directly opposite of the first initiative. I put the acorn there as a symbol that nature is all around us. We roll to the left and to the right with the waves of stuff, hoping to not fall off the dashboard of life?

I found my acorn one day while out seeing clients. My spirit longed to be outside, seeing people, building relationships, so imagine how moved I was to park under an oak tree near my client's office. As I opened my car door, the parking lot was filled with acorns! I had to be careful where I stepped so I didn't roll onto my back! In my heavily worked induced computer head fog, this was a sacred moment and I knew it. I breathed in the tree; I breathed in the moment; I let the moment savor through my body; and then I instinctively picked up a two headed acorn as a remembrance of this experience. The acorn has rolled around the dash of my car for years now, again never falling. Like many things in life we see everyday, the acorn, at times, would become "invisible" to me. Then I would turn a corner, and rolling to the other side it would go, waking me from my trance of driving, and I would be reminded of my longing for nature. A longing deep in my spirit, it is as if, I needed nature to breathe.

Like Psalm 55 and 138, God was listening to my pleas, my deepest soul's longings. Though I was distraught, he had me in the palm of his hand the whole time.

Little did I know, when I scooped that two headed acorn into my hand, I was setting an intention when I placed it on my car's dashboard. That acorn was a visual reminder for years, of what my spirit truly yearned for- to be outside, even to work outside. Every time I saw that acorn, I was immediately transported back to the moment I found it—all my senses alive with that moment.

Years later, I was working in my new backyard on my computer basking in the huge canopy like trees. It was as if I was being fed by the energy of the trees and the lush greens surrounding them. I have been away from corporate America about a year now; moved twice; lost a parent, moved another parent to another home; got married; and experienced my son moving far away. The acorn is the farthest thing from my mind. I got up from computer, to clear my head and was browsing around my new backyard basking and breathing in nature, giving thanks for my new work environment when I looked down and there was an acorn at my feet. Immediately I was transported back to first acorn experience, all while I looked around and there were acorns EVERYWHERE! I couldn't believe it. Then I looked up and realized there are three huge oak trees in my new backyard. My continuous prayer was answered and I was so grateful! That is how I felt when I saw not one acorn, but literally thousands right in my own backyard. God had answered my deep longing to be in nature with an ABUNDANCE of acorns, much like the ABUNDANCE of his love for us.

Monday, 14 March

Searcy Fox Morell

In I Corinthians 4: 21, Paul asks “What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?”

Have you ever run in a race? Have you ever had someone in the way of you and the finish line and all you wanted to do was to push them out of the way? Well, I wouldn't say I would physically push someone out of the way, but I can't say I haven't thought about it. Recently, I ran a half marathon. While I'm not the fastest runner, I trained for weeks and worked hard on pacing and timing. At the starting line, I thought surely people around me would be running and not walking right out of the gate. I was in for a rude awakening from the moment the light went off for my group to begin. (The runners were apparently grouped by their pace). I was faced with many people going at a much slower pace than me, even some walking right out of the starting line. I was angry and flustered, as I didn't want to waste energy or time to run out of my way to get around them, but I also couldn't stay behind them. Some would say, I may have wanted to hit them with a stick, as Paul writes in his letter. However, I would never hit someone with a stick, but it is hard to show love and gentleness when you have someone or something blocking your path and what you have worked so hard for. In the end, we all trained to finish a great distance, regardless of the pace.

God may look at the decisions we make or are about to make and want to hit us over the head with a stick, yet he does not. He does not come at us with great force and sticks. Instead, God gives us a remarkable amount of love and kindness. We do not deserve the amount of love and gentleness God provides us, yet he continues to give it to us every single moment of every single day, even when we do not realize it.

Today, I pray we know Christ will always give us love and gentleness. I pray that when we are faced with a difficult situation, we will choose love and gentleness like Christ.

Tuesday, 15 March

Whit Rayner

Who are my mother and my brothers?...Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. Mark 3: 33-35

Several of today's lessons focus on the family-- dysfunction and all. I am not a sociologist, nor have I ever taken a sociology course. I'm sure that there are definitions of "family" and all the behavioral aspects that accompany such definitions. But it doesn't take a sociologist to see that in today's readings, "family" is what is at issue. And today's scriptures do not spare us from the dysfunction that every family experiences—even Jesus' own family.

In the Old Testament reading, we pick up with epilog of the story of Joseph's brothers selling their sibling into slavery (sparing him from the murder they had initially plotted). Famine had spread into Canaan, and Jacob, the bad family's father, sent the brothers to Egypt to purchase grain (except for the youngest brother, Benjamin, whom Jacob wisely ordered to remain home for fear of a repeat episode). Of course, Joseph, who by now was running the province, recognized them. And Joseph still exacted his own measure of brotherly revenge—imprisoning as spies all of the brothers for three days, then holding Simeon hostage until the other brothers returned with Benjamin.

Fast forward to the New Testament lesson, and shortly after Jesus began his teaching and drawing crowds, word got to Jesus' family that Jesus was causing a commotion. Saying, "he is out of his mind", Jesus' brothers and Mary arrived to retrieve him. You can just picture the scene—Mary intending to grab Jesus by the ear and drag him home. But Jesus, upon being advised that his mother and brothers were outside, told those around him that they were his family.

From Old Testament days to New Testament days, to TODAY, every family faces dysfunction to some extent. Human social groups, families included, are all imperfect. But when Jesus was told that his family was looking for him, he took the institution of family one step further: "...he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'"

My family is God's greatest gift to me. But, earthly families, however important and however dysfunctional, pale in comparison to the family of God's believers and what they can accomplish. We witness glimpses of this in the work of outreach (and in-reach) in our own Parish. Those of you who have been involved in Cursillo witness the grace shared with each other in that servant community. However, these institutions are also earthly families. How much greater must be the family of God's children all living with him in heaven doing God's will?

Wednesday, 16 March

Rebecca Haas

And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some a hundred. Mark 4: 1-20

It's our job as Christian's to continue to spread God's word like the farmer in the parable. We never know which of our seeds will find the right soil to become a bountiful crop. We must live our lives in accordance with the Bible and the beatitudes found within. Therefore, we can be good examples to others and our message of God will have honesty and truth.

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Thursday, 17 March

Eric Eaton

“Why, Lord? Why? I wander through the darkness searching for words to say; I strain my ears in vain to hear the message of the scriptures. When I set about to capture the thoughts, they leave my mind as fine sand through the fingers... why, Lord? Why?”

The above is NOT from the Bible. This is Eric’s Lament, 2022. I have to confess that sweet Betty Ruth Fox sent me no less than TWO rounds of verses this year. As many of you know, yes.. I am a divo at times. I could not, for the life of me, detect a voice directed at me in the verses for the appointed days. The only one that sort of spoke to me in any way, regarding a reflection, was Psalm 74. And even that passage has me circling in the dark unsure of what to say. But what can you really say to people when they are facing insurmountable adversity, grief, or pain? That isn’t even talking about life prior to 2020! The last two (or is it three now? I forgot) years have affected us all in different ways. Fear, worry, anger over altered lives, sickness, a seemingly worsening political divide, and the loss we deemed “too soon” of loved ones and famous folks. The last few years have truly been on the strugglebus, if you’ll allow the understatement.

By then I found myself leading our youth Sunday school on January 30, 2022. It began as a normal lesson with talk of sports, life, and prayer. We jumped into the lesson and chatted about this and that. We ended up talking about a scripture of Ecclesiastes. Not the one from Job listed above, but one nonetheless that had someone mention the story of Job. This guy, the one who had everything, was allowed to be given over to Satan’s worst “tricks”. It was as if God said, “Do your worst... just don’t kill him.” Why would God do this? Isn’t God merciful and just? I won’t go into the details of all that Job went through, but it was hell. I am not saying we should look at all we go through and compare it to Job. That would be impossible to accurately compare. Every person has their own trials and tribulations, especially the shared frustrations and pains of the last few years. We aren’t to look at Job’s story and think “well, at least I don’t have it THAT bad”. We are to look at Job’s example of faith: In the darkest moments of despair, when by our modern levels of comfort, we would have expected him to give up and curse God, Job doubled down. He complained to his friends (who gave him lousy advice, by the way), he even questioned things like his existence, but he pushed on through and proved to Satan and God that his faith in the Creator was infinite. I feel that Psalm 74 ties it all back together, much like Psalm 22 can in moments of personal anguish and despair. Both start with laments and humanity’s inability to understand events. Yet, both submit these fears and worries over to God’s sovereignty and control. Psalm 74:16-17 states:

*“The day is Yours, the night also is Yours;
You have prepared the light and the sun.
You have set all the borders of the earth;
You have made summer and winter.”*

The scripture that day in Sunday School was Ecclesiastes 3. We are familiar with the “A time to” verse. Yet it’s a common theme in the Bible. Summed up: God has ALL of this. While He may not cause bad things to happen, He allows them out of HIS firm control over all that we see and encounter. God knows what we will face tribulations and He knows we will struggle with faith. But we have to only open the Bible and see that we are not alone. More importantly, we have never been alone and never will be. To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under Heaven...

Loving, Holy, and Sovereign God. Creator of all that we see and know, grant us an ever-strengthening faith through your word, our prayers, our friendships, and our shared experiences. Give us strength to press on through the darkest of days and voices of thanksgiving to shout for joy on the brightest. Enrich our prayers so that daily we can proclaim the words of our Brother Job from old: “The Lord gave the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord!” Amen

Friday, 18 March

Suzanne Files

Now the famine was severe in the land. And when they had eaten up the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little more food." But Judah said to him, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' Genesis 43:1-15

This is a middle passage of a story we know well. The sons of Jacob sold their father's favorite son, Joseph, into slavery. Joseph rose to a position of leadership under Pharaoh and recognized his brothers when they came begging for food. During my personal journal of faith through EFM and writings of theologians I have learned to try and place myself into different positions in a story, in other words, try to look at all sides. We can clearly see the good guys but in this story how do we see the brothers? I doubt they were happy with their decision; keeping painful family secrets can destroy relationships. Deceit exacts a heavy toll and their secrets empower guilt, shame and regret. Their collusion of silence became more toxic than the concealed truth. To be forgiven is incredibly healing and when the truth was finally revealed after all those years, their anxiety evaporated. We see similar stories throughout our Bible, in the prodigal son and the lost sheep. God's joy is revealed when we are all reconciled, one with another.

And as always, this redemption only comes from God. I don't know how Joseph or his father was able to forgive the brothers but God always leads us to grace. So again, I realized that Joseph was not the only family member to suffer from the tragic decision made long ago. God's response of grace and forgiveness are there for all of us; how very generous.

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you, be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen

Saturday, 19 March

Becky Herren

One of the readings for today is the beautiful Twenty-Third Psalm—a psalm of David which we are well acquainted.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me.”

Because God is with us, we can lie down in peace, find sustenance for our souls, and even walk through death’s valley with courage. When I say this familiar psalm, I think of my dad. Psalm 23 was his favorite and often recited psalm which he leaned on heavily, particularly during WWII. In the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, before he entered the “valley of death” on a Normandy Beach, my dad said that he repeated the psalm in the Higgin’s boat; on the beach; and throughout the battles that raged around him. When he was an old man in his late eighties, he told me that he was so blessed to have memorized that psalm as a child. It was his anchor and brought courage and peace to him throughout his life.

The Bible is full of stories of God being with people. Enoch walked with God for three hundred years; God was with Ishmael when he was alone in the wilderness; Jacob was promised by God “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go”; and God promised Moses to help him when he spoke to the Pharaoh.

And God is with us! I reread a book recently which repeated the words “***Noli Timera***” (Be Not Afraid) often. I think I would like to have those words framed so they are the first words I see in the morning and the last words before I sleep at night!

Whatever dark valley we are facing, we can face that valley knowing we are in the presence and care of our God.

Lord, I trust that I can walk through any dark valley for you are with me. Amen

Monday, 21 March

Laney Crampton

Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:4-9

When I read Philippians 4:4-9, I knew instantly these verses were meant for me to distill by writing this meditation. I have always thought of myself as a fairly patient person which has been an advantage in both my business and my personal life. When the pandemic began two years ago, certainly life changed, but I was all on board to participate in lockdown, wearing a mask, socially distancing and doing my part to eradicate this horrible virus. After all, I knew there was a vaccine on its way, and all I needed to do was to be patient! Do you remember that moment in time when we all thought that the pandemic was coming to an end last spring? We somewhat resumed our normal lives and thought, "Hallelujah!" And then the Delta and Omicron variants came rushing in!

For all the gratitude I have for my life's many blessings, I longed for the time when we are all simply free to be. In the interim though, I asked for God to place on my heart how to strengthen my patience so that I have a more pleasing attitude to Him. And just like that, a text arrived this past week from Betty Ruth with my Lenten meditation scripture that happens to focus on this very thing!

Paul's words in Philippians 4:4-9 reinforce how to nurture this well pleasing attitude. He tells the citizens of Philippi to rejoice in the Lord always, to be gentle in our interactions with others (the Golden Rule), to pray to negate anxiety, to honor God's peace in our hearts, to meditate on His word and to do His will. As I repent and pray about my human frailties, I know God's forgiveness covers me with His grace as I strive to be a more patient human being.

Dear Lord, help me to focus on all the beauty and good I am able to know as a human being and to strengthen my resolve to know that you are always with me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Tuesday, 22 March

Tommy Roberson

He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES. Matthew 13: 31-33

What is a parable? It is a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. I have often wondered why Jesus used so many parables in his teachings. Maybe it was because most people were not well educated and lived a simple life. The people of his day were able to relate to these parables.

One of the best known of these parables was of the mustard seed. The mustard seed was a parable used to describe the smallest of all seeds that grows into a large tree. Many birds of the air come and nest in its branches. It represents the ability to have paramount faith, in which nothing is impossible for you. The amount of faith needed to do great things is very small indeed. Some see the mustard tree as the church which grows to incorporate all nations. The birds are the people who have made a home in faith to learn and grow.

We as people of God are very much like that mustard seed in that we are small in our faith but we can grow. How do you grow? Do we come to church every Sunday, read the scriptures, practice the teachings of the Bible, love one another and understand that we are all God's children? What things in your life bring joy and goodness when they are allowed to flourish? We have a short time on this earth and must grow each and every day. We hope to grow with the love God has given us and share that love with others. It's not easy, I should know, but rest assured it will be worth it.

Indeed, little things are much when they come from God.

Wednesday, 23 March

Robert Pooley

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. Mark 2:18-22

Don't you just love it when a local Pharisee asks you why you are not acting like they think you should? There is an old saying that people of certain denominations won't speak in the liquor store. If I were only so lucky. As I presented my bottle of wine to the cashier, a young preacher man I knew proceeded to tell me that my life will be empty at the bottom of that bottle. My mouth spoke before my brain when I responded to the preacher man that he is correct, and I retrieved another bottle to put on the counter. *But I digress.* In the gospels, Jesus is often challenged for not upholding the customary "religious rules", like working on the Sabbath, etc. In this case, Jesus' disciples were not fasting twice a week in accordance with the Rabbinical tradition, and the Pharisees, like my preacher friend, questioned their sincerity and devotion to the ceremonial law. Jesus responded, why would you deprive yourself when the presence of the Lord is among you? "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom (Christ) is with them." It would just not be proper southern etiquette not to celebrate during a wedding. I think Jesus was suggesting a shift from the old standards in the ways we relate to God, and how God relates to us. Another point here is that we can not earn our way to heaven with good deeds. Jesus the groom comes to betroth his bride, the followers of Christ, only out of love and grace. Not because we earned his favor.

Verse 20 foretells the crucifixion. *"But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them."* Like the Bride of Annandale, after the murder of the groom we will mourn and fast. Lent is a good time for us to reflect on our relationship with Christ through prayer and maybe sacrifice.

Verse 21 is another short parable regarding change. *"No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise, the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old."* There are a lot of interpretations of this. To me, this is again telling us to beware of patching man-made doctrines with God's divine inspired Word. That doesn't mean we should resist change. A new coat may be preferable to a patched one. While our ways of discerning God will evolve, the fabric of this understanding must be consistent.

Verse 22 concludes: *"And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."* Whether true or not, we as Episcopalians might have a reputation of boldly clinging to our old ways and traditions. You can't put new ideas into old mind-sets. You can't get new results with old behaviors. Let us also boldly face the challenges presented by Jesus.

Lord, may I be a new cloak, a fresh wineskin, a heart ready to bear your message.

Thursday, 24 March

Bill Buhner

Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD, for I call on you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol. Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt. Psalm 31

Seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a (false) charge against him. 1 Kings 21:10

Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. John 12:26

The first thing that strikes me in Psalm 31, and all the Psalms, for that matter, is the wonderfully direct way King David, the author, speaks to God. From this I take, as we are directed to read the Lord's word in our time, that we, also, may speak **directly** to God: no beating around the bush. Say what it is that you need and trust in the Lord to answer your request.

The first two readings, from the Old Book, speak of those who are prideful and hold contempt for those who follow the Lord. The third reading, from the New Book, speak of what is required of those who willingly choose to follow the Lord. These words, from both Books, say the same thing: follow the Lord and he will help you in your journey, show you the way, and protect you from those who would do you harm, in His time and way.

Here are some words from both Books to guide you on **your** journey:

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Matthew 5:11

No weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their vindication from me, declares the Lord.” Isaiah 54:17

With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by knowledge the righteous are delivered. Proverbs 11:9

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” Romans 12:19

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4

Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on us, all sinners. Lord Jesus, stay with us this day. Help us, yet again, to KNOW you.

Friday, 25 March

Lynne Stillions

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. Isaiah 7:14

I loved the readings for today. All three readings, Isaiah, Hebrews and Luke, told of God's promise to his people. God's son will be conceived from a virgin, and he will come into this world and sacrifice himself for our sins, so that we can have eternal life with him in heaven.

The chapter of Isaiah was written between 740 and 700 BC, so God's promise to his people was foretold hundreds and hundreds of years before Christ's birth. That promise is reaffirmed in the book of Revelation 1:5 "*to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood*". The Book of Revelation was written about seventy years after the death of Christ. God's promise has been consistent throughout the Old Testament, New Testament and the Book of Revelation.

In this virus laden world that we have lived in for the last two years, everything keeps changing. Masked up and fearful, always worrying about the next virus count for the day, or the next new variant. It is comforting for me to know Christ is consistent and never changing. God loves me, He is here for me, and He has prepared a place for me in Heaven

Saturday, 26 March

Suzie Webb

Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. Psalm 133:1

Imagine all the people living life in peace. ~ John Lennon

Nothing does this mamma's heart more good than seeing my children getting along and loving and caring for each other. When my three were growing up there could be moments (a lot!) when they would bicker, fight and scream at each other. But those moments when they were talking and having fun together were the moments I treasure.

Now that they are grown and we've added three more kids (won't they always be kids?), their spouses/significant others and grandkids, it has become a challenge to get everyone together at one time. When we do manage it, my heart fills with joy watching how they all love each other and genuinely enjoy being together.

In these chaotic days of divisiveness, fear and anger, God's heart must hurt. After all he created us to love each other. What joy He must feel during those times when people love and care for each other regardless of their differences. Speaking for myself, I do not know how to achieve world peace, but I can do my best every day to love, serve and pray for those in my corner of the world. If we all started with our corners, I believe that we could make the world a more peaceful place and make God smile a little more.

You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us and the world will be as one. ~ John Lennon

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

Monday, 28 March

The Rev. Will Compton

Philip the disciple says to Jesus, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied." It is a bold ask by Philip. His words are my words though. Philip speaks for me. I, too, want to see the Father. We all search for God. We all wonder of his whereabouts in our life. We all say Father, show yourself and we will be comforted. Show yourself and we will be healed. Show yourself and we will grieve no more. Show yourself and let us know that you are with us. Show yourself and we will be satisfied. John 14: 8-9

And yet, just as Philip's words are my words, and just as Philip speaks for me, so is Jesus' reply to Philip a reply to me. "Have I been with you all this time, Will, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

This is what Lent is about: seeing the Father. It is a season of penitence, self-examination, fasting, and contemplation, but with one end in mind: seeing the Father. It is in this season that we remove those things that hold us back from seeing God and knowing his whereabouts in our life. It is a season contrary to society. A society that tells us we can never consume enough. A society that tells us to pick up the phone and check social media. A society that tells us that we are not worth a darn until we have done all and accomplished all that we can.

I don't know what was going on in Philip's life that was keeping him from seeing the Father, but I know what is going on in my life that keeps me from seeing the Father, and I bet you do too. I'm working to remove those things and I invite you during the remainder of this holy season of Lent to do the same. It is never too late to see the Father. He is always with us, calling to us because in the Father's eyes, we are worth a darn.

Creator God, giver of sight and knowledge, to see you is to know you. In this holy season of Lent, may we see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, who lives and reigns with your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tuesday, 29 March

Ralph Stillions

If it is possible, so far as depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Romans 12: 18-20

Like everyone, I am not immune from unsolicited advertisements or endorsements as I wander through the cyber world. Yesterday, an ad popped up advertising 2021 SUV's so inexpensive they were practically giving them away. Today, another ad came up advertising a seemingly shadowy buyers' club with examples of being able to buy computers, I-phones etc., that normally retail for \$1000+, for as little as \$4.99! Whenever I see such claims, the first phrase that pops into my skeptical mind is "caveat emptor," Let the Buyer Beware! However, another common adage that almost immediately enters my mind is "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is."

In our secular world these are words of wisdom that ring true and should normally be heeded. That is why it is often so difficult in our spiritual life to accept the concept of Grace, that if we accept Christ as our Lord and savior, we will have eternal salvation regardless of our sins. It just seems too good to be true.

It is also equally difficult to believe we should do nothing when we are wronged by someone. Our instinct is to fight back and seek revenge or some form of retaliatory satisfaction. However, through Paul, God tells us not to do that. Actually, we are told to do the opposite. Paul says "... never avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God." Additionally, he says "... if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

In other words, God is telling us to not worry about the wrongs committed by our adversaries He says that He, not we, should and will take care of it. He's saying to us "I've got this!"

Sounds too good to be true. But in this case, when it comes to God and his promise, it is true!

Wednesday, 30 March

Reggie Sims

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him. Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means "sons of thunder"), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Mark 3: 7-15

I've never been much of a joiner. I could probably count on one hand and have a few fingers left over the number of groups, clubs, committees etc. that I have joined as an adult. Ben, other rectors and vestry members that I have served with will attest that I don't function well in groups. With the patience of a two-year-old and the attention span of a goldfish, I guess I should apologize, let's just call it a blanket apology, to all the friends who were forced to serve at the same time as me in all the vestry, boards, committees etc. There, I feel better.

All the gibberish above is what I thought about when I read the above passage about Jesus calling The Twelve and how I would have responded if I had been in the crowd, and He pointed a finger at me. Did they accept the invitation without hesitation? Did He have to convince them? Did Jesus know most would be martyred? If he knew, did He tell them? I'm sure there is a fascinating story behind each disciple's call, but we will never know...until, I guess, we can ask them ourselves one day. What I struggle with and have struggled most of my life is: What would I have done if I were in the crowd and this guy who says He is the son of God, and I think He probably is, asked me to give up my life so He can make me a fisher of men? Would I say, sign me up, or would I doubt myself or start to doubt Him? Would I say yes, then find an excuse later when things got tough to bow out and go home? If I said yes, would I use my talents to the fullest in so doing, risk martyrdom? These are the questions of my faith. And if you fast forward to today, what have I done and what am I doing with the talents that God has given me? Most of us are not blessed with a road to Damascus moment like St. Paul or some other lightning bolt type experience that leaves us knowing what we should do with our talent, treasure and faith. If you are like me you go to work, go to church, raise your kids, love your spouse, bake cookies for DITC and one day you take the time to reflect; am I doing enough to spread the good news of Jesus Christ in the world today? Will I hear one day "Well done good and faithful servant?"

If I were totally honest with myself and with you, I would have to admit that if I met my Maker today, I'm not sure what I would hear from the Almighty. Typing that gives me pause. James said, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds." I need to get to work on getting to work. (That was one of my dad's favorite sayings) I can assure you that I shall begin praying and meditating and, just maybe, He will remove the scales from my eyes and show me or help me see the way to be a better servant. I just hope I don't have to join some committee!

Thursday, 31 March

Stan Herren

I'm telling you the solemn truth," he said. "The son can do nothing by himself. He can only do what he sees the father doing. Whatever the father does, the son does too and in the same way. John 5:19-23

I was raised on a cattle farm in Utica, Mississippi. The original parcel of Herren land dates to 1825 when Stephen Herren came to Mississippi in search of a better life for himself and his family. I was the first son in six generations to break away from this way of life and not farm this land. In our modern Western world, sons entering their fathers' businesses is becoming rarer and rarer. And particularly where the business involves working at a skilled trade with one's hands. Apprenticeship means literally side by side with the son watching and learning to do what the father does in exactly the same way. I know that many of these skills are passed down for hundreds of years.

So, verse 19 almost seems like a parable, a story about how sons are apprenticed to their fathers. Jesus is explaining more fully how God is working in a new way and how Jesus is watching carefully to see how it is being done. Jesus is the Word made Flesh.

"The Word became Flesh," John said. God finally managed after attempt and after attempt to drive his message to us. God tells us through his Son who He is and what human is. It means just as your words have you in them—your spirit, your breath, your power—so Jesus had God's spirit in Him.

Dear God, bring me through darkness into light. Bring me through pain into peace. Bring me through death into life. Be with me wherever I go and with everyone I love. In Christ's name I pray. Amen

Friday, 1 April

Ellen O'Neal

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So, Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived. Numbers 21: 4-9

This story from Numbers of The Bronze Snake is a pretty clear foreshadowing of our salvation through Jesus. The people whined, they sinned, they complained - God had led them out of generations of bondage in Egypt, yet they complained about the food! But still God had compassion, and though the wages for their sins was death by snakebite, He had Moses create something for them to look to, and if they did, they would not die. All they had to do was turn their eyes upward to see The Bronze Snake. Just as we now know we can turn the eyes of our sinful and snakebit selves to Jesus.

In this season of Lent, we try to slow down, we look inwardly at ourselves, we acknowledge our sinful ways and those areas of our lives that need more Holy attention. I have many. But the good news is that, after we've piled all this sin and complaining and procrastination and wretchedness onto our little wagon and hauled it before Jesus – our confession - we know that we can turn our eyes upward to Him, as the Hebrews looked to The Bronze Snake, and we are forgiven, yet again. It is humbling indeed.

Prayer: Lord, during this season of Lent, help me to more fully and solemnly acknowledge my shortcomings in your sight; help me to identify those areas of my life and of my spiritual journey that could be improved upon, and to endeavor to "do better." Knowing, Lord, that even with my best efforts, I will always fall short and be bitten by the snake of sin, I am thankful that, through Jesus, I will not die.

Saturday, 2 April

Lenten Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit

Replace the tension within us with a holy relaxation.

Replace the turbulence within us with a sacred calm.

Replace the anxiety within us with a quiet confidence.

Replace the fear within us with a strong faith.

Replace the bitterness within us with the sweetness of grace.

Replace the darkness within us with a gentle light.

Replace the coldness within us with a loving warmth.

Replace the night within us with your light.

Replace the winter within us with your spring.

Straighten our crookedness.

Fill our emptiness.

Dull the edge of our pride.

Sharpen the edge of our humility.

Light the fires of our love.

Quench the flames of our lust.

Let us see ourselves as you see us

That we may see You.

Amen.

Monday, 4 April

Steve Middleton

Forgiven

*Pulled from my mother's arms
Beaten, Abused, Shamed
From house to house I ran
Promises of redemption, promises of love
Lies, lies upon lies, deep into my soul they cut
Empty, angry, cold I am
All I have to offer is my flesh
Your name I do not even know
Doors thrown open wide, sun light in my eyes
Shouting, cursing, hate
Dragged into the streets
A rod upon my back, a stone upon my cheek
Spit upon my face
Thrown before your feet
Fear
I look up, you look down
No condemnation do I see
You hold out your hand and offer this rock
"You, You cast this stone"
"You who have not sinned"
Silence fills the air
Lifted to my feet
Your face I still see
Your words I still hear
"Where are your accusers?, go and sin no more, go and sin no more"
Amen*

Tuesday, 5 April

Susan Lawrence Hedglin

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord; more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. Psalm 130:5-6

I love getting things on demand. I have a weekly meal prep kit that arrives on my doorstep each week, where I choose the meals with a click of a button. I downloaded not one, not two, but three different TV streaming services on my iPad, where I can watch hundreds of shows with just a few swipes. I don't even have to step foot in the library anymore—I can download library books straight to my Kindle!

And yet, there is one thing in my life which is resistant to time pressure. One thing that cannot be rushed, or hurried along, or done at my convenience—and that's my relationship to God. He is always with us; but feeling his presence requires some investment on our part. We must show up. And wait. Sometimes I'm waiting for a response: to prayer, to a cry for help, to a secret desire we don't dare speak out loud. Other times, I'm not sure what I want but I wait anyway. Lent is a time to recommit ourselves to waiting. To feeling the joy, and the hopefulness, that comes in waiting for the miracle of new life that will come at the end of our waiting season. True miracles are coming to those of us who wait faithfully...is your soul waiting for the right things?

Lord, help me wait with patience during this Lenten season. Help me focus on the coming joy, the resurrection, the momentous miracle that will visit us on Easter. I'm waiting for your renewed presence in my life. Amen.

Wednesday, 6 April

Steve Middleton

This is the Church

Sanctuary, Fellowship

Thin Place

Near to God

The Spirit with us in this place

This is the Church

Above the buildings

Above the Trees

You Guide us, you direct us

You bring us Home

This is the Steeple

Books, Crosses, and Candles

Prayers, songs, and Praise

Words of peace, Words we know

Age to Age, and long ago

Open the Doors

We who have lost our way

We, who feel pain, worry, and fear

We, who Seek grace, comfort, and Peace

Will be accept me, Will be make me whole

See all the people

Amen

Thursday, 7 April

Isabel Weathersby

Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered. Psalm 105: 4-11

The psalmist praises the Lord, who has kept his covenant promise and provided enduring strength to the Israelites, his chosen people, since the time of Abraham. He also encourages the reader to turn to the Lord and remember that it was the Lord who kept them alive during their wilderness journey and gave the promised land to the descendants of Abraham forever. God is always faithful. It was the ancient Israelites who time after time did not uphold their part of the covenant. But God, sometimes punishing them for their sinfulness, always forgave them, and again they were restored.

Let us place before God, in prayer, all our sins and offer our most sincere repentance. Then with contrite hearts we can meditate on the glory of God.

And now, O Lord, I bend the knee of my heart, and make an appeal, sure of your gracious goodness. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned, and I know my wickedness only too well. Therefore I make this prayer to you: Forgive me, Lord, forgive me. Do not let me perish in my sin, nor condemn me to the depths of the earth. For you, O Lord, are the God of those who repent, and in me you will show forth your goodness. Unworthy as I am, you will save me, in accordance with your great mercy, and I will praise you without ceasing all the days of my life. Amen.

Just as the Israelites of old were admonished to praise God and look to him for strength, let us, during this Lenten season, and with penitent hearts, seek God and remember all his wondrous works, as the angels in heaven unceasingly sing praises to God. But above all, as we journey to Jerusalem and the cross with Jesus, let us remember God's greatest gift, his son who obediently went to his death and glorious resurrection for all of us.

O God, whose wonderful deeds of old shine forth even to our own day, you once delivered by the power of your mighty arm your chosen people from slavery under Pharaoh, to be a sign for us of the salvation of all nations by the waters of Baptism: Grant that all the peoples of the earth may be numbered among the offspring of Abraham, and rejoice in the inheritance of Israel; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Friday, 8 April

The Rev. Ben Robertson & Dr. Billy Taylor

I am weary. Jeremiah 20:9

We are in week five of Lent. This holy season of penitence and reorienting ourselves towards God can be wearying. Plus, we all live in 2022.

The pandemic was a two-year punch to the gut. It exacerbated and amplified our divisions, our pain, our grievances, and the regular stressors of this life. And yet, we are expected to look and seem fine, like all is well and that we – despite all of the above – we have risen above the rancor and our house is thriving. In many ways we are thriving, and in many ways we are blessed, and part of our Lenten discipline is to acknowledge and give thanks for our many blessings. But sometimes, even when we are quite blessed, we don't feel like it.

I wasn't feeling it the other day. And then I heard this song. I wish I heard it before (embarrassingly so, because I have learned that it is a classic and a piece of history). "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free" was written in the early 1960s by Dr. Billy Taylor, a native of Greenville, North Carolina, jazz pianist, professor of music at East Carolina University, and the artistic director for jazz at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. It became an anthem for the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Taylor commented, "I wrote this song, perhaps my best known composition, for my daughter Kim ... it is very spiritual."

When I heard this song, it was a blessing to me and a balm for my soul. Listen to it on Dr. Taylor's 1997 "Music Keeps Us Young" album, or Nina Simone's 1967 album "Silk & Soul." I pray the lyric speaks to you as much as it speaks to me.

*I wish I knew how
It would feel to be free
I wish I could break
All the chains holding me
I wish I could say
All the things that I should say
Say 'em loud say 'em clear
For the whole round world to hear*

*I wish I could share
All the love that's in my heart
Remove all the bars
That keep us apart
I wish you could know
What it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
That every man should be free*

*I wish I could give
All I'm longin' to give
I wish I could live
Like I'm longin' to live
I wish I could do
All the things that I can do
Though I'm way overdue
I'd be starting anew.*

*Well I wish I could be
like a bird in the sky
How sweet it would be
If I found I could fly
I'd soar to the sun
And look down at the sea
And I sing 'cause I know
How it feels to be free*

Amen. Amen.

Saturday, 9 April

Steve Middleton

Abraham

Abraham, Abraham, Abraham

Leave the house of your father

Leave the land of your birth

For I will give you a land of your own

For I have obeyed you lord and you have blessed me

I have many herds and many servants

You have given me great riches

But I do not sleep

No flesh of my flesh, no blood of my blood

My arms ache for my own, sorrow do I feel

My heart is empty, I am not complete

No one for me to comfort, no one for me to teach,

No one to learn the wonders of your name

Leave your tent, Leave your fire and walk with me

You take me deep into the darkness far from my camp

Only in your hand can I trust, I cannot see

Without you, I am lost, without you, I stumble and fall

For I have heard your prayers and Sarah's cries in the night

I have felt the pain in your heart and the anguish of your soul

Look up what do you see

Stars upon stars, Thousands upon thousands, Horizon to Horizon

More than I can count

They light your heavens and they praise your name

For as this is so shall be your flesh, so shall be your blood

For you shall be the father of many nations

For they shall rule your land and they shall proclaim my word

For ever and ever more, from this day forward

They shall be my people, they shall be my joy, and I shall know their pain

From your people shall come a child, this child shall be the Savior for all the world

Abraham, Abraham, Abraham

Monday, 11 April

Margaret Roberson

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came, not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus also to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. The next day a great crowd who had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. John 12: 1-11

Many noted theologians have written volumes on the relatively short passage of Jesus' dinner at the home of Lazarus only six days before the Passover. This was the final week of Jesus time on earth. It should have been a time of peace and unity with His closest and most trusted followers. Yet, from John's description the house was filled with tension.

John begins by revealing the conflicting personalities of Martha and Mary. The hardworking Martha is busily preparing and serving the dinner. Mary, on the other hand, is sitting shamelessly at Jesus' feet. She begins to anoint His feet with expensive perfume and wipe them with her hair. Can you imagine how Martha felt? Surely, she resented Mary's actions, but should she? Are you a "Martha" or a "Mary" or a little of both? Each sister loved and worshipped Jesus in her own way. All of us are different. The lesson is that we should love and worship Jesus with all that we have.

Then Judas begins to admonish Mary for wasting the expensive perfume when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. How ironic that the very one who steals from the common purse and later betrays Jesus, portrays himself as a righteous disciple caring for the poor. No one is suspicious. How real are we in caring for others less fortunate?

Jesus rebukes Judas and defends Mary. He makes a most astonishing statement that seems to contradict his teachings. He states that the poor will always be with them, but He would only be there for a brief time. He knew of His impending death, but the others were unaware. Many feel that Jesus believed through his death and resurrection the whole world, even the world of poverty, would be put right. Mary was preparing Jesus' body for burial, just as we prepare for His death and resurrection throughout Lent. How are you prepared?

Heavenly Father, help us to love and worship you with all that we have. Help us to care, not only for the ones we love, but for all who suffer and hunger for the necessities of life, including spiritual food. Help us to prepare during this time of Lent for the death and resurrection of our Lord. Help us to be ever mindful of His sacrifice for our sins and salvation. Let us do His work in our world of tension and discord. In His name, I pray. Amen

Tuesday, 12 April

Frederick Buechner

Lent

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 supposed 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 most 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 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 make 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 sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.

Wednesday, 13 April

Maridine Wall

“For it is not the bearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” Romans 2:13

A theme running through today’s scriptures is that of judgment—whether it is asking God to judge our enemies, describing Christ’s role as judge, looking to the end times and a final judgment or treating those who merely cite the law and those who obey it.

Since Lent is a time of introspection, I chose to focus on the Romans’ passage. It asks us to look at ourselves and see if the sin we accuse others of possessing is something we possess. In a time when “trashing” others in the media seems so prevalent, are we or “am I” guilty of discriminating against others on the basis of their religion, education, politics, race, ethnicity, and so many other factors? Do I automatically judge others without looking at the whole person? Do I label an entire group as “those people”?

Unfortunately, when honest, I often find myself guilty of judging “those people” whom I label as being judgmental. What about you?

It is much easier to tell others how to behave than to behave properly ourselves. Perhaps instead of constantly judging and being critical of others, we might look for what is good in them and try to work on what is at fault in our own character. God gives Jesus the power to judge. We have enough to worry about when dealing with our own flaws.

Heavenly Father, help me to realize that you love us all equally and that you are the ultimate judge. Help me to be mindful of others and their unique gifts rather than finding fault with the ways they are different. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, 14 April

The Rev. Linda Berry

For I received from the Lord that which also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was delivered up, took bread, and having given thanks he broke.... And said, "Take eat, this of me is the body which for you being broken: This do in remembrance of me." In like manner the cup, after having supped, saying: "This cup the new covenant is in my blood: This do, as often as ye may drink, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye may eat this bread, and this cup may drink, this death of the Lord ye announce, until He may come. I Corinthians 1:23-26

Good Saint Paul of Tarsus is the author of this description of the last meal Jesus would share with his closest followers whom we call Apostles—the “Sent” ones. They would carry the light and the exact words of Christ down all the generations, into Chapel of the Cross and its communicants: Us.

“Take this and eat it... this is me, giving everything I am to you... pass it on, and keep it going... until my return...”

Wars have been fought over the exact intent of Jesus in speaking “This is my body... my blood” Massacres have occurred, done both by and to those who insisted his meaning was literal and new countries founded by those who believed it was symbolic only. . The Church of England, adopting the “Via Media”—the middle way.. does not in these days insist so much on absolutes, allowing believers to experience Jesus in the Eucharist as a person, and as God, each inseparable from the other. He changes the substance, first in the food and drink, and then in me. If we sense little of this process, it is still occurring. And I must confess.. I am among the former persuasion: It’s really Him.

Celebrated as the central sacrament of our worship together, this highlight of prayer and praise in the ancient church was a joyful occasion, as Jesus meant it to be. He had come into the human condition, passed through it, was about to leave, and wished us all to know... the suffering is temporal.. I’ll be back again.

A few simple words, and the universe changed forever. Jesus’s words were alive with power to convey his life into any form of matter he chose, and he chose the everyday elements of unleavened bread with red wine and made them sing to life.

This is our gift and mystery. In the quiet, peaceful reception of the eucharist in worship, we receive the divine body and blood of a very human man, a gentle and loving Christ who is life himself. He is God in matter, come to heal us.

Good Friday, 15 April

Steve Middleton

The Rain

*Accused, Convicted,
Nailed to that Cross
Who can help me, who can you heal
Rage, Revenge is what I feel
And the Blood flowed
The clouds gathered
The sound of thunder
And the Rain Came down*

*In sorrow as we walk
Miles behind us, Miles to go
You join us and we talk
Stay with us for the day is gone
Stay with us for the evening is long
It was you and we did not know
You gave thanks, you broke bread
And the Blood flowed
The clouds Gather
The sound of thunder
And the Rain came down*

*Playing on the floor
Ages two and four
I cover my head for
My hair is gone
My skin is pale
My body frail
To raise these at my feet, lord don't let me fail
And the Blood Flowed
The clouds gather
The sound of Thunder
And the rain came down*

*The work is hard
The sun is hot
The ground is dry
The Debt is high
Lord save this crop
Lord save this farm
The weight of the world is in my arms
And the Blood flowed
The clouds gather
The sound of thunder
And the rain came down*

*My Brothers and my Sisters
Have you ever walked out on faith
Looked up
And felt the Rain
Amen.*

Saturday, 16 April: Holy Saturday

The Rev. Ben Robertson

This is the night, when you brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land.

This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life.

The Exsultet from the Great Vigil of Easter (Book of Common Prayer, p. 286)

Reflecting on the prayer above it a bit of a cheat. It is not one of the readings for today, Holy Saturday. I apologize to you, Becky, and Betty Ruth. But, I can't help myself, for tonight is one of my favorite nights of the year. Tonight we will gather to celebrate the Great Vigil of Easter and these words begins the liturgy.

On Holy Saturday, as Jesus rests in the tomb, we should contemplate the silence of the day and the horrible thought of a world without Christ. That is truly terrible, and worthy of examination as we prepare for the Feast of the Resurrection. You could do that, but I am blithely jumping ahead to the Vigil.

A few years ago, I worshiped (not the Vigil, just an average Sunday) at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta – a beautiful space with beautiful music. But what I remember from that service was probably something no one else worshipping there that day found remarkable: how the Dean introduced the Nicene Creed (very church geek, I know, but stay with me).

On a Sunday, we say the Nicene Creed (page 326 or 358 in your Book of Common Prayer) after the sermon, and the Creed is introduced quite simply. I usually say something like, “turning to page 326/358, let us say together the Nicene Creed.” But on that Sunday at St. Philip's, the Dean said, “joining with Christians across time and throughout the world, let us say ...” That is a very dramatic introduction.

And I thought about that intro when I considered the prayer above from the Vigil. Because both remind us that we are not alone on this journey. We walk the journey of Lent, and we celebrate the miracle of Easter, with many sisters and brothers in Christ. We walk with beloved friends at the Chapel of the Cross, Episcopalians across Mississippi, Anglicans in all the Provinces our Communion, and members of the Jesus Movement (as our Presiding Bishop names us) on every corner of the globe. Good disciples have walked this walk before and we are inspired by them. Good disciples (like you – yes you!) walk this walk today and we walk alongside them. And good disciples will walk this walk in future and they will be inspired by us (shocking, I know).

So as we conclude this holy season, and take the final steps into the light and New Life of Easter, take note of who has walked along side you and give thanks. I am thankful for all who wrote reflections, and Becky and Betty Ruth for putting them together. Perhaps one of these reflections touched your heart – many touched mine. And beyond these reflections, perhaps you became aware of a spiritual sibling in another way. Perhaps someone unexpected prayed for you. Perhaps you made a new friend one Sunday. Perhaps you finally realized that you aren't alone.

This is the night, this is the day, and this is the time, when all who believe are restored. “Now that our Lenten observance is ended,” (another prayer we will pray tonight), let us rejoice once again. And let us rejoice and give thanks for all who walk this way with us. Amen.

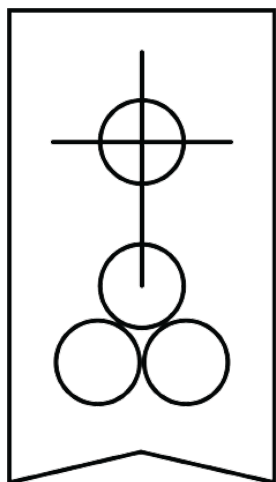
Betty Ruth Fox and Becky Herren, Coordinators and Editors

The Rev. Ben Robertson, Typesetter

Many thanks to everyone who wrote our reflections



may God bless all who encounter these reflections with a most holy Lent



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