



Reflections for  
the Season of Lent  
and Holy Week  
2023

*Written by Parishioners, Clergy, and Friends of  
St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church*

Welcome to St. Martin-in-the-Fields'  
Lenten Reflection readings

This compilation of writings includes voices from the parish, friends of the parish, and clergy throughout the Diocese of Texas and beyond.

The Book of Common Prayer includes this invitation to the observance of a holy Lent:

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting...

Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith. - The Book of Common Prayer p. 264-265

Gathered in this booklet are the lectionary readings for each day of Lent and a reflection. May you experience each reflection as an invitation to enter the Scripture with fresh perspective.



**Deuteronomy 30:15–20**

Moses said to all Israel the words which the Lord commanded him, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

**Luke 9:18–25**

Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God."

He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, saying, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

## REFLECTION - KEEN HAYNES

While reading Deuteronomy 30:15-20, it was not a single line but an underlying theme that jumped out at me. I can choose to worship God and find life, or I can choose not to worship Him and follow another or nothing at all and find death. Seems like a big, yet simple message and choice that is placed before us. For me this passage speaks to a spiritual life and death versus a physical one.

As I pondered Luke 9:18-25 it was Luke 9:25, "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" that jumped out at me. To me, this speaks of losing oneself in exchange for the pursuit of things. To be honest that line always hits me like a 2x4 across my forehead. For me both passages had a simple meaning. I can choose to worship God, follow Christ to the best of my abilities and have a spiritual fit and eternal life. For me the real question is how do these readings apply to my life?

I grew up in the Episcopal Church and in my late teens I walked away from the Church and God. My lifestyle was not in keeping with what I heard in Church on the rare occasions I listened, and I did not have much faith to speak of unless I was in a jam of some type. It was about people, places and things and man, I was going to go far. Over the next several years as my life spiraled out of control, fueled by drugs and alcohol, I went from one jam to another. As the jams became more intense and costly, I made bigger promises to God, but as I steamrolled from one disaster to another, I never seemed to keep my end of the bargain. In the final throws of my alcoholism and addiction I was mentally, morally and spiritually bankrupt. I was dying inside and no amount of drugs or alcohol - no person, place or thing I knew - could stop the pain. I was at a jumping off point where I did not care any more about life or death, only that I wanted the pain to end. At the age of 27, I found myself in the meeting rooms of Alcoholic Anonymous and was told that among other things I needed to find a higher power. In AA, with a simple yet firm belief in a higher power, who I choose to call God, I found a healing and peace that I never thought I would have in my life. In the AA Big Book there is a chapter titled "We Agnostics" and in there is a line that says "God either is or he isn't." For me reading and hearing those words was like a being hit by a light bolt and for 25 years or so that simple belief was enough.

After my father's death, I had a new kind of hole to fill, but this time I turned to the Church of my youth, the same one my father had held so steadfastly to during his life. I found a new nourishment and understanding of God. I found a Christ who I can follow and who with God loves me always, regardless of my shortcomings. I have come to believe it is okay to ask questions and get mad at God - he has big shoulders and can take it. Every day Jesus invites me to pick up my cross, which I take to be my burdens and follow him and share in an everlasting life. God, how my life has changed.

### Acts 1:15-26

Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus-- for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the book of Psalms,

'Let his homestead become desolate,  
and let there be no one to live in it';

and

'Let another take his position of overseer.'

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us-- one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

### John 15:1,6-16

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name."

### REFLECTION - FLO LOWREY

Collect:

Almighty God, who in the place of Judas chose your faithful servant Matthias to be numbered among the Twelve: Grant that your Church, being delivered from false apostles, may always be guided and governed by faithful and true pastors; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

We give thanks for the godly men and women we have now and have known through the years in this place.

The reading that caught my attention for Lent was from the Gospel of John about Jesus saying he is the true vine and his Father is the vine-grower. Our connection to Jesus keeps us connected to the Father. During Lent, we pay closer attention to our connection to the true vine. Some of us take on something. Some of us give up something in order to discipline ourselves. I am better at "taking-on" than I am at "giving-up." I remember what Fr. Ernie Maddon would say, "If you feel you are needing to move closer to God, what are you reading? How is your prayer life?" Consider a time of reflection each day; a time of prayer each day; a time studying the Bible." God will take our desire and actions to be closer to him and fill us with his strength, love, grace and mercy. Is he calling you to follow him more closely? Try answering that call.

**Isaiah 58:9b–14**

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.  
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.  
If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;  
then you shall take delight in the Lord,  
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

**Luke 5:27–32**

After healing the paralyzed man, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

REFLECTION - CATHY TOLLIVER

Isaiah's prophecies are frequently gloom and doom with a heavy dose of retribution. This prophecy is a little different. There are promises of hope and joy, forgiveness and reward. All those old testament Jews had to do was turn back to God and follow the rules about caring for their fellow man and keeping the Sabbath holy. All of this was meant just for them, right? It couldn't possibly relate us today, could it? Could a little harmless (?) gossip or being a bit judgmental have anything to do with oppressing others? Could feeding and clothing others be more than just donating a few dollars or canned goods? Should we actually volunteer at a food pantry or homeless shelter? And maybe an hour of church on Sunday isn't exactly showing dedication and faith in God; not enough to call it keeping the day holy. Maybe we should replace shopping trips and movies on Sunday with some personal prayer time or bible study. Perhaps spend time with family discussing faith and spiritual matters. I think what it boils down to is it may not be the big things that trip us up. It could be the small ways where we fall short. God is ready to keep up his end of the bargain. The rewards are promised and available if we strive to do our part.

Luke's reading starts with Jesus asking Levi to give up his life as a tax collector and follow Him. This isn't the first time Jesus asks someone to drop their life and follow Him, so why is it different for this tax collector than it was for the fishermen? Well, being a tax collector in those days was a pretty good gig. Not only did they collect income, property and miscellaneous taxes for Rome, they also were allowed to tack on a little extra to put in their own pockets. In addition, they could set up “toll” booths on any street and charge people to walk down the street. As if that weren't enough, tax collectors were Jews, not Gentiles. Levi and his friends were hated for not only extorting money, but more so for betraying their own people. So, it's not surprising that the Pharisees would question why Jesus would associate with these betrayers. As usual, however, Jesus calmly gives the ultimate “duh” answer: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” If the Pharisees were less self-absorbed and understood at all why Jesus became man, they would have seen the wisdom of what He was doing. I saw it written somewhere in other simple terms: “if you want to catch fish, go where the fish are.”

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

REFLECTION - LIZA GOODNER

A few years ago I read from a "Forward Day by Day" meditation that temptation comes not only in the form of things, but can also be thoughts. As the Children's Minister, at the end of each Godly Play story, we ask follow-up questions to our children, including, "Where do I see myself in this story?"

I feel forever grateful to my mother for providing a religious foundation. When family challenges occurred, I felt comforted knowing that I wasn't going through things alone. In motherhood, setting a good example comes with anxieties. It's tempting to worry incessantly. Am I raising my kids to be resilient, and accepting of all people? The choices my children will be faced with without my presence is inevitable. I want my children to know they can always lean on God and their church family, and know they will always have a church home at St. Martin's. Adam and Eve's decision comes with consequences, and we are reminded to arrive at the best choice with discernment and prayer. God still gives Adam and Eve a gift: to know the difference in making the right choice.

My own wondering questions intensify: I wonder what it would be like to love myself the same way God loves me? I wonder what tempts me into living less than who I really am? God knows each and every one of us as he created us, and loves and knows us better than we know ourselves. I prayed for a church community that would provide the kind of religious foundation that would support my whole family. In return, that community has exceeded expectations, and is a place that embraces all people. As a mother, I find relief knowing the church community makes decisions that aren't afraid to defy biases, racism, bullying, and violence.

Jesus' resilience in the desert is the epitome of Matthew 4:1-11. 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' Jesus spent an agonizing 40 days in the desert but came through triumphant!

I love hearing Godly Play lessons as an adult because the same themes are as applicable and relatable as they are to children. Put God first and love God. Be kind like Jesus. I am so grateful that I don't have to do life alone and give thanks this Lent to my family, friends and church community. Lessons taught and good reminders: Be resilient like Jesus. Love God. Love yourself the same as God and Jesus love you.

**Leviticus 19:1–2,11–18**

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

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

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

**Matthew 25:31–46**

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

REFLECTION - JACQUELYN CAMPBELL

Throughout both of the readings, God’s message is pretty straightforward on His expectations of how He wants us to treat each other. For me, there are several overlapping messages: Love your neighbor as yourself, choose kindness, have compassion, show mercy.

In the Old Testament reading, God keeps it simple and gives black and white instructions. He tells Moses a dozen seemingly obvious laws of what the Israelites should not do and concludes with the one simple thing they should do: Love your neighbor as yourself. It doesn’t seem like the Israelites often got the message on the first go-round, so it feels like God knew He had to take it a step further and simplify it for them. If you just love your neighbor as yourself, you’ll find yourselves following the other laws as well. What really strikes me is, here we are 2000 plus years later, and isn’t this message still so applicable? Couldn’t the world benefit by all of us being a little more loving and kind to one another?

So, then what happens when you love your neighbor as yourself? In Matthew, Jesus speaks of the consequences of our treatment of others and how it will impact our eternal resting place. We will be separated to the right as believers (sheep) and to the left as unbelievers (goats) at the final judgment. He explains that if we take care of our neighbors when they are in need (loving them as ourselves), we will go on to eternal life. When we act in this way, we are outwardly showing our beliefs about Jesus’ words to us through our actions. If we don’t show kindness and mercy, the consequence is eternal fire and eternal punishment. While Jesus paints a rather vivid picture, He is trying to shepherd us to eternal life and tells us exactly how to get there. It is up to us whether we choose to go to the right or to the left.

To tie it all together, isn't it a beautiful thing that being kind or loving or compassionate or merciful doesn't cost us anything? You don't have to be wealthy, smart, or popular to do these things. You don't even have to like someone to be kind to them. We have the power to make the choice. In making the choice to be loving, kind, compassionate, or merciful, we can glorify God.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Choose kindness. Have compassion. Show mercy. Have eternal life.

#### THE LESSONS FOR FEBRUARY 28

##### **Isaiah 55:6–11**

Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;

let the wicked forsake their way,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,

making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

##### **Matthew 6:7–15**

Jesus said, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

#### REFLECTION - BECKY SNELL

Today's readings give me hope. I hear the call to seek the Lord God, and the welcome to call upon Them. The Lord God the Trinity, who has ideas & thoughts & mercy & judgment & delivery & pardon that are greater than any of my doubts and fears. I feel the call to trust Them. The analogy of the rain and snow that comes from heaven and does not return to God "empty" gives me hope in the works and actions currently in play. What comes from our God accomplishes God's purpose and is increased. The Word comes and does not return empty.

In Matthew I hear Jesus teaching about praying. He tells me to slow down, and think about the words of the 'Lord's Prayer,' don't just recite the words, go deeper. What resonates with me today is the phrase; forgive us as we forgive others. That is both simple and difficult. I know if I get angry at the inattentive driver that is not behaving up to my expectations, the anger just affects me. My frustration does not change their path. Yet, I know by having grace and giving them space (making me a little safer) and maybe lifting them up a bit to God in prayer, I can change in myself how I think and feel.

I will continue in the prayers and in the apostles' teachings, and looking for God's kingdom to come close. Amen.



### **Jonah 3:1–10**

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

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

### **Luke 11:29–32**

When the crowds were increasing, Jesus began to say, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!"

#### **REFLECTION - MARY BETH BUTLER**

The Lord seems just a bit frustrated with the crowd, who are NOT getting what he's trying to say. In using the Jonah example, Jesus is telling a story they all know as well as we know it, and he goes on to say that the people of Nineveh are going to rise up in judgment of them. What does that mean? Well, the important thing about Nineveh is: They. Listened. To. Jonah. (These folks are NOT.)

When Nineveh heard Jonah's prophecy, they immediately put on sackcloth and ashes and repented. It was a very unusual and surprising response. Remember that Jonah was dumbfounded by it, and went on to do some big sulking? The people of Nineveh listened to their prophet and changed their ways.

The Queen of Sheba traveled far to visit Solomon, and Jesus tells his crowd, "indeed, something greater than Solomon is here...something greater than Jonah is here." But the members of this crowd are not understanding the importance of who Jesus is, the revolutionary difference.

Are we, as those in Jesus' crowd, failing to see the amazing revelation that faces us? Are we unaware of the miracle happening before our eyes?

God, please make us willing to listen, and willing to change.

**Esther (Apocrypha) 14:1–6,12–14**

Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord. She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair. She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said: “O my Lord, you only are our king; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, for my danger is in my hand. Ever since I was born I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations, and our ancestors from among all their forebears, for an everlasting inheritance, and that you did for them all that you promised. And now we have sinned before you, and you have handed us over to our enemies.

“Remember, O Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction, and give me courage, O King of the gods and Master of all dominion! Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion, and turn his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may be an end of him and those who agree with him. But save us by your hand, and help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, O Lord.”

**Matthew 7:7–12**

Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

REFLECTION - EDWARD MCGLASTON

**Esther:**

By embarking on this Lenten assignment, I learned something else that I didn't know about the Bible; namely that some passages can be and have been removed. The term *Apocrypha* refers to a body of esoteric writings that were at first prized, later tolerated, and finally excluded. It turned out that the Apocrypha was excluded from my Bible. I was referred to a link that provided only the chapter and verses assigned to me. In the chapter and verses which I was assigned, Queen Esther is seized with deadly anxiety and discards all symbols of wealth, and being well cared for, and surrenders herself to the Lord. She asks the Lord for courage because she is now alone and has no other helper but the Lord. From the assigned readings, it is unclear to me why the Apocrypha was removed from the Bible. What is clear is that it is necessary to obtain all that was written in Esther 14 in order to fully understand the reasons for Queen Esther's anxiety and distress. During the Lenten season, I will take on the challenge of obtaining the deleted chapters of the Book of Esther as one of my Lenten season activities. For me, the season of Lent does not only involve giving up something, but also can involve undertaking an activity that one normally doesn't engage in.

**Matthew:**

This segment of Matthew's Gospel is very familiar to me. During my childhood, my parents often said to me that “God helps those who help themselves.” I believe that my parents' advice was a paraphrasing of Matthew 7: 7-12. My interpretation of this particular reading is that God is calling for us to be proactive with regard to our own well-being. It isn't that God can't or won't help, but there is also a calling that we, individually, need to take action to achieve our goals and solve our problems. This passage perhaps speaks to issues like why ending gun violence in our nation requires more than just thoughts and prayers for the victims. “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” This is wonderful advice for our modern society.

### **Ezekiel 18:21–28**

If the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die.

Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.

### **Matthew 5:20–26**

Jesus said, “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

#### **REFLECTION - LESLIE SCHULZ**

As I read these verses, I think how grateful I am that God will forgive us if we ask. We cannot go through life without making mistakes, but when we do, we can ask for forgiveness.

I remember at a younger age, when I realized that I had done something wrong, I would feel so guilty. I would be harsh with myself and not forgive myself.

But I realized, over time, that it was easier for me to learn from my mistakes if I accepted God’s forgiveness. Without that forgiveness, I was more likely to avoid thinking about what I had done or even admitting that it was wrong, because it was too painful.

The verse in Ezekiel sounds as if it is guiding us in the right direction. We need to continue to improve. And we need to ask forgiveness of others, of our “brother,” as Jesus tells us in Matthew. Psalm explains that if we were just marked for our iniquities, we could not stand. But with the Lord, there is love and redemption.

I try to pray every day, “God, am I doing what you want me to be doing?” I may not always listen as carefully as I should, but I do try.

God, please help me to forgive others. Help me to ask their forgiveness. And especially, help me to forgive myself. Amen.

### **Deuteronomy 26:16–19**

This very day the Lord your God is commanding you to observe these statutes and ordinances; so observe them diligently with all your heart and with all your soul. Today you have obtained the Lord's agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him. Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honor; and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.

### **Matthew 5:43–48**

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

### **REFLECTION - PAUL POWERS**

The reading from Deuteronomy summarizes God's relationship with the children of Israel: they have agreed (or covenanted) that they will follow God's ordinances, and God will be their God. In the Psalm appointed for today (Ps. 119: 1-8), the Psalmist says "Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts!" For the psalmist, the law isn't a burden, it's a gift.

Nor does Jesus disagree. While he often debates with the Pharisees about the application of the law to specific situations (e.g. healing on the sabbath), he never urges wholesale abandonment of the law. In fact, in this passage when he calls upon us to love our neighbor, he is quoting directly from Leviticus: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:18). By the way, the Hebrew scriptures don't say anywhere that we should hate our enemies. Some commentators have noted that Jesus says "You have heard that it was said...", not "it is written" or "you have read." So, in this case, he isn't quoting from scripture itself. He's quoting a common (at the time) misunderstanding of the scriptures. Of course, these kinds of misunderstandings of scripture are far from unknown among Christians too.

But far from rescinding the law, Jesus extends it by calling us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. How difficult it is to follow this teaching! It seems counterintuitive. Why should we love someone who is making us suffer? It's also dangerous when we interpret it to mean that we are required to allow our persecutors to continue to do us harm. But I don't think this is what Jesus has in mind. Instead, he calls for them to pray for our enemy's repentance and healing so that they are no longer harming themselves or us, while realizing that in many cases, it's in their interest and ours for us to pray for their hearing, but not to participate actively in the process.

None of this is easy, especially when we aren't able to distance ourselves from those who wish to harm us. Jesus deliberately sets us to an almost impossible standard, but he doesn't expect us to live up to it on our own. Instead he calls on us to seek his help in living up to them and to repent for our failures to do so. This requires us to make a realistic - and often painful - self-examination. Lent is a particularly good time to start the process.



**Genesis 12:1-4a**

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.

**John 3:1-17**

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

REFLECTION - SUSAN CREE

Today's readings are about faithfulness to God. In Genesis God praises Abraham and tells him to go and be blessed. In Romans, Abraham is righteous before God due to his faithfulness. God made Abraham the Father of all. In John the writer tells us we are children of God, in loving God. Those who are faithful have no sins. Jesus's death is the supreme example of love. Psalm 121 explains God watching over those of faith.

Kindness, helpfulness, and patience are signs of faith. What is the response of people when you are kind and nice? Often times they will respond in a similar manner. Faith fills me with strength and courage when times get tough. Everyone experiences struggles and needs to remember they are not alone. God is always by our side and loves us unconditionally. Keep the faith!

**Daniel 9:3–10**

I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying,

“Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

“Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. Open shame, O Lord, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.”

**Luke 6:27–38**

Jesus said, “I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

REFLECTION - SHERRY MARVEL

**Daniel:** Overwhelming guilt and regret can consume us, resulting in anxiety and ultimately panic attacks. This has been my experience, even more regularly since having covid and the flu at the same time over a year ago. My mind tends to go to all the mistakes I have made in my 53 years of life and there are a lot of them! Prayer and fasting to break generational curses for my children is something I have done, and praying for them constantly is another, even though they aren't sure they believe. To be fair I also struggle with belief. (I am open to any recommendations for help and forgiveness available!) Hearing that people were making some of these same mistakes and feeling shame over them for thousands of years now is sad and also comforting.

Requesting forgiveness and release from God's judgments were and are so common that the Bible and God in his infinite wisdom were compassionate enough to give us a detailed plan for a clean slate. Interestingly, many times it was a believer who would pray for God to have empathy and forgiveness for nonbelievers. Here is a quote by my friend Peter, who has a different viewpoint on this that I find quite interesting. Peter P. says, “I don't believe individuals are entitled to ask for forgiveness. The decision to forgive rests solely with the aggrieved party. It is the obligation of the offender to offer apologies for their transgression, then after they repent, offer restitution and show remorse, it's up to the aggrieved person to choose whether or not to forgive.”

I think these contrasting thoughts make for a great meditation exercise.

**Luke:** Upon reading these passages, a Buddhist sutra came to mind. Buddha said, “Forgive others not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace.”

The Quran states, “And whoever is patient and forgives—indeed, that is of the matters worthy of resolve.” Quran 42:43

Hinduism recommends saying, “O Lord! I repent for my mistake. I ask for your forgiveness and resolve never to repeat it.”

Ben Pobjie, an atheist says this about forgiveness, “I don't believe forgiveness is about making excuses, rather

it is about looking at a person who has done wrong, even reprehensible acts, and saying, this wrong is not the totality of their being. It is about recognizing that in every human, no matter how low they sink, humanity remains.”

The concept that we forgive and we are forgiven seems simple enough, so why is it sometimes so difficult? Forgiveness is one of our chances to emulate the character of God, what an incredible gift.

#### THE LESSONS FOR MARCH 7

##### **Isaiah 1:2-4, 16-20**

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;  
for the Lord has spoken:  
I reared children and brought them up,  
but they have rebelled against me.  
The ox knows its owner,  
and the donkey its master's crib;  
but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand.  
Ah, sinful nation,  
people laden with iniquity,  
offspring who do evil,  
children who deal corruptly,  
who have forsaken the Lord,  
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,  
who are utterly estranged!  
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.  
Come now, let us argue it out,  
says the Lord:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be like snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool.  
If you are willing and obedient,  
you shall eat the good of the land;  
but if you refuse and rebel,  
you shall be devoured by the sword;  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

##### **Matthew 23:1-12**

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

## Judgement & Hope

Our Old Testament reading from the beginning of Isaiah and our Gospel passage from Matthew communicate the same theme. Both are an attack on hypocrisy and a call for humility – humility before God and before our brothers and sisters.

In Isaiah, we read that God’s desire is not to condemn but to call his people to genuine repentance. “Wash yourselves clean!” How are they to repent? By offering more sacrifices? By making confession? No, “learn to do good; seek justice.” They are to redress the wrongs done to others, to “rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.” In ancient times, these were the vulnerable and most neglected of people. There could be no real repentance unless care was taken of the weakest and most needy in society. For us, this message still holds true.

In Isaiah we also find hope. “Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow.” For those who truly repent – who are willing and obedient to God – shall eat the good of the land.

The message in Matthew is similar. It teaches us to serve others with humility and sincerity, not with pride and self-promotion. We read that Jesus urges the crowd to do what the Pharisees teach, despite the fact that they do not practice what they preach. He is trying to draw them away from trivialities to something deeper—a dynamic relationship with the living God. Jesus reminds that we have only one father and one Instructor – our Father in heaven and the Messiah. When we turn ourselves over then our burdens are lightened, and we have true life.

*Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly thine, utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. (BCP pp. 832-833)*

## THE LESSONS FOR MARCH 8

### Jeremiah 18:1–11,18–20

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. Then they said, “Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us bring charges against him, and let us not heed any of his words.”

Give heed to me, O Lord,  
and listen to what my adversaries say!

Is evil a recompense for good?  
Yet they have dug a pit for my life.

Remember how I stood before you  
to speak good for them,  
to turn away your wrath from them.



## **Matthew 20:17–28**

While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.”

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

### **REFLECTION - TERESA & DAVID STADLER**

One of the topics that seemed present in both the reading from Jeremiah and the reading from the Gospel of Matthew, is the apparent dynamic interplay in each moment between the intentions and actions of human choices and the desires and influence of Divinity. This seems to give and support the impression that the future is not already fixed, but is open and unfolding in response to a continuous and sometimes changing stream of ongoing choices and influences of both human and divine origin.

At each current moment, Divinity is actively present, fully aware of the many interior and exterior complex aspects of each situation, and bringing forth into each moment a depth of insight, wisdom and desire for the greatest good for all involved. Internally whispering and encouraging in the still small voice within each of us, if we open our hearts to hear this ever present Divine influence within. We each also bring our own unique set of experiences, perspective, intentions and desires into each moment that also influences our choices, and this combination of human and Divine dynamic influences, which include free will, can potentially bring forth something new into a situation as a ‘creative advance into novelty’ that can change the course of the future in each moment.

The sons of Zebedee and their mother, may have had a perspective on positions of power based upon their history of experiences with other examples of positions of power, where “rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them,” which may have influenced their intentions, desires and choices in the moment. The heart and desires of Jesus sees these positions of honor quite differently, and instead views these positions of greater service to all.

The actively dynamic and changing interplay between Divine and human intentions and choices seems to be present in the reading from Jeremiah, where both human as well as Divine intentions and choices may swing back and forth, and with each, create changing ripples into the unfolding future events.

The future may unfold dynamically and actively, influenced by all of these various and complex factors of both human and Divine, including even the misunderstanding of the impact of our choices that may be quite different than what was expected. I think this is most often the case. A remarkable example of this is reflected in the life of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the current president of Ukraine. President Zelenskyy has shown tremendous courage, leadership, and skill. It seems that he was the exact right person to lead that country at this time of crisis, the human and the Divine working together for the world to see.

In each moment, Divinity remains ever faithful to the desire to influence and bring forth greater good out of each unique situation. Sometimes we may find we do not get what we intended, yet we may receive a gift and blessing so much greater than we could have intended, desired or chosen, even though the path might have been more difficult and challenging than we would have chosen.

Abundant Blessings Always.

**Jeremiah 17:5–10**

Thus says the Lord:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.

They shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.

They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;

in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

The heart is devious above all else;  
it is perverse--  
who can understand it?

I the Lord test the mind  
and search the heart,

to give to all according to their ways,  
according to the fruit of their doings.

**Luke 16:19–31**

Jesus said, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out,

'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

REFLECTION - APRIL ALVARADO-CLARK

Upon reading these passages, I was hit with the wave of works-based, prosperity-promised, guilt-ridden propaganda I was misguidedly taught in high school and college. Sure, these passages could be interpreted in this way, that if we do the right thing, pray hard enough, and rely only on God instead of others - then we will be infinitely blessed, healthy, wealthy, and wise. For lack of a better word, the favored Gen Z phrase "cringe" comes to mind, reminding me of a time in my life when I thought Proverbs 31 was not only attainable (no), but that I had to fulfill it to the T (also, no).

Alternatively, I believe the passage in Luke is addressing our present lives, how we are spending our time and money and resources in the everyday humdrum. Instead of focusing on the heaven and hell of it all, let us focus on what we are doing with our one wild and precious life. Are we ignoring those that are experiencing pain and suffering? Are we thinking of others as less deserving of God's love because of their life circumstances? Or are we sitting down on the ground with them, listening to those for whom life is not easy, offering what we can and acknowledging them as fellow children of God?

Let us make our Mundane Wednesdays count, bringing life, peace, joy, and love to those in the valley of life, where we have all once been in some shape or form. Sustain us, Lord, and help us to see others as your loved and valued children. Amen.

**Genesis 37:3–4,12–28**

Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" -- that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

**Matthew 21:33–43**

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:

'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?

"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."

REFLECTION - THE REV. MELANIE BARBARITO

Have you ever been ganged-up-on the way Joseph was by his brothers? Been part of such a gang, maybe in school? Have you ever been a bystander, choosing not to or afraid to intervene? Last month you probably saw or heard on the news about a group of men who should have, like the sons of Jacob to their youngest brother, protected the vulnerable. Instead, they beat him, ultimately to death. Others, standing by, did nothing. In today's reading from Genesis, the unsung hero is Reuben, Jacob's first-born. His was the only voice speaking in defense of Joseph.

I wonder what that young man was feeling when his own brothers, nine grown men, grabbed him, stripped him, roughed him up and then threw him into a pit. I wonder how he felt as he lay there listening to them laughing at their meal. Perhaps he thought it was all a joke; perhaps he was planning how he'd get out. Perhaps

he was wondering what he had done to deserve their animosity. It seems clear that those sons of Jacob were not going to let that youngest, most beloved son walk away from there.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be peacemakers—to step into the breach to protect the vulnerable. It doesn't always require great acts of courage; sometimes seemingly very small acts will do. Decades ago, when my own children were young, I heard a neighbor boy yelling at someone across the street - a well-traveled road. I realized that he was yelling a racial slur, the worst one, at a black boy around his own age. Although I knew that the neighbor kid would not run across that road to physically harm him, I could see the fear in that black boy's face. Here was a stranger around his own age being hateful toward him for no good reason and a white woman standing by, not condemning and, therefore, in some ways, condoning. I will forever regret that I did not admonish that white neighbor boy either where the other child could see him or at least taken him aside to say that his behavior was not acceptable. It's the least I could have done and might have prevented worse behavior in the future.

Reuben's intervening in his siblings' plan to kill Joseph not only saved his brothers from committing fratricide, but also genocide. For had the young man been killed, he would not have been sold into slavery in Egypt, would not have come to the attention of Pharaoh, would not have prevented mass starvation, and ultimately would not have saved the entire family of Jacob, Israel. Reuben's was a small act of mercy, the least he could do. Sometimes all it takes from us is a small act of mercy; but God can work with even small acts to effect miracles.

#### THE LESSONS FOR MARCH 11

##### **Micah 7:14–15,18–20**

Shepherd your people with your staff,  
the flock that belongs to you,  
which lives alone in a forest  
in the midst of a garden land;  
let them feed in Bashan and Gilead  
as in the days of old.

As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt,  
show us marvellous things.

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over the transgression  
of the remnant of your possession?

He does not retain his anger for ever,  
because he delights in showing clemency.  
He will again have compassion upon us;  
he will tread our iniquities under foot.

You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea.

You will show faithfulness to Jacob  
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,  
as you have sworn to our ancestors  
from the days of old.

##### **Luke 15:11–32**

Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the



father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

#### REFLECTION - THE REV. ROBBY VICKERY

Our gospel reading for today is traditionally known as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but this is a misnomer. Jesus opens the parable with, “There was a man who had two sons,” so a better name would be the “Parable of the Two Lost Sons.” The younger son was lost to “dissolute living.” However, he came to himself, returned to his father, and repented. As his father put it, “He was lost and has been found.”

To what was the elder son lost? Hint: To whom was Jesus telling this parable? “The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (15:2) The elder son was lost to his own self-righteousness. But just like the father never gave up on the younger son, he did not give up on the elder either. The father came out from the celebration for the return of the younger brother and pleaded with the elder brother to come into the joy of the party. O, how often Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a party. Until the elder brother can rejoice that his younger brother was dead and has come to life, he himself will be outside the dancing and feasting and joy of the party. He will remain lost and dead. Will he eventually be “found” by his father’s pleading and steadfast love? The parable ends without us knowing. Will the Pharisees and scribes eventually be “found” and able to celebrate that sinners are welcomed, eaten with, and found by Jesus? Let us pray so. Will our own self-righteousness be surrendered to our Heavenly Father? Let us pray so.

If we want to call this the “Parable of the Prodigal \_\_\_\_\_,” then let us call it the “Parable of the Prodigal Father.” For there are two meanings to the adjective “prodigal.” The first meaning is spending wastefully, extravagantly, recklessly and is certainly an apt description of the younger son. The second meaning of prodigal is giving on a lavish scale, generously, bountifully. This is an apt description of the father. With the younger son he was lavish with his forgiveness, kisses, robe, ring, sandals and calf. With the elder son he was lavish with his forgiveness, “all that is mine,” and his pleading for the elder son to let go of his self-righteousness and enter into the joy of the party.

Is anything keeping you and me from the party? Our prodigal Heavenly Father is pleading with us. He “will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

### **Exodus 17:1-7**

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

### **John 4:5-42**

Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

When I was a young boy, my grandmother had a friend named Dorothy. Even though she was not really my aunt, she was like family to us, so I called her “Auntie Dorothy.”

Everything about Auntie Dorothy was big and bold and loud. Back in the 1960s, Auntie Dorothy had a big bouffant Texas hairdo. Auntie Dorothy drove fast in her Cadillac Coupe de Ville. Auntie Dorothy laughed so loud that other folks would stop and stare. And whenever you were with Auntie Dorothy, she would just gush all over you.

Auntie Dorothy would gush over when I got good grades in school; she would gush over how tall I was getting; she would gush over how proud she was of me. As a boy, Auntie Dorothy was like a big spring of grace and love, gushing up to eternal life.

In the Bible, in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, the writer of John tells us, in great detail, about one of the biggest and longest encounters that Jesus ever had. In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, the woman has several strikes against her: a foreigner, a string of marriages, an unorthodox religion, and...she is a woman. Yet the Samaritan woman is big and bold in engaging Jesus in a long conversation.

In their bold conversation, the Samaritan woman is at the well to draw out actual water. Yet Jesus explains to her that the water that he gives will always quench our thirst. Then, in a big and bold and loud voice, Jesus proclaims: “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

For the living water that Jesus gives does not come in a trickle. The living water does not just pour out. The living water does not come out of a well or a bucket. Rather, the living water gushes up. For the love of Jesus for you is so big, and so bold, that it becomes in you a spring of water, gushing up to eternal life.

As a young boy, Auntie Dorothy was a big and bold and loud presence in my life. Even though she was not really my aunt, she gushed over me and loved me, as if I was her very own nephew.

During this season of Lent, give thanks that Jesus has a long encounter with us at the well, even with several strikes against us. In our baptism, a torrent of forgiving water has gushed over us. For Jesus gives us grace upon grace upon grace upon grace. Jesus gives us love, love that will never end.

Jesus gushes over you, with forgiveness and grace and love, gushing up to eternal life.

## 2 Kings 5:1–15b

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

## Luke 4:23–30

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

### REFLECTION - SARAH KENNY

Being a couple millennia removed from Jesus' time, and being filled with love for our Savior, we may wonder why in Luke 4:30 the people of Nazareth wanted to kill Jesus. Yet, I suspect we can relate more to the Nazarenes than we first realize. Jesus just told them He wasn't going to heal their lepers or save the lives of their widows, even if drought and famine fell upon them. In fact, Jesus said he had and would perform those miracles elsewhere. In modern times, think of it like this: despite your fervent prayers, your beloved spouse passes away from cancer; meanwhile, other people at the hospital celebrate and take their loved ones home. Or, you're already struggling to pay bills, inflation rises, but your wage doesn't, and someone else gets promoted at work. During those times, although we do not want our Lord to die, we feel anguish and wonder, as the Psalmist did, "'Where now is your God?'" (Psalm 42:3). Or we might turn away from God, thinking if our Creator will not help us, then we will trudge through this life alone. There are trying times when we are tempted to reject Jesus just as His hometown did.

While faith is not the absence of doubt, but rather trusting despite doubts, it is difficult to know what trust even looks like when our hearts are cut so deeply. To get an idea of what trusting God during trials can mean, consider 2 Kings 5:9-14. Naaman shows faith by going to Israel. He shows appreciation by bringing gifts for the one who will heal him. He's done the work, he's done his part. We can imagine he might feel a little thrown off, first being directed to the king, and now having to go to Elisha. This plan already veered off course, but



the result will be the same, so he shakes off any unsettled feelings and goes to Elisha. Then Elisha does not face Namaan, but just sends a servant. Namaan is the army commander for the king; he deserves a little more respect than that. He's insulted that the method for his healing is to wash 7 times in a dirty river. Simple enough, but not as simple or magical as Namaan had hoped. In a sense, Namaan was saying, "I've already done a lot just to get here. Now it's time for someone to do something for me. I'm the one in need. When am I going to get helped?" Namaan's servants talk some sense into him and he does as he's told, and is healed. Yet, this is not an example of how God helps those who help themselves. Lepers can bathe in the filthiest or most filtered water and still have leprosy. It is not Namaan's actions which heal him; it's his faith in God and God's miracle which heals him. This story reveals that God's help for us is often unexpected, confusing, and potentially humbling, but His help is always possible. God showers blessings on the whole world, even on those who do not believe. Believing is the comfort you get in knowing that God is with you and not against you during your struggles.

#### THE LESSONS FOR MARCH 14

##### **Song of the Three Young Men 2–4,11–20a**

Azariah stood still in the fire and prayed aloud:

"Blessed are you, O Lord, God of our ancestors, and worthy of praise;  
and glorious is your name for ever!

For you are just in all you have done;  
all your works are true and your ways right,  
and all your judgements are true.

For your name's sake do not give us up for ever,  
and do not annul your covenant.

Do not withdraw your mercy from us,

for the sake of Abraham your beloved  
and for the sake of your servant Isaac  
and Israel your holy one,

to whom you promised  
to multiply their descendants like the stars of heaven  
and like the sand on the shore of the sea.

For we, O Lord, have become fewer than any other nation,  
and are brought low this day in all the world because of our sins.

In our day we have no ruler, or prophet, or leader,  
no burnt-offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense,  
no place to make an offering before you and to find mercy.

Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted,  
as though it were with burnt-offerings of rams and bulls,  
or with tens of thousands of fat lambs;  
such may our sacrifice be in your sight today,  
and may we unreservedly follow you,  
for no shame will come to those who trust in you.

And now with all our heart we follow you;  
we fear you and seek your presence.

Do not put us to shame,  
but deal with us in your patience  
and in your abundant mercy.

Deliver us in accordance with your marvelous works."

## Matthew 18:21–35

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

REFLECTION - THE REV. ANNELIES MOESER

### Forgiveness and the Unjust King

At first, this gospel passage seems to be a nice, normal bit of instruction. Peter seeks clarity on how often we should forgive another member of the community. Jesus responds with a number (77 or 490) that the reader is meant to interpret generously.

But then, Jesus tells a parable about forgiveness that is dramatic and shocking. We might have been taught to read this story as a metaphor wherein G\*d is represented as a king. However, this king is capricious and cruel. When a slave fails in gathering the enormous sum of ten thousand talents (about 164,000 years' worth of wages for a day-laborer), the king orders him, his family, and all his possessions to be sold. When the slave pleads for mercy, the king forgives the slave his entire debt. However, as Warren Carter (Matthew and the Margins) points out, this "mercy" is to the king's benefit; the man becomes even more indebted to the king and the king retains the use of this valuable slave-administrator. Unlike G\*d's mercy, where forgiveness enables healing and freedom, the king's "mercy" keeps this man trapped in slavery and exploitation.

When the king becomes aware that this slave imprisons a fellow slave who owed him 100 days' wages, the king becomes angry, "takes back" his forgiveness and has the slave tortured. An initial approach of interpreting this parable as a metaphor results in a horrifying image of a mercurial G\*d engaged in violence.

So how else might we read this gospel passage? We can recognize, contrast, and engage. In this parable, we recognize that Jesus' story about a king illustrates the way an imperial, exploitative world works. It's not the way that his followers should behave. The king's anger demonstrates that behavior in conformity to the world's values will have awful consequences.

We can contrast the so-called "mercy" of the king with what Jesus does and teaches. For example, Jesus' compassion leads to feeding the crowds that follow him (15:32), an emotion that leads to life-giving food. How have we encountered G\*d's forgiveness? How have we extended the same to others? Have we provided life-renewing spiritual and emotional uplift as well as life-renewing mercy and even material sustenance?

Engage in the world around us. Fellow slaves are the ones who report the unjust imprisonment of one of their own (v.31). Although not powerful, nevertheless, they speak and act. I am reminded of a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "'Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.'" How am I using my voice and actions to point out injustice, to stand in the breach with my neighbor in trouble? Have I asked for forgiveness to the injustice done by me or done on my behalf? Have I engaged in relieving injustice and suffering?

**Deuteronomy 4:1–2,5–9**

Moses said: So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.

See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

**Matthew 5:17–19**

Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

REFLECTION - THE REV. CHANTA BHAN

Cave Idus Martiae! "Beware the Ides of March!" March 15 . . . There is a familiar prophecy from Shakespeare's tragic historical play, Julius Caesar, in which Julius Caesar is assassinated in an attempt to prevent him from becoming a tyrant. On two separate occasions, he is warned by a soothsayer. The first warning occurs many years before there is a possibility of threat to his life. The second occurred on March 15, the day that Julius Caesar was assassinated. In his hubris, Julius Caesar dismissed the soothsayer just before his betrayal by trusted senators. The senators believed that their assassination of Julius Caesar served a higher purpose and prevented his autocratic leadership from undermining the Roman Republic.

In our readings for today, "prophecy" factors prominently. Jesus has come not to destroy but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. The people of Israel had received the Law through the Torah and they knew the teachings of the Prophets. They knew right and wrong. In Jesus' day, the teachers of the Law debated with Jesus and challenged him. He was a threat to their authority; and, later, he was a threat to Roman authority. Jesus' execution by crucifixion occurred, in part, because the Roman Empire felt destabilized by Jesus' presence, teaching, and mission.

Ultimately, Jesus taught two commandments: 1) Love God; and 2) Love others. These two commandments simplified all Law that the Jewish community had learned through history, culminating in Jesus' incarnation. Jesus continued the Prophets' call to care for the poor, the lowly, and the suffering; and this is part of what made him so popular with the common people of his day.

The Prophets who preceded Jesus' coming called the people to repentance just as Jesus did; and they spoke of a coming Messiah. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. In the Gospel of John, Jesus prophesied about his own death as he prepared to leave his disciples. This prophecy was not the ominous portent that the prophecy about Julius Caesar's downfall presented; instead, Jesus inspired hope because he was resurrected and the Holy Spirit was present with his disciples on earth.

Both the death of Jesus Christ and the death Julius Caesar achieved higher purposes for the Empire. The assassination of Julius Caesar led to the fall of the Roman Empire, the opposite of what the senators had hoped would happen. Jesus's death led to his resurrection and the development of a burgeoning persecuted Christian community that spread rapidly across the Roman Empire.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection form the basis of our faith and hope throughout this season of Lent. As we think about important warnings and hopeful promises in our lives, how can we accept Jesus' commands to love God and love others as we seek to follow his example in our own life and witness?

**Jeremiah 7:23–28**

This command I gave them, “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.” Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward. From the day that your ancestors came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me, or pay attention, but they stiffened their necks. They did worse than their ancestors did.

So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. You shall say to them: This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

**Luke 11:14–23**

Jesus was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.” Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

REFLECTION - THE REV. KATIE WRIGHT

I’m on your side child. How many times as a parent do we say that to our children in one way or another? Don’t touch - hot! I know the shots hurt, but they are to help you. Please eat your vegetables. I don’t think going out with that group is a good idea. How is your school work going? The things you are doing are going to hurt you - there are dragons on the path you are on. Throughout their years, whether our own children or other children we are in contact with, we try to help them navigate this complicated world that doesn’t always have their best interest at heart. Sometimes they listen - sometimes they don’t.

In our reading from Luke today Jesus is pointing out that he is on our side. The healings he does, the instructions he gives, are for the wellbeing of the world, not to harm it. He is not coming from a place of evil, not ordering demons about because he is in charge of the demons, but from a place of love and hope. And he is here with all the power and strength! He is taking away the armor of the enemy and weakening the foes that we face. And yet they are suspicious of him, as we often don’t recognize others who have our best interests at heart.

And sometimes others don’t listen when we try and help - they are like the people that the prophet Jeremiah is speaking about. God tells Jeremiah that the people will not listen, they won’t respond when he tries to guide them. They have been told to do God’s bidding, to walk in the ways that God has given them so that life goes well for them. But off they go to the paths with dragons on them - following the willfulness of their evil hearts.

Of course, we aren’t perfect. Sometimes our own fears and wounds lead us to not act in the best interest of others or ourselves. We are selfish and weary and others can see that in us, and they may appropriately not trust us to do the right thing for them. To over or underestimate what someone is capable of on their own, to lash out with words or actions that can harm. And when we do that we need to examine our actions, repent and confess to the one we harmed. And we need to remember that God is merciful and will help us as we strive to do better. We have the strong man on our side, we have the ways of God that bring life when we follow them. We do not need to act worse than our ancestors, but can do better.

**Hosea 14:1–9**

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,  
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.  
Take words with you  
and return to the Lord;  
say to him,  
“Take away all guilt;  
accept that which is good,  
and we will offer  
the fruit of our lips.  
Assyria shall not save us;  
we will not ride upon horses;  
we will say no more, ‘Our God,’  
to the work of our hands.  
In you the orphan finds mercy.”

I will heal their disloyalty;  
I will love them freely,  
for my anger has turned from them.  
I will be like the dew to Israel;  
he shall blossom like the lily,  
he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon.  
His shoots shall spread out;  
his beauty shall be like the olive tree,  
and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.  
They shall again live beneath my shadow,  
they shall flourish as a garden;  
they shall blossom like the vine,  
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?  
It is I who answer and look after you.  
I am like an evergreen cypress;  
your faithfulness comes from me.  
Those who are wise understand these things;  
those who are discerning know them.  
For the ways of the Lord are right,  
and the upright walk in them,  
but transgressors stumble in them.

**Mark 12:28–34**

One of the scribes came near and heard Jesus and the Saducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

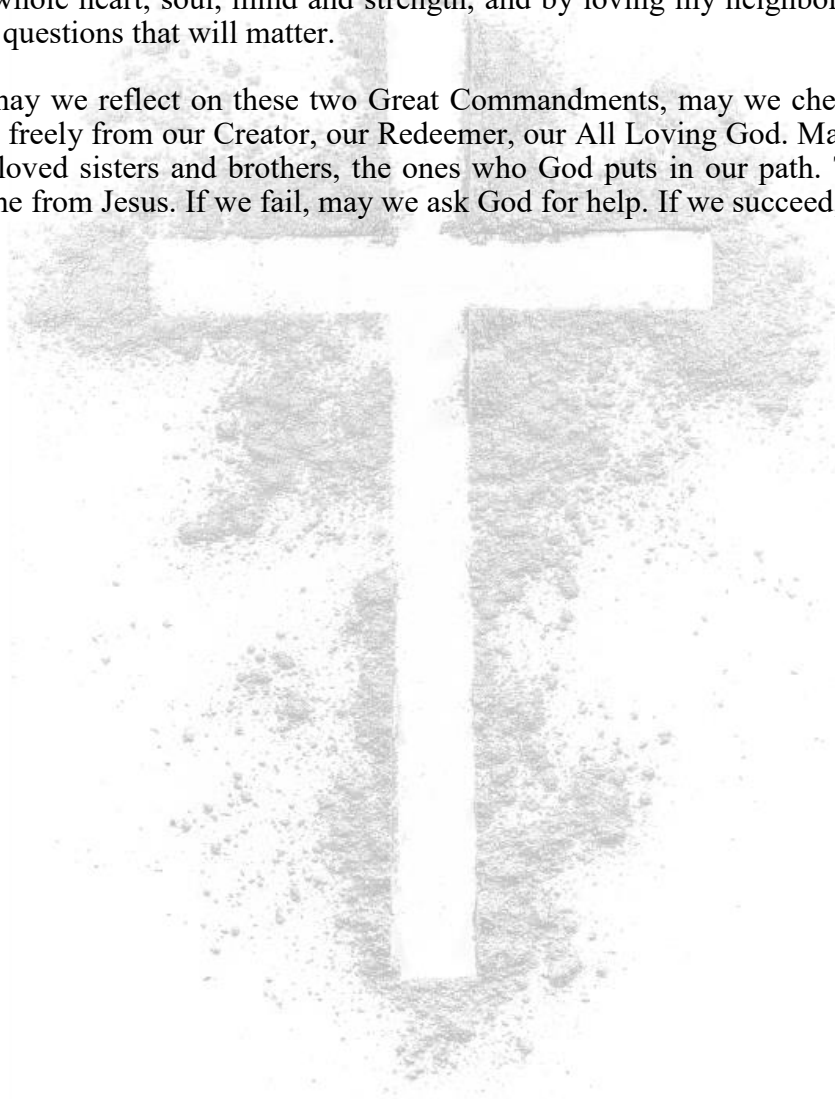


Could there be more important words that came from Jesus, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”?

These are the two commandments on which everything hangs. You can’t have one without the other. They are two sides of the same thing. If we want to know how well or how much we love God, look at how we are or are not loving our neighbor. As the scribe in today’s Gospel says, “This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

As I ponder on these questions, I think what I really have to ask myself is this: first, have I joyfully accepted the unconditional love of God by receiving from Jesus the free gift of eternal life, putting my faith in Him and putting my life in His hands? Second, am I living out my gratitude for the love God has showered on me by loving Him with my whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving my neighbor as myself? In the end, these are the only two questions that will matter.

This Lenten season, may we reflect on these two Great Commandments, may we cherish and adore the love that has been given so freely from our Creator, our Redeemer, our All Loving God. May we cherish and adore our neighbors, our beloved sisters and brothers, the ones who God puts in our path. These are the most important words that came from Jesus. If we fail, may we ask God for help. If we succeed, may we thank God for the gift of love.



**Hosea 6:1–6**

“Come, let us return to the Lord;  
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;  
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.  
After two days he will revive us;  
on the third day he will raise us up,  
that we may live before him.  
Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;  
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;  
he will come to us like the showers,  
like the spring rains that water the earth.”  
What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?  
What shall I do with you, O Judah?  
Your love is like a morning cloud,  
like the dew that goes away early.  
Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets,  
I have killed them by the words of my mouth,  
and my judgement goes forth as the light.  
For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.

**Luke 18:9–14**

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

REFLECTION - THE REV. JIM LIBERATORE

We become what we pray. Better yet, we become how we pray. Examining our attitude in prayer keeps us honest and powerful, transcending life's circumstances. Honest prayer channels God's love through us to a world desperate for the freedom of unconditional love. Self-righteous (deceptive) prayer seeks to demonstrate how well we are doing without God, especially through the comparison to others. It dams up love. Here, everyone must free themselves. The choice before us is one of channel or dam.

Prayer can move us deeper into a relationship with ourselves and with God. These prayers unleash power because God is invited in. God supplies the power. They are a channel.

Yet, other prayer practices lead us away from the power and presence of God. We resist being known by God and knowing God. We accomplish this though littering the landscape with spiritual self-promotion. This clutter is a dam. More "in the way" than on The Way.

The prayer of the Pharisee today is a self-congratulatory prayer. It draws on comparison. "God, see what a great job I am doing! I am not like those people." This prayer relegates God to the status of bystander. This prayer insulates the pray-er from the transforming power of God's love. In Praying a To-Do list for God serves the same purpose. The world suffers as well.

The prayer of the tax collector is one of honesty. It is raw and intimate. "God, I need help and I know you have it in big supply." This prayer invites God in. Love does its work. The pray-er knows that they alone do not have the resources to transform. They know that prayer is their oxygen. They will breathe life into their environment as well.

Hosea speaks of what is necessary. God does not need to collect more flowery speech or pictures of big deeds done to put on God's refrigerator. We don't need to fight for a square inch of God's approval. But we need to love and be loved. This takes selflessness, humility. We are liberated to renew Creation. The fruit of our willingness is life overflowing.

When we are honest with ourselves in the presence of God (repentance,) we become instruments of love by first being loved by Love itself.

Ask yourself each day, "Channel or Dam?"

### 1 Samuel 16:1-13

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

### John 9:1-41

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born

blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

#### REFLECTION THE REV. BILL CARROLL

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

At first glance, the answer Jesus gives us is neither convincing nor comforting. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” he says. “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Does Jesus mean to suggest that God caused someone’s blindness, in order to work a miracle?

But maybe what Jesus is really up to is breaking the connection between suffering and sin.

As it’s commonly presented, the problem of evil is an intellectual one. God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. And yet, horrible evil and unspeakable suffering exist. The usual solutions are to deny God’s existence, to somehow limit God’s power, or to maintain that suffering serves a greater good.

Perhaps suffering calls for another kind of response. Rather than thinking our way through, we might show some Christlike solidarity and compassion. Instead of words, we might offer a strong, tender, and loving presence. If we offered any words, we would offer only gentle words of comfort and blessing.

As Origen of Alexandria pointed out in the third century, this is the fundamental importance of Jesus spitting in the dirt. (Not that I’d recommend that method of healing.) By making some mud with his saliva, Jesus draws our attention to the Incarnation. He rubs our noses in his fleshy presence as God-with-us.

Too often, when we read John’s Gospel, we are overwhelmed by the seemingly otherworldly Jesus that he presents. Too easily, we forget John’s central affirmation: that “the Word became flesh.” This is the ultimate act of solidarity—to share our life, including our suffering and death.

If we want to find where God is when we suffer, we should turn to Jesus as the giver of life. He is the one who invites us into wholeness, no matter how we are hurting, no matter how far we’ve wandered or strayed. Suffering also exists that overcomes us and defeats us. Jesus shares that too—on the Cross. There, he completes God’s work, making all things new.

In John 9, the only place we catch Jesus doing theology is in what he denies. Jesus refuses to see suffering as punishment. He refuses to trap God in a human cycle of tit for tat. For the most part, rather than just speaking about God, Jesus does the work of God. He embodies God’s wisdom and life-giving power in all he says and does and is.

As Rowan Williams once wrote: “This is what the love of God is like: it is free and therefore it is both all-powerful and completely vulnerable.”

Jesus is what we will look like when we are set free from the power of death. He is what we will look like when we finally learn how to love. He is God’s own answer to evil, not as a theoretical problem but as a lived reality. And he is far, far stronger than all the things we think are strong.

## 2 Samuel 7:4,8-16

The word of the Lord came to Nathan:

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

## Luke 2:41-52

Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

### REFLECTION - THE REV. PRESTON YANCY

If you let it be, the story of young Jesus in the Temple is a comical one. Joseph and Mary anxiously search Jerusalem for three days looking for their son and suddenly discover him in the Temple. Mary calls out to him with what I assume to be the commanding tone of any parent experiencing both relief and bewilderment, to which Jesus replies, "'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'" This is not a response that does any child any favors and Luke seems keen to point that out with understatement: "But they did not understand what he said to them." I'm sure they didn't. In a final note of comedy, it is only after this incident that the Gospel adds, "Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them." You do have to wonder, as did many speculative writers in the late first into the second century, what Jesus was like as a child?

We don't know. Outside of this vignette from Luke, no other Gospel gives us information about Jesus as anything other than baby, toddler, or fully grown. Matthew and Luke account for the birth of Jesus and Matthew then adds the visit of the Magi, which would have been about three years later. In every story, however, Jesus is passive. He's a baby. He has no babbles of wisdom. He's a toddler but the narrative isn't interested in focusing on how a three year old reacts to myrrh. Luke's account is the only one we have in our Bibles and frustratingly, we are still left with mystery. What was Jesus talking about with the other people in the Temple?

These are the questions I bring to the table as a historical critic, but Luke is not interested in them. His goal is not to share the insights of what Jesus was ruminating on with his fellow Jewish lovers of the Law, but something else altogether. What, specifically, is something I can't say with certainty but on my list of questions I have in heaven, it's up there. (First is for Peter: What happened to your wife?) I can, however, offer a brief speculation.

I think Luke is more interested in showing the fact of Jesus's humanity than he is the particulars of that humanity. Jesus doesn't go with his parents when he should have. He got sidetracked by something more interesting and let his parents continue on their way. (When your whole city would travel by caravan to Jerusalem and back for the High Holy Days, it's a lot easier to be left behind.) He's a child like any other. He makes decisions that reflect that stage of development. Luke suggests, through his comedy, that we have to let Jesus actually be fully human as well as fully God. Ponder this mystery today: how totally Jesus is with us both as people and as our God.



**Ezekiel 47:1–9,12**

The Lord brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, “Mortal, have you seen this?”

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

**John 5:1–18**

There was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” But he answered them, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’” They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and walk’?” Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

REFLECTION - TINA MOREHEAD

Jerusalem’s fall and exile to Babylon occurred in 586 BC. Ezekiel was one of the first leaders to be exiled.

In Chapter 33 of the book of Ezekiel, he begins describing his visions of the restoration of the Temple and all of Judea. There’s a lot of intricate detail - including exact dimensions of every furnishing in the new Temple, how Jerusalem will be laid out, laws on how land will be distributed when it is restored to the Israelites, and what laws will apply to inheritance of that land.

In Chapter 47 our reflection verses show Ezekiel’s vision of the rock-solid hope that burned in the hearts of all the exiles.

Ezekiel finds himself outside the Temple entrance, where a stream of water flows from the Temple itself. He follows that stream accompanied by an angel who measures how far the water is flowing out into the desert. The water gets deeper and deeper the farther they walk from the Temple.

The water becomes a river too deep to be crossed. Turning around, Ezekiel finds new plants and trees all along the banks of the river. The Angel explains these will always be there – and keep bearing new fruit - because the water for them flows from the Temple.

This is the shout of hope that the exiles need. Everything goes back to “God provides and will prevail.”

As we know, every living thing needs water to survive and thrive, we also know the destructive characteristics of some forms of water. Especially in February in North Texas.

But the water of God nurtures, feeds, and saves us. Just as Ezekiel brings this river of hope to the exiles, we can count on the river from God through Jesus sustaining us in our darkest times, restoring us when we’ve given up, and surrounding us in protection from the destruction that sometimes happens in all of our lives.

Page 306 in the BCP (the Service of Baptism) says: “We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.”

Thanks be to God.

## THE LESSONS FOR MARCH 22

### **Isaiah 49:8–15**

Thus says the Lord:

In a time of favor I have answered you,  
on a day of salvation I have helped you;  
I have kept you and given you  
as a covenant to the people,  
to establish the land,  
to apportion the desolate heritages;  
saying to the prisoners, “Come out,”  
to those who are in darkness, “Show yourselves.”  
They shall feed along the ways,  
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;  
they shall not hunger or thirst,  
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,  
for he who has pity on them will lead them,  
and by springs of water will guide them.  
And I will turn all my mountains into a road,  
and my highways shall be raised up.  
Lo, these shall come from far away,  
and lo, these from the north and from the west,  
and these from the land of Syene.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For the Lord has comforted his people,  
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me.”  
Can a woman forget her nursing-child,  
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.

### **John 5:19–29**

Jesus said to the Jews, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

“Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

#### REFLECTION - THE REV. CHRIS HAMBY

All Lent, I wrestle with scripture, theology, and my own spiritual journey. On this Wednesday, March 22, the appointed reading is John 5:19-29, which fuses my journey with scripture and theology in a challenging way. Scripturally, it is hard to live in fear of harsh judgment and condemnation while trying to live into grace and love at this very moment in my life. When I read scripture, it always encapsulates a specific moment in time. Often I will return to a particular passage and let scripture speak to me again days, weeks, months, or even years later and feel quite differently. Do I strive to, as John says, “...have done good?” Of course. Do I sometimes feel those who have done evil, as defined by a feeling in a particular moment, to the “resurrection of condemnation?” Of course. I am, like all of you reading this, human. Full of complexities and failures. Full of profound sadness and joy. Constantly asking myself “why” and living into that sacred moment when a bit is revealed and then coming around to understanding a little more bit by bit. This leads to the theological wrestling we all encounter as we read and digest scripture. How can I judge when John clearly states Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will be the one to judge? Letting go of judgmental thoughts and feelings to God does not give instant gratification closure despite a broken world full of numerous human failings propped up by human structures of power, which sometimes place ego and personal gain above honoring God, spreading the Gospel, and loving all we encounter. Scriptural and theological thought come together to illuminate the spiritual journey ahead. My own spiritual journey twists and turns as George Cohan, in a 1904 song, writes:

Sit and wonder, sit and think  
Why we're here and what this life is all about?....  
Life's a very funny proposition after all,  
Imagination, jealousy, hypocrisy and all...  
Ev'rybody's fighting as we wend our way along,  
Ev'ry fellow claims the other fellow's in the wrong;  
Hurried and worried until we're buried and there's no curtain call.  
Life's a very funny proposition after all.

I never know how God will work through me in my journey. I know that not everyone understands everything everywhere all at once, but I do know Jesus will be there with me throughout my life, helping me to understand the lives we live. Being patient with scripture to speak to me, even when I feel challenged by the words from John or other scripture, because I know life is a funny proposition and we never know how our scriptural, theological, and spiritual journey will wend along and greet us, especially during times, such as Lent, when we enter into a prayerful listening to hear God's voice.

### Exodus 32:7-14

The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

### John 5:30-47

Jesus said, "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

"If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

### REFLECTION - THE REV. TRACEY CARROLL

Today's words from scripture are hard to hear. Even Jesus' own words are harsh to our ears: "But I know that you do not have the love of God within you." Jesus warns his hearers that they are heading down a path of spiritual, soul killing destruction. And, as we see in our other readings, that is nothing new for the people of God. Time and time again, God's people have chosen the easier way, because they could not bring themselves to trust in God's love and mercy. And time and time again, God has forgiven God's people, finally giving them God's very self in Jesus. Still there are those that rebel, still there are those that refuse to believe. These words of Jesus are for us as well. Jesus was God living on earth as one of us to gather all of us back to him. Even now, Jesus asks us to put aside our doubts and our fears; he asks us to put aside our desires for self preservation that are killing us and killing those who live on the margins. There will always be golden calves that will try and pull us away from the kingdom of God with promises of wealth and safety. Jesus has promised us God's eternal and life giving love both here on earth and in the life everlasting. As followers of Jesus, we are here to help continue his work in the world so that all people might know God's love and also might know what life in God's kingdom is like. May we all reject the golden calves whose promises are empty. May we trust and embrace the promises of our loving God, promises that will sustain us in this life and in the next. As we draw closer to Golgatha, may we come to see that the kingdom of God has come near, and may we help those whom society has pushed to the margins to realize that God's kingdom is for them as well as for us. Let us not be afraid to be heralds of the kingdom "here on earth as it is in heaven;" may we trust in God's never ending love and mercy to give us strength and hope even in darkness. May we know and feel God's love within us which will help us to be Jesus' hands on earth, making the kingdom known so that all people... ALL people will know that they are children of God.

**Wisdom 2:1a,12–24**

They reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves,  
“Short and sorrowful is our life.  
“Let us lie in wait for the righteous man,  
because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions;  
he reproaches us for sins against the law,  
and accuses us of sins against our training.  
He professes to have knowledge of God,  
and calls himself a child of the Lord.  
He became to us a reproof of our thoughts;  
the very sight of him is a burden to us,  
because his manner of life is unlike that of others,  
and his ways are strange.  
We are considered by him as something base,  
and he avoids our ways as unclean;  
he calls the last end of the righteous happy,  
and boasts that God is his father.  
Let us see if his words are true,  
and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;  
for if the righteous man is God’s child, he will help him,  
and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.  
Let us test him with insult and torture,  
so that we may find out how gentle he is,  
and make trial of his forbearance.  
Let us condemn him to a shameful death,  
for, according to what he says, he will be protected.”  
Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray,  
for their wickedness blinded them,  
and they did not know the secret purposes of God,  
nor hoped for the wages of holiness,  
nor discerned the prize for blameless souls;  
for God created us for incorruption,  
and made us in the image of his own eternity,  
but through the devil’s envy death entered the world,  
and those who belong to his company experience it.

**John 7:1–2,10,25–30**

After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret.

Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, “Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.” Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.” Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.



We live in a world that is becoming more and more secular. We also live in a world that is full of violence and hatred. Because of this, more people are finding it difficult to see God in the world around us. Sometimes we may even see outright hostility towards the church, some of which is brought upon because of actions of the church that are not righteous and Godly. With this we get a distorted view of God, and Jesus. We as the church are the Body of Christ, and must be willing to show Christ to this world, and that means the love of Christ to a world that sees hatred.

Jesus came to the world in a time where people's vision of God was distorted. The Roman rulers wanted to take the allegiances of the People from God and put it towards the Emperor and their Gods. They wanted to bring down the righteous, and the God followers. Because of this, people began to grow further from God. So God sent His Son to the world to take on flesh. Just as today, some did not want to hear the truth. In the Gospel as well as the Old Testament appointed for today, we see the people testing the truth. In Wisdom we hear a plan to trap the righteous person, as that person is inconvenient. In the Gospel the people were standing against Jesus, because how could this person that they know be the messiah? Jesus responded that they know him, and that he is not there for his own benefit, but rather for the one who sent him. Through Jesus, they could see God.

As the Body of Christ, we are called to show the righteousness and love of God through our actions. This is even more important in this secular world, where many try to distort Christ's Gospel of love with messages of hate. A world where some messengers try to block the truth of this inclusive love for all, all because it is inconvenient to another narrative that is counter to the love. Let us show the love of God to those around us, no matter the cost. Because the world around us needs to see the truth of Christ's love. Let our voices overtake the voices of hate, which sometimes comes from the church. Let our actions be actions of love. Let our words be the words of truth that Jesus shared. When we do that, the world can see the truth of Christ's love that led him to the cross for all people.

#### THE LESSONS FOR MARCH 25 - THE ANNUNCIATION

##### **Isaiah 7:10-14**

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."

##### **Luke 1:26-38**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Gabriel the archangel says to Mary, “You will have a Son.” He will be unique...unlike any other.

Many mothers think and feel that way about their children, don’t they? My child is special. Unique. Wonderful. And there is truth about the uniqueness of each of us.

I like to imagine Mary sitting around with other moms speaking of their children. One mother says, “She took her first step today...how special she is.” Another says, “He said his first word...how precious is he?” Still another, “She came out speaking in complete sentences...she’s so smart.” Mary says...Jesus will you make us some lunch?” Mothers should adore their children. And then... they become teenagers, and they become special in a different way. Every conception is a miracle from God.

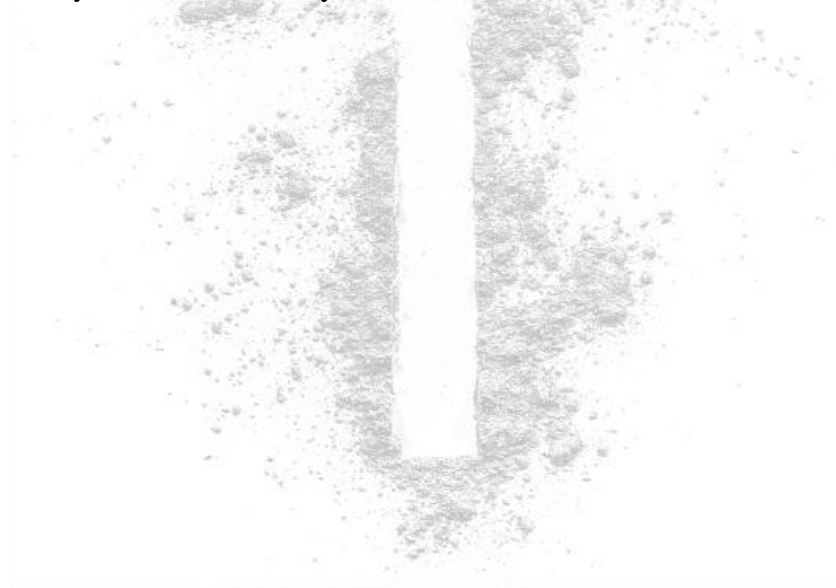
It is beautiful to me to think that Luke, the Evangelist, was by trade a physician concerned with health and healing. And as such he begins his gospel by telling of two miraculous births. Elizabeth in her old age is barren in her womb past the age of having children. The angel Gabriel tells her priestly husband, Zechariah you will have a son. And he will be a great prophet, and it comes to pass. God’s promise is fulfilled.

Mary, young and fertile...yet virginal – betrothed to Joseph will bear a child Called the Son of God...Son of the Most High...it will come to pass. Both great miracles are conceived of God for the redemption of the whole world to fulfill promises made generations earlier.

Thank you Luke...for telling us this story. This annunciation to Mary is like no other.

In Greek mythology and other ancient stories there is a parallel. Io is a mortal woman and Zeus the king of the gods is infatuated with Io’s beauty, and he overshadows her as a dark black cloud. Io conceives children from this unholy encounter. In Greek Mythology the gods exhibit human tendencies disposed to human appetites and sin. Zeus is not revered as being good; his motives are wanton and selfish.

This is not so with the God of Abraham. His desire is for the whole of humanity to belong to him. You are favored Mary...not for her beauty, certainly not for her wealth. (the wife of a carpenter.) Contrastingly, there is no mention of why God chooses her. Is it her faithfulness? Devotion? Her strength? We don’t know. But there is something comforting in her response, “Let it be according to your word.” She is willing to participate in the gift to the world. She can say, “No.” But she says, “Yes, Lord.”



**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

**John 11:1-45**

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have

kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

#### REFLECTION - THE REV. LYN BRIGGS

Jesus walks into a hopeless situation in Bethany. Lazarus is dead. 4 days dead. His sister Martha's words echo those of many who grieve - “If only, Lord,” she says. “If only, you had been here, things would have been different.” Martha continues, and here is a seed of hope, “but even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Even now. With her home full of mourners, and her heart sick with grief, Martha embraces hope. Even now, she says.

“I am resurrection and I am life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Jesus asks.

“Yes Lord, I believe.” she replies to the One who breathes life into those who are physically dead, offers life to those who are spiritually dead, and offers eternal life beginning in the present, and life everlasting which follows resurrection.

Those words are familiar as “funeral talk”. They can comfort as no other words can. They speak to the truth of our faith and the hope at the heart of Christian life. They lose their power to transform our lives now if we wait until the next funeral to invoke comfort they bring into our lives. If we understand the resurrection only as life after death, we only receive a portion of the life Christ has to offer. If we understand death to mean only the end of earthly life, we may miss the miracle of God's Spirit breathing new life into lives that are life-less, even now.

Even now there are places in our lives that we have given up hope; places we have sealed off from God. Perhaps some dream has died, some relationship is beyond repair, a faith which was once a flame is now a mere flicker. Even now, we can respond to God's loving voice calling us forth to start again.

If we believe that there is no one, no issue, no place beyond the reach of Jesus' loving voice, then as Christ's body our task is to listen and respond to his voice: to seek those who are held back from new life in some way, and walk with them as they are restored. As Jesus called for those who loved Lazarus to unbind him so that he could move again, removing obstacles to new life in response to Christ's call is what we as the church are to be about.

A life that is eternal begins, even now, with a relationship with God through Jesus with the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The promise of eternal life is found not only in some distant and future event; the promise of eternal life is the promise of new living now and it is always and already available in the person of Jesus Christ, and your relationship with those whom Jesus loves. Even now.

**Susanna 1-9,15-29,34-40,41-62**

There was a man living in Babylon whose name was Joakim. He married the daughter of Hilkihah, named Susanna, a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord. Her parents were righteous, and had trained their daughter according to the law of Moses. Joakim was very rich, and had a fine garden adjoining his house; the Jews used to come to him because he was the most honoured of them all.

That year two elders from the people were appointed as judges. Concerning them the Lord had said: "Wickedness came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people." These men were frequently at Joakim's house, and all who had a case to be tried came to them there.

When the people left at noon, Susanna would go into her husband's garden to walk. Every day the two elders used to see her, going in and walking about, and they began to lust for her. They suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice.

Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was a hot day. No one was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her. She said to her maids, "Bring me olive oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I can bathe." They did as she told them: they shut the doors of the garden and went out by the side doors to bring what they had been commanded; they did not see the elders, because they were hiding.

When the maids had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, "Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away."

Susanna groaned and said, "I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord."

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and the two elders shouted against her. And one of them ran and opened the garden doors. When the people in the house heard the shouting in the garden, they rushed in at the side door to see what had happened to her. And when the elders told their story, the servants felt very much ashamed, for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.

The next day, when the people gathered at the house of her husband Joakim, the two elders came, full of their wicked plot to have Susanna put to death. In the presence of the people they said, "Send for Susanna daughter of Hilkihah, the wife of Joakim."

Then the two elders stood up before the people and laid their hands on her head. Through her tears she looked up towards Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord. The elders said, "While we were walking in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, shut the garden doors, and dismissed the maids. Then a young man, who was hiding there, came to her and lay with her. We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this wickedness we ran to them. Although we saw them embracing, we could not hold the man, because he was stronger than we are, and he opened the doors and got away. We did, however, seize this woman and asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us. These things we testify."

Because they were elders of the people and judges, the assembly believed them and condemned Susanna to death.

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, "O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!"

The Lord heard her cry. Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, "I want no part in shedding this woman's blood!"

All the people turned to him and asked, "What is this you are saying?" Taking his stand among them he said, "Are you such fools, O Israelites, as to condemn a daughter of Israel without examination and without learning the facts? Return to court, for these men have given false evidence against her."

So all the people hurried back. And the rest of the elders said to him, "Come, sit among us and inform us, for God has given you the standing of an elder." Daniel said to them, "Separate them far from each other, and I will examine them."

When they were separated from each other, he summoned one of them and said to him, "You old relic of wicked days, your sins have now come home, which you have committed in the past, pronouncing unjust



judgements, condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty, though the Lord said, 'You shall not put an innocent and righteous person to death.' Now then, if you really saw this woman, tell me this: Under what tree did you see them being intimate with each other?" He answered, "Under a mastic tree." And Daniel said, "Very well! This lie has cost you your head, for the angel of God has received the sentence from God and will immediately cut you in two."

Then, putting him to one side, he ordered them to bring the other. And he said to him, "You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has beguiled you and lust has perverted your heart. This is how you have been treating the daughters of Israel, and they were intimate with you through fear; but a daughter of Judah would not tolerate your wickedness. Now then, tell me: Under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?" He answered, "Under an evergreen oak." Daniel said to him, "Very well! This lie has cost you also your head, for the angel of God is waiting with his sword to split you in two, so as to destroy you both."

Then the whole assembly raised a great shout and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. And they took action against the two elders, because out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbour. Acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death. Thus innocent blood was spared that day.

### **John 8:1-11**

Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

REFLECTION - THE REV. MATT STONE

### **Finding Yourself in the Story**

*Today's reflection is dedicated to the one in three women who is sexually assaulted in their lifetimes.*

Where do you see yourself in the stories of Scripture? Recently our youth minister remarked in a sermon that we tend to read ourselves into the best parts of a story. We imagine ourselves as the righteous and wrongly accused Susannah or the courageous young Daniel who speaks up against injustice and unveils the truth. We see ourselves as the one who draws near to those being attacked and offers a word of encouragement, forgiveness, and grace.

But the world, even our churches, aren't filled only with heroes. The best stories contain a victim, a villain, and a hero. Whether you are a Star Wars fan or a Marvel maniac, think of your favorite story and you'll quickly see the pattern. We see these roles clearly in the stories of Susannah and the woman accused of adultery in John. For far too many of us, we know what it is like to be the victim, to have another's power lorded over us and our bodies, to be judged by those who only look at outward appearances, and to experience trauma, exclusion and loss. Many of us readily identify with the hero of the story, and many of us can identify with the victim.

But few people eagerly picture themselves as the villain. I think most people get up every morning and try to do the best they can. But part of life in this world is that we hurt each other, ourselves, and God - often without even meaning to. Most of the time, these destructive acts are not nearly as dramatic as they are in Scripture or on the big screen. Small decisions made for selfish reasons, little white lies to get us off the hook, quietly passing judgment on someone who is different, and constantly magnifying others' shortcomings lead to the kinds of injustice we witness in today's readings. The judges didn't start out with this Machiavellian plan, they grew into the kinds of people who could conceive of such an act.

As we enter the home stretch of Lent and prepare for the hope of resurrection, perhaps we can acknowledge and welcome the parts of us that are the villain. When we walk the way of love with Jesus, he invites us to bring every part of ourselves on the journey, not just the shiny, heroic parts. In each story, God interacts with the hero, the victim, and the villains in some way. God's spirit speaks to the unjust judges through Daniel in Susannah just as Jesus speaks to the accusers in John. The good news is that God draws near to the fullness of

who we are. The Spirit can strengthen the gifts we have, heal the trauma we carry, and transform the hurting, broken parts we try so hard to hide.

No matter what character we play, Lent is an invitation to put down our masks, notice what is in us, and offer it to God. Once we do, Psalm 23 reminds us that God is always waiting to take our hand and guide us to goodness, mercy, and peace.

*The Collect for Purity (prayed near the beginning of each service & composed by Saint Alcuin in the 800s)*

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

## THE LESSONS FOR MARCH 28

### **Numbers 21:4–9**

From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

### **John 8:21–30**

Jesus said to the Jews, "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." Then the Jews said, "Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" He said to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he." They said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Why do I speak to you at all? I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him." As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

It can be difficult, when reading the works and word of God, to accept the death and danger that are inherent of following and believing in him. Our readings today span from serpents killing God's people for their sins, to Jesus explaining what will happen to him upon his death. These stories show how sin befuddles our purpose on earth.

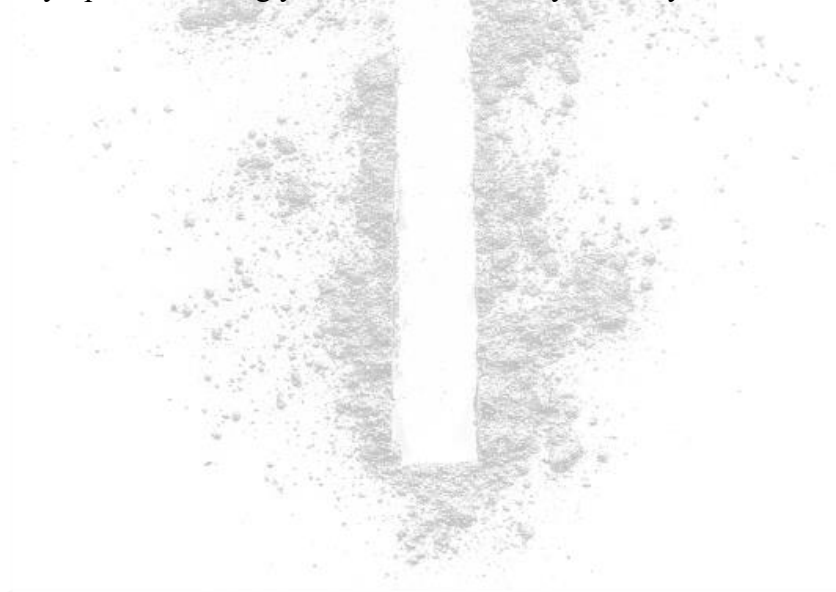
By following Christ, we are giving up our lives, and in following, we are given eternal life. To do so, we must give up our desire for safety and security, as he did. This mechanism of sacrifice could scarcely be understood by the disciples and is scarcely understood by us now.

When danger, sickness and violence enter our lives, as they are apt to do in this time of great struggle, we are at choice about how we proceed. We can hold on tightly to life and comfort, or we can dig into the deep love and gratitude that are buried in the rubble of emotions that lay at our feet. When we are bit by the serpent, we simply turn to God to be restored. We survive the serpents of sin and injustice by remembering the provision of God, in the bronze serpent, or Christ Himself. That is all that separates us from heaven.

Jesus tells us that we can hold on to God or to sin, either, not both. We can hold fast to the power and safety we have on earth. To do so, though, will mean that we are no longer looking towards the provision of God. When we forget to believe, we miss the beauty and love that surround us in this earthly moment we are given. We miss the chance to be Christ living here on earth.

We are here on this earth to be human, to relish in the messiness of love, the glory of hugs, the wet and cleansing nature of tears. We feel the freedom of our spirit when we cheer with utter joy or release a guttural roar. Through it all, we are compelled somehow, over and over again, to find hope that lasts, and bring it to our people in the form of flowers and song, in our presence, or in a casserole dish bubbling over with cheese.

Jesus came for us, Jesus taught us to show up for the struggles, and Jesus died so that we would know the path back to God. What matters most right now is that we take the time to look one another in the face and say "I Love You," and that we mean it. Because this life is short. We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind. And may the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you always. Amen.



**Daniel 3:14–20,24–28**

Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?”

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar was so filled with rage against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times more than was customary, and ordered some of the strongest guards in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to his counselors, “Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?” They answered the king, “True, O king.” He replied, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god.” Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men; the hair of their heads was not singed, their tunics were not harmed, and not even the smell of fire came from them.

Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.

**John 8:31–42**

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”

They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.” They said to him, “We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me.”

I loved coming home with my son at the end of his school day. It was truly a picture of someone set free from constraints. He threw his backpack down anywhere and raided the fridge. He changed into comfortable clothes and did whatever he wanted to do with his unconstrained time until after dinner when it was time for homework.

Home is the place where you feel comfortable. You can make noise, turn the music up loud, and run around and play. At home, you can be yourself and explore your interests. It's a place where you reconnect with what makes you – YOU – and remember your creative spark and source of life. I wonder how many of us feel that kind of freedom in our relationship with God. Is that the sense of freedom and ease we feel when we gather as Christians and disciples? Would that sense of belonging and home help us find respite and sustenance before being resent out to the world?

And here's the big question: What would people know about the God you serve by observing your behavior? Would they know you serve a loving Father? The first barrier to this kind of discipleship, is how we view God. Jesus is always fixing people's vision about God. The Gospel of John is set up in the first chapter. It says that what you're about to read about Jesus will reveal God's glory. The Gospel's structure features the "I am" statements. In these, Jesus demonstrates that he is God's son by revealing he does what God does. Our reading highlights that we also demonstrate whose disciple we are by what we do.

The second barrier is how we view ourselves. Do we see ourselves needing this kind of discipleship – the kind where we keep our eyes trained on our master and closely follow his example? That requires being open and humble. As my Franciscan friend often reminds me, "To be humble is to keep the thought: I may be wrong." Jesus' audience felt their discipleship was good enough. It provided a sense of belonging and identity. But Jesus pressed them, and presses us, further. "Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

To continue in Jesus' word means our actions flow from what he has told us to do. Then our actions reveal who we are following. People will know we follow Jesus because we are doing the same things Jesus was doing, feeding the poor, healing the sick, and setting people free. To be a true disciple is to follow Jesus so closely that we know his ways and receive what he received from the Father: Freedom. As our Collect for Peace reminds us, "to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom."

How is Jesus leading you into freedom today?





**Genesis 17:1–8**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

**John 8:51–59**

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.” The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, ‘Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?” Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, ‘He is our God,’ though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.” Then the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.” So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

REFLECTION - PHYLLIS BESS

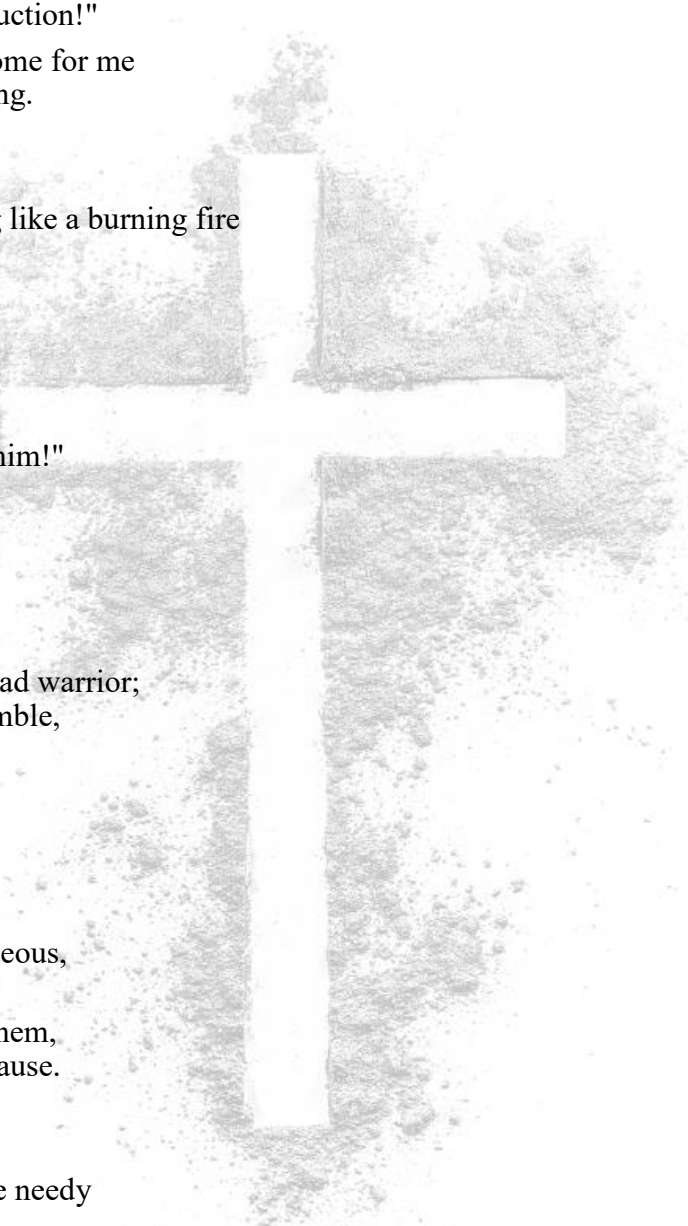
Genesis sets the scene for us with the covenant story of God’s promise to Abram and Sarai (soon to be known as Abraham and Sarah). The eight verses of Psalm 105 reiterate the greatness of our God who made this incredible promise to the most unexpected of humanity and then kept the promise to all future generations. And then the meat of it all in the reading from John’s gospel telling us how Jesus gets to explain to the Jews the notion of eternal life within the context of them trying to understand who Jesus really is...how difficult can this be?

It is complicated. We are sometimes like the Jews with our questions and our doubts and our desire to argue. We can be drawn in to conversations where we are asked to explain things we may not fully understand. Sometimes we do argue. It was interesting to note that Jesus set the bar nice and high (he often does) when he did not allow himself to be drawn in to the argument, but instead he responds to the challenging questions by offering what knowing God can be. Jesus did not dwell in the minutia of the discussion.

The gospel reading highlights the difference in the way of Jesus and the way of the authorities. This fundamental difference caused much fear and anger and an outcome we know is coming.

Perhaps, we can make ourselves vulnerable to our own fear and pain, and in doing so, make ourselves open to the experience of loving and being loved.

**Jeremiah 20:7–13**



O Lord, you have enticed me,  
and I was enticed;  
you have overpowered me,  
and you have prevailed.  
I have become a laughingstock all day long;  
everyone mocks me.  
For whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"  
For the word of the Lord has become for me  
a reproach and derision all day long.  
If I say, "I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,"  
then within me there is something like a burning fire  
shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot.  
For I hear many whispering:  
"Terror is all around!  
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"  
All my close friends  
are watching for me to stumble.  
"Perhaps he can be enticed,  
and we can prevail against him,  
and take our revenge on him."  
But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;  
therefore my persecutors will stumble,  
and they will not prevail.  
They will be greatly shamed,  
for they will not succeed.  
Their eternal dishonor  
will never be forgotten.  
O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,  
you see the heart and the mind;  
let me see your retribution upon them,  
for to you I have committed my cause.  
Sing to the Lord;  
praise the Lord!  
For he has delivered the life of the needy  
from the hands of evildoers.

**John 10:31–42**

The Jews took up stones again to stone Jesus. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God." Jesus answered, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods' —and the scripture cannot be annulled— can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.

He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there. Many came to him, and they were saying, “John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.” And many believed in him there.

#### REFLECTION - BETH FAIN

Jeremiah is not having a good day.

He’s been faithful (more or less) to God’s call on his life to be a prophet (not much chance of getting out of it since God called him before he was even born). It’s not a very popular Word from God that Jeremiah is proclaiming: conquest by an enemy, destruction of the city, death and mayhem, plunder and captivity.

It’s no surprise that in the latest prophecy episode, Jeremiah ends up in the stocks in the House of the Lord, no less, at the hand of Pashur, the chief temple officer (who Jeremiah reminds has been renamed by God as “Terror-all-around”).

Still, Jeremiah continues to prophesy words of doom and destruction. Which is where our scripture takes up the story today.

What we read is Jeremiah’s final complaint (of five). Some editors name Jeremiah’s speech a lament (to harken to the Psalms), but complaint works better for me.

Who hasn’t had their world turned upside down and lashed out at God? I mean, all Jeremiah has done is be faithful to what God told him to do—and look where it’s gotten him. He’s lost his family, his friends, and his community. Doing God’s will has, in fact, become a reason for others to denounce and disrespect him. Jeremiah is weary and worn out.

Jeremiah does what most faithful people do when they go through a rough patch. They have a serious chat with God and unabashedly give God a frank piece of their mind. They may even, like Jeremiah, tell God that it’s time to go into punishing mode on those who would dare to ignore God and to abuse God’s messenger.

Jeremiah views his difficult life as God’s test. To be honest, I’m not convinced that every tough thing in our life is God’s test. I am convinced that every tough thing can be a test in the sense of letting us know where our strengths and weaknesses are in order for us to walk stronger in our relationship with God

Where Jeremiah ends up, at the end of his complaint, as almost all Biblical complainers do, is with a word of praise to God:

Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For God has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers. Jeremiah 20.13

As we prepare for Holy Week:

Do we need to have a little chat with God and give God our personal complaints?

Do we need to ask God to show us how God is making us stronger in the midst of life’s ups and downs?

Can we end our chat with words of praise and thanks to and for God, anyway?

**Ezekiel 37:21–28**

Say, Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.

**John 11:45–53**

Many of the Jews who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

REFLECTION - JEANNE NEILL

Throughout history, humankind has been in battles, wars between nationalities, conflicts between races, people of different beliefs and identities and even family members against family members. God's message in the Bible reminds us again and again that He wants his people to live together and we are all his people. God sent his Son to save us, all of us from our sins.

In today's lesson in Ezekiel, God promises that He will make the Israelites one nation and He will make a covenant of peace with them. "My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people."

In John, God tells the Jews that "Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one."

I believe that the covenants spoken here are covenants God makes with all of his people. God is our God. We are his people. God's dwelling place is with us and ours with Him and He will bring us together.

**Matthew 21:1-11**

When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

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

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

**Isaiah 50:4-9a**

The Lord God has given me  
the tongue of a teacher,  
that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.  
Morning by morning he wakens--  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.  
The Lord God has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious,  
I did not turn backward.  
I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from insult and spitting.  
The Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;  
he who vindicates me is near.  
Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand up together.  
Who are my adversaries?  
Let them confront me.  
It is the Lord God who helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?

REFLECTION - THE REV. ALAN D. BENTRUP

On this final Sunday of Lent, we celebrate Palm Sunday. Or, as we call it in the Episcopal Church, Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday. That name is a lot.

And our service today will start outside with readings, move inside with more readings, and will be unlike any other Sunday throughout the year. This Sunday is a lot.

Our readings start with the Triumphal Entry, then move through the upper room, the Garden of Gethsemane, imprisonment, torture, the cross, and the tomb. All of this prepares us to enter into the sacred time of Holy Week.

And Jesus is with us this week. God is with us this week.

Jesus is, for Matthew, Emmanuel, God with us, and the entire Gospel begins and ends with this truth. From



“they shall name him Emmanuel” (God is with you), in chapter one, to the final lines of the Gospel, “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

Planted right here in the Passion Narrative are Jesus’ reassuring words, words each of us and our world need to hear at this moment and time. In the midst of whatever we’re going through. In the midst of joy and sorrow, success and failure, life and death. It’s all here in Holy Week, where we are reminded of Jesus’ promise once again.

Yes, Jesus will always be with us; our God will always be with us.

### THE LESSONS FOR APRIL 3

#### **Isaiah 42:1-9**

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;

a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,

who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.

See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;

before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.

## John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor 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 because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

### REFLECTION - ROBERT BESS

#### Isaiah 42:1-9

This passage helps me to understand what to expect when Jesus comes. The Prophet Isaiah let everyone know that "I (God) will put my spirit on him...He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets." Many questioned why Jesus was not a King or at least a rabble rouser, and that is answered in this passage from the Prophet Isaiah. There are also reassurances that the Lord will be with us and take our hands "and be a light for the Gentiles to open eyes that are blind." In reading and studying this passage I feel much is revealed about the Lord and Jesus' coming.

#### John 12:1-11

This passage is set six days before Passover when Jesus will die, and at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Lazarus and Jesus and some other friends sit at the table while Martha serves them dinner. Mary, during the meal begins to anoint Jesus' feet with Nard, an expensive perfume. Judas objects to Mary's wasteful actions and suggests that the Nard could have been sold and the money given to the poor. It is suggested in the passage that Judas only raised this question because he was shady and wanted to get hold of the cash the sale of the Nard might have raised.

Jesus responds to Judas, "Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." Jesus' response is quick and harsh. It foreshadows Jesus' death and creates a quote we hear often about the poor always being with us. Unfortunately people often mention the first half of the quote and neglect the second half. Jesus was not just making a point about the poor, he was again referring to his impending death.

What struck me most about this passage was the friendship between Jesus, Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Jesus who knows he is soon to be crucified and joins his friends for a dinner. Jesus who is about to die and talking with his friend Lazarus who was dead for 4 days before Jesus called him back from death. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation. It is suggested by some scholars that the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead was what caused the chief priests to plan to kill Jesus because so many saw the miracle occur. It also led to plans to kill Lazarus because the chief priests believed many more people were following Jesus now. According to scholars Lazarus probably escaped execution and moved away.

He is not mentioned after this dinner.

**Isaiah 49:1-7**

Listen to me, O coastlands,  
pay attention, you peoples from far away!

The Lord called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.

He made my mouth like a sharp sword,  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

he made me a polished arrow,  
in his quiver he hid me away.

And he said to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

But I said, "I have labored in vain,  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;

yet surely my cause is with the Lord,  
and my reward with my God."

And now the Lord says,  
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,

to bring Jacob back to him,  
and that Israel might be gathered to him,

for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,  
and my God has become my strength--

he says,

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;

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

Thus says the Lord,  
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,

to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,  
the slave of rulers,

"Kings shall see and stand up,  
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,

because of the Lord, who is faithful,  
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

**John 12:20-36**

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,

will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

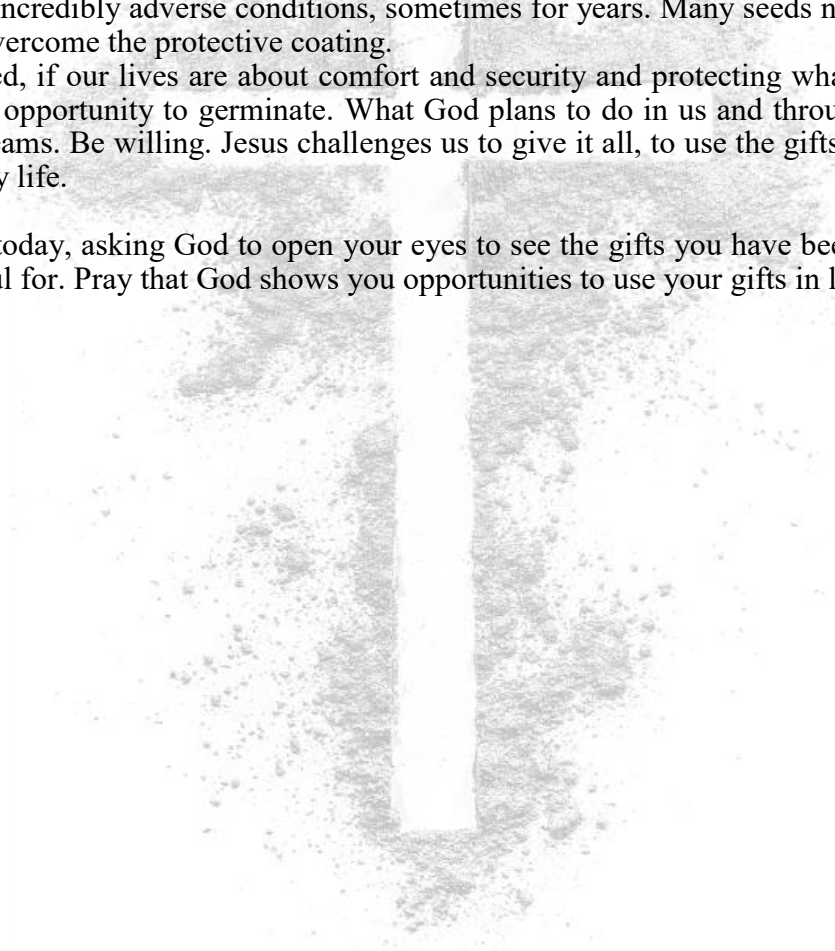
REFLECTION - THE REV. ROBIN DENNEY  
(TAKEN FROM EPISCOPAL RELIEF & DEVELOPMENT'S  
2023 LENTEN MEDITATIONS AT EPISCOPALRELIEF.ORG)

Seeds respire ever so slightly if they are alive. A dead seed cannot germinate and grow. Jesus knew this. He farmed like everyone else in his community. Jesus was also a master of metaphor and parables, so the idea that sticks out to us as odd is often the doorway into deeper understanding.

What is it about a seed that dies for it to bear fruit? A seed is living potential. To bear fruit, the seed must cease to be a seed. It must spend the energy reserves it has been saving, give up all its protective coatings, and become an incredibly vulnerable sprout. Seeds are designed for security. Their respiration is so slow that they are able to protect life in incredibly adverse conditions, sometimes for years. Many seeds never germinate because the life within can't overcome the protective coating.

If we love being a seed, if our lives are about comfort and security and protecting what has been given to us, then we will miss the opportunity to germinate. What God plans to do in us and through us is so much more than our goals and dreams. Be willing. Jesus challenges us to give it all, to use the gifts of ourselves, our time, our resources, our very life.

Spend time in prayer today, asking God to open your eyes to see the gifts you have been given. Make a list of all that you are grateful for. Pray that God shows you opportunities to use your gifts in love and service.



**Isaiah 50:4-9a**

The Lord God has given me  
the tongue of a teacher,

that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens--  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord God has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious,  
I did not turn backward.

I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face  
from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;

therefore I have set my face like flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;  
he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?  
Let them confront me.

It is the Lord God who helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?

**John 13:21-32**

At supper with his friends, Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples-- the one whom Jesus loved-- was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once."

REFLECTION - THE REV. BLAKE RIDER

In the selection from the prophet Isaiah, we learn of a well-trained tongue and opened ears that are among the tools the prophet brings to his ministry. That is a powerful combination – and one that often eludes us. Eloquence in speech might be a natural gift – though more likely one that is learned and honed through practice and experience.

The corollary gift of being both capable and willing to listen (“wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed”) might also be a learned talent but is one that uniquely requires an attentive heart. Time and time again, we find ourselves in situations where we are called to listen like one being instructed. And yet, do we really listen? I could not count the multitude of times in my life – when younger, ‘listening’ to my parents or teachers; or in my career (both in private industry and the church) ‘listening’ to a supervisor or rector or bishop, and there are



countless other examples. I have had the bad habit of, instead of listening, preparing my rebuttal or counter-argument for the conversation that I'm in.

That of course is not listening. It is ignoring the person on the other side of the conversation. That mode of 'listening' seldom bears fruit and is more likely to result in the whole enterprise moving backward a few steps. Oh that I could always have ears that have been opened. In honesty, I am a work in progress.

The remainder of the prophet's voice has been appropriated in the Christian tradition as a harbinger of the experience of Jesus during his Passion, and so is worthy of our consideration during Lent. The offering of one's back to be beaten; to be physically abused, mocked, spat upon. To set one's face like flint. A call for the accuser to show their face.

Reflection on this reading from Isaiah underlines the richness that the Hebrew Scriptures provide to our knowing and understanding the One who arrived in Jerusalem to great praise and acclimation, but who also suffered unspeakable abuses, even unto death. He came to offer peace and hope and yet was killed at the hands of the very humanity that he came to embrace.

It is a sad story that invites us into a deeper Lent, to walk the Way of the Cross with the One who would offer us more than we could possibly ask for or imagine, if only we have ears to hear.

#### THE LESSONS FOR APRIL 6 - MAUNDY THURSDAY

##### **Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14**

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. [Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.] This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

##### **John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

“Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

#### REFLECTION - THE REV. CANON JIMMY HARTLEY

The unusual word, “Maundy”, comes from a Latin word “Mandatum” in which the English word “mandate” also derives. As the Gospel recounts, Jesus and his disciples were sitting in the upper room earlier in the evening, before his passion, and Jesus does three incredible actions described in the our readings for today. The first action is the institution of the Holy Meal, the Eucharist. The moment where we are promised, that in the eating of the bread and the wine, we are being united to Jesus himself. Jesus promises to make himself known to us each and every time we recount this night in which he takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks the bread, and then gives it to his friends. The second action is really an example of the third action. John tells us that during this very meal, Jesus gets up from the dinning table, removes his outer robe, and ties a towel around his waist. Jesus humbles himself, taking the role of the servant of the house, and washes the feet of those that would call him master and lord. The role reversal within this action by the Messiah demonstrates the essential nature of God and the created purpose of humanity in relationship to God and each other. Namely, and to our third action in that upper room all those years ago, he gives a new commandment. Jesus gives a new commandment which is really anything but new. In fact, it is so old that it reaches back to the very beginning of all creation and the intention of our createdness. Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The whole evening we are discussing is commonly called the “Final Discourse” in the Gospel according to John. In this discourse, Jesus is preparing his friends for the most profound expression of this ancient love - his crucifixion and Easter morning. In all the preparation and mandates that he gives to his disciples (and them to us) on that evening, may we be reminded on this day that it is all done in love. A love that tears into this world and in doing so, draws the whole world back to God. A love that bears our pain and sin and suffering on the cross and, in the first lights of Easter morning, makes us whole. A love that inhabits our very selves through the Holy Spirit (a promise also given on that night in the upper room) and enlivens our lives to bear God’s love to the world. By this love, may everyone know that you are disciples of Christ.

#### THE LESSONS FOR APRIL 7 - GOOD FRIDAY

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

See, my servant shall prosper;  
he shall be exalted and lifted up,  
and shall be very high.  
Just as there were many who were astonished at him  
--so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,  
and his form beyond that of mortals--  
so he shall startle many nations;  
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;  
for that which had not been told them they shall see,  
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.  
Who has believed what we have heard?  
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?  
For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;

yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,

and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.  
Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people.

They made his grave with the wicked  
and his tomb with the rich,

although he had done no violence,  
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,  
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;

through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.  
Out of his anguish he shall see light;

he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.  
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,  
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;

because he poured out himself to death,  
and was numbered with the transgressors;

yet he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors.

### **John 18:1-19:42**

Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave

me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said." When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says,

"They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots."

And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced."

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

#### REFLECTION FOR GOOD FRIDAY - SARAH KENNY

If you haven't already, please take the time to read these Bible passages. They are long and it pricks my conscience to hear the terrible pain Jesus went through to atone for my sins; we must honor this agonizing sacrifice made for us. I say all that so those verses are not swept aside as I elaborate on the verses which stand out to me.

Isaiah 53:10 says, "When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days." This makes me think of one perspective of the nuns: When we accept Jesus as our Savior, He lives through us. This is also a concept in meditation: inviting Jesus to live through me ("Savior, use my strong back to sit tall. Use my lungs to breathe deeply.") Our successes are His successes. In this way, Jesus has gotten married, had children, and lived well beyond retirement. Additionally, I'm reminded of sentiments we sometimes have when a loved one passes, such as, "It was always their dream to do \_\_\_\_\_. I'm going to do that now for them." Jesus knew how and when His life was going to end, but that does not mean His work ended at His



death. I'm not simply referring to each person born who has come to believe since then. I'm talking about the work Jesus did while He was alive: helping those in need physically, tending to people emotionally, and creating a better community for everyone to live in where people could be treated fairly. That's the work Jesus continues to do through us.

Our suffering is also His suffering. Isaiah describes the tragedy of Jesus' life. He is able to understand our sadness and frustration. He has compassion towards us and so much love for us. God is big enough to handle any grief we endure, even when that grief makes us angry at God. Our Creator doesn't abandon us just because we turn away from Him. Our struggles are His struggles. He is with us.

#### THE LESSONS FOR APRIL 8 - HOLY SATURDAY

##### **Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24**

I am one who has seen affliction  
under the rod of God's wrath;

he has driven and brought me  
into darkness without any light;

against me alone he turns his hand,  
again and again, all day long.

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
and broken my bones;

he has besieged and enveloped me  
with bitterness and tribulation;

he has made me sit in darkness  
like the dead of long ago.

He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;  
he has put heavy chains on me;

though I call and cry for help,  
he shuts out my prayer;

he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,  
he has made my paths crooked.

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!

My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.

But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;

they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.

"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,  
"therefore I will hope in him."

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

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.'

Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

#### REFLECTION - THE REV. PAULA JEFFERSON

Today is Holy Saturday, a liminal time between the physical life of Jesus and the resurrection of Christ.

Matthew tells us that this liminal moment is not dormant. However, we don't hear the voices of Jesus' disciples in the text. Instead, it is another cast of characters who are mobilized into action.

Joseph of Arimathea comes to the forefront. He comes in the evening, when the sun has set. It's the shadowy time of day when it is safest to be at home. But, Joseph is not a typical follower of the Way...he is rich and powerful. He has political connections to get an audience with Pilate and be given the body of Jesus. He takes the body to his own, new tomb; he wraps the body in clean linen. And then Joseph walks off the stage of Matthew's Gospel. Mic drop.

It's interesting that Matthew highlights Joseph's wealth. Jesus had a lot to say about wealth - for many, he said, wealth becomes a god. Yet here is Joseph giving his wealth and power to God. He knew Jesus...and he believed. He is risking a lot for the sake of an unwritten Gospel. In three days' time, God will raise God's Son. Divine power will consecrate the gifts of Joseph.

The story of Joseph of Arimathea is a powerful witness to God's movement in our lives when the way forward is unclear. Joseph walked into a hot mess in Jerusalem. What would happen after the crucifixion? Would the fickle crowd be looking for followers of the Way? Would the Temple authorities be satisfied that the Jesus movement was sufficiently quashed? Would the things Jesus said come to fruition?

In that liminal moment, Joseph of Arimathea offered his gift to God. And he walked away. His moment, his gift, complete. God will do the rest.

Finally, we invite you into your own reflection.  
Use this labyrinth below -  
trace the path with your finger as you ponder the readings.  
Allow yourself to get lost in the wilderness of your thoughts  
as you open your heart and mind to God.

And if you are in the area of our church, we welcome you to come walk our life-size labyrinth anytime.



St. Martin-in-the-Fields would like to extend a huge thank you to all those who contributed to  
this year's Lenten Reflections.

We invite you to share this pdf with your family, friends, parish, etc.

If you are interested in contributing next year, please let us know! Send an email  
to [contact@stmartininthefields.org](mailto:contact@stmartininthefields.org).

You can also sign up to receive our weekly emails, for all our news and updates!  
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