



# LENTEN

*Devotions*

Dear Friends,

Much of our faith involves being on a journey.

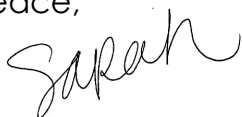
We spent Advent journeying toward Bethlehem together, reading familiar Bible passages with fresh eyes, hearing new insights from old friends.

Now, we invite you to join us on yet another journey. It's a different kind of journey than that of Advent. It's a journey that will seemingly end on a cross on Good Friday. But because we know this story so well, we know that will not be the final destination. We know that this long Lenten journey will end with the "Alleluias!" of Easter.

We welcome you on this journey toward Easter. Whether you've given up chocolate, the snooze alarm, or nothing at all, we hope that you will take on this habit of beginning, ending, somewhere-in-betweening your day with these devotions.

May the words of these devotions and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to our Lord, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Sarah".

## February 17 - Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

### Sarah Wolf

Today's text falls in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and in it, Jesus cautions his followers on not being too showy in their religion. He warns them against "practicing your piety before others" — against sounding trumpets as you tithe, against praying loudly on street corners, and against making your face so contorted in pain from fasting, that others can't recognize you (which then guarantees you some recognition).

It seems strange to me, that this would be our text on the one time of the year that we Presbyterians are actually kind of showy in our religion. It's the one time that we put something on that declares, "I am a Christian!" And...it's on our foreheads — it's not written on a piece of paper that we quietly stuff into our pockets. But per-

haps this mark of the cross isn't so much for others, as it is for us. Perhaps it is there to serve as a reminder to us — of God's unconventional love for us.

While we Presbyterians may wear our ashes all day or just for an hour, they will surely be gone before our heads hit the pillow tonight. What would it look like if we had the cross permanently displayed? How would it change the ways in which we conduct our lives if the image of the cross on our foreheads was harder to get rid of?

And maybe they should be. Because maybe we need more of a permanent reminder of the reason behind this journey we begin together tonight. If the cross were harder to get rid of, how would we love God better? How would we love each other better? How would we love ourselves better? My hunch is that having a tangible reminder would encourage us to rethink the way we practice our faith.



Ash  
WEDNESDAY

(continued on next page)

The action of placing a cross on our foreheads signals an act of repentance — of turning away from sin and turning toward God. The symbol can be fleeting; it will wash off in the shower later tonight. And this year, when it's difficult to actually have the imposition of ashes, we can only have the symbolic crosses. But it's what we do with this reminder that makes the difference.

What will you do to keep the image of the cross and what it means close to you? It will look different for everyone. It might be fasting or alms-giving. It might be by volunteering at the food bank, or committing to praying at each red light throughout Lent, or reading this devotional every day.

Whatever your practice may be, I encourage you to find one this Lenten season that will make the cross stick in your hearts and minds so that you take this crucial image with you wherever you go, and so that practice informs your faith in God, and not the other way round.

**PRAYER:**

God, during this Lenten season, show me ways that I might turn to you, put my faith in you, and trust in you. May this season reveal your love for me in new ways, and may I respond with gratitude. Amen.

## **February 18 - Psalm 25:1-10**

### **Beverly Riddell**

Psalm 25 might be the perfect simple prayer. It speaks of trusting God. It asks for forgiveness from old sins. It asks God for direction. It expresses gratitude:

"In you, LORD my God, I put my trust."

"Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good."

"Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long."

I discovered that some English translations are "Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; For You I wait all the day."

Some minor research (Google) leads me to believe that "wait" in this passage was used in the Hebrew in the sense of "look eagerly for." This would seem to imply the Psalmist has an expectation of seeing God, rather than just a hope.

Psalm 25 points us to the future, as we walk on our journey with God. Trusting God. Hoping in God. Looking to God for teaching, truth, and guidance. Expecting to journey with God.

Asking for forgiveness from past sins, and looking eagerly for God is something we do all year long, not just during Lent. Lent is a time leading to the crucifixion and resurrection, when we focus on Jesus and his journey. Why is an Old Testament prayer suitable for contemplation now?

Lent can be a wonderful time to get back to our Christian basics. A lot of what we believe about God is reflected in Psalm 25. It includes all the basic communications we have with God in prayer: You're great! I'm sorry. Please. Thank you. I trust you. I will follow you. Forgive me.

These words comfort and sustain us as we talk with God, and as we walk with Jesus during Lent.

And always.

All praise be to God.

## **February 19 - 1 Peter 3:18-22**

### **Taylor Chenery**

My father always told me, "Anything worth doing is worth doing right." We face new challenges every day and must choose how to respond. We all know what we should do. It might not be, and often never is, the easy thing to do. However, through baptism our hearts are made pure. Through Jesus' death and suffering, our sins are forgiven.

Listen to your heart. Let it be your guide. Stand up for what you believe and what you know is right. There may be pain and suffering along the way, but as long as your intentions are pure and the suffering comes as a consequence for doing good, you will be blessed. Jesus suffered on the cross for all of us. Have love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind, and you will be heard in Heaven.

Do good today. Just know it might not be easy.

## **February 20 - Mark 1:9-15**

### **Karen Peterson**

I grew up in a loving, faithful family but, Shakespeare's quote from Hamlet, "Brevity is the soul of wit" could only be used to describe my family in jest. It was always a challenge for me, the youngest of four, to get a word in edgewise. I think that is why I like the gospel of Mark so much. The words are concise, sort of like an abstract for the rest of the Gospels. Mark begins with no mention of Jesus' birth and no clear time frame. It only takes the gospel writer seven verses to move from Jesus leaving home, to his baptism by John in the Jordan, to being driven into the wilderness, and then on to his ministry. It only takes three verses to involve the entire trinity: the SON is baptized, the FATHER speaks, and the SPIRIT descends.

Like Jesus we are claimed by God as God's children and then go into the wilderness of life. Isn't that what Lent is all about? We leave behind what was, and what will be is not yet clear. In that wilderness we come face-to-face with the realities and temptations of our own lives: the things we've done and left undone, our fears, our hopes and dreams, our sorrows and losses. But our Lenten journey should not be just a reliving of past regrets and failures. This journey is a way forward.

Jesus could not begin his ministry without first surviving forty days of temptation. As we journey through this Lenten season we remember who we are and whose we are. Jesus was not alone in the wilderness, and neither are we. God is with us each step of the way. We too are God's beloved children. Let God's words to Jesus become our mantra through this Lenten journey: we are the beloved children of God and our steps are not taken alone.

## February 21 - Genesis 9:8-17

### Cora Leigh Clark

When I first read this passage, I thought to myself, “Huh. What does this have to do with Lent?” After doing some reading and some thinking, I found a connection. In this story, we read of the post-flood covenant God makes with Noah and all loving creatures. At this time, a covenant was not necessarily an agreement between equal partners, but it was an agreement of mutual obligation. This covenant is an acknowledgment from God that we are going to mess stuff up — sometimes on a large scale. It’s also an assurance that God won’t completely destroy everything and start all over ago. It’s a chance at a future, which leads us right to the culmination of Lent. Trial, crucifixion, resurrection — the ultimate promise from a loving God.



Lent should be a season of honesty. But how honest are we really about our own sin? How honest CAN we be? We would have to own up to the messes we create — individually and corporately — and we are really not prepared to do it. It’s hard and it’s uncomfortable. As we work our way through Lent toward the cross, during this time of self-reflection, let’s be honest with ourselves. Yearn toward the promise of the covenant with Noah and yearn toward the promise of the cross and don’t forget to be thankful. Love...hope....a future.

Let’s pray —

“And this is God’s promise to you and to me  
Written by rainbow and twig of a tree.  
A promise lead us and guides us always  
To love and protect us  
The rest of our days.”  
Amen.



## **February 22 - Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16**

### **Linda Foster**

God our Father, creator of the universe and all humanity;  
You promised to Abraham and Sarah, a childless couple,  
a wondrous vision of many offspring and nations populating  
the good earth from them;

Today and throughout history, we, the children of Abraham,  
sin against each other in thought, word, and deed.

There is division among those who profess that you are the one and only God.  
Search me, O Lord, for any sin that I do that divides me from my neighbor.  
Help me to know it and repent. Show me how to love all my neighbors.

Let your truth shine throughout our land and across the nations of the earth,  
stop the lies that keep neighbors apart.

Bring your people together to rule according to your law;  
to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you.

God of our creation, we praise your name above all.

You are what's beautiful in our creation.

Only you can bring your glorious plan for creation to fulfillment as you promised  
Abraham many centuries ago.

Let each one of your children see you in all people and love them as they love  
you. Amen.

## February 23 - Romans 4:13-25

### Joan Sayers

Trust, Faith, Hope.

Abraham had such Faith that he Trusted God when God told him to pack up and move. He had Hope for his future because he knew God can be Trusted. Without following rules or regulations, Abraham showed absolute Faith and Trust in God as he followed God's call.

In this message in Romans, Paul reminds us that our Faith, Trust, and Hope in God should be our main focus. There was a time in Paul's life that he focused only on rules and regulations.

Then he found that there is a better focus: Faith, Trust, and Hope with God. It is not the rules we learn nor the counting of how often we follow them that guide us to God's call for each of us. It is trusting God in our faith and hope that leads us to take risks to move ahead.

As the hymn says, we can always be "Standing on the Promises of God" without reservation or distraction.

**PRAYER:** Faithful God, forgive us when we forget where our focus should be. Remind us that what we need is to have Hope, Faith, and Trust in You and, "Standing on the promises I cannot fail, listening every moment to the Spirit's call, resting in my Savior as my all in all. Standing on the promises of God." Amen.

## February 24 - Mark 8:31-38

### Amy Diduch

I'm sitting next to a pile of newly cleaned face masks as I compose this entry. If you'd asked me a year ago whether we could collectively engage in an extended period of self-denial, I'd probably have laughed heartily and pointed out that many of us find a self-imposed Lenten discipline to be a bit of a struggle. When we first entered lockdown last March I grieved the loss of daily routine but hoped that it would last, what, a month or two? I couldn't imagine at that time that we would still be making sacrifices to keep ourselves and others safe as we re-entered this season of Lent. Spend a year avoiding our favorite restaurants, movie theaters or sporting events? Spend a year without in-person Sunday worship? Spend a year staying distant from our friends and family members? There is no way I would have signed up for this last March.

I'm tired of wearing a mask. I'm tired of seeing friends only at a distance. I miss choir practice on Thursday nights, Covenant's Taizé service during Lent, team trivia nights, and friendly hugs. Like others, I've faced the pain of mourning the loss of my father without the ability to join with those I love (and who loved him). Our in-person memorial time has to wait.

I'm bad at this self-denial stuff, I desperately want it to end, but I'm doing it anyway. When the time comes that we can be fully together again I will celebrate with dancing and tears of joy. I hope I will remember that it is possible to take the hard path, to keep making those hard choices, to dig deep and find more patience when the call comes again. In the meantime, I will wear my masks.

The last two stanzas from John Bell's hymn, "The Summons" serve as my reminder and my prayer:

"Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?  
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?  
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,  
Through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?"

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.  
In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show.  
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me."

## February 25 - Mark 9:2-9

### Tom Compton

In this second week of Lent, let us reflect on the Transfiguration of Jesus. This miraculous transformation of Jesus high on a mountaintop was witnessed by Peter, James, and John. Let us, for a moment, put ourselves in the shoes of these three disciples. Surely, to see Jesus transfigured into dazzling white and be joined by Moses and Elijah was frightening enough, but to hear a voice from heaven confirm that Jesus was the Son of God took it over the top. What a wake-up call! These disciples whose faith, on occasion, had wavered, witnessed firsthand the Glory of Jesus in his divine nature and his unique relationship with God. For the first time, Peter, James, and John saw the true essence and divinity of Jesus. Now they understood that Jesus was not only the Messiah, but the son of God.

Unlike the disciples coming down from that mountain, we know the details of what is to come; the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know that Jesus' brilliant appearance during the transfiguration was a brief metamorphosis and glimpse of Jesus in all His glory — of what's to come for all of us.

You may have had a “mountaintop moment.” Maybe not as dramatic as the Transfiguration, but an event that confirmed your faith and solidified your belief. Let us be like the three disciples, whose glimpse into Jesus in all His glory, deepened their faith in Him. As we journey through this Lenten season, let us take the time to examine our own faith and may it be a thoughtful, transforming experience. We are all coming out of a pandemic induced winter slumber. Let this time of Lent be a spiritual awakening for our own faith as we walk with Jesus to the cross. The joy of Easter is approaching!

#### **PRAYER:**

Dear Heavenly Father,  
May we always walk in the radiant light of your grace and glory. Open our hearts and fill us with your divine presence. We pray that you will illuminate and awaken our relationship with you as we follow you along this Lenten journey. Thank you for the grace and salvation you have given to us through your son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **February 26 - Isaiah 58:1-9a**

### **Carrie Darracott**

Faced with challenges in life, we may try to take charge of the situation by reaching out to God and bargaining for favorable divine intervention. Our arsenal of ploys may include many ritualistic outward gestures of pious faith, but usually no admission that we cannot achieve success on our own. Most of the time we may not even understand the problem, much less know the solution and how to achieve it.

Isaiah, speaking in God's voice, reminds us that what is needed instead is the admission that we are not in charge at all. True faith is shown not by our inadequate works and words, but by humility before God that enables Him to use us to accomplish His work. Trust in God's leadership results in faith that asks for and is open to God's direction. Through God's grace . . . loving, trusting relationships are the outcome. God's command to aid those bound to the yoke of injustice is answered, and His kingdom is created bit by bit in this world.

'Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.'

#### **PRAYER:**

Lord, through your grace, grant us the humility to listen for your direction, to receive the love you so freely offer to us, and to share that love with all we encounter. Amen.

## **February 27 - Joel 2:1-2; 12-17**

### **Lynn Grimm**

Reading this passage in Joel, I was struck by verse 13 which begins “rend your hearts, not your clothing.” What a powerful statement!

The rending of clothes in the Old Testament is described many times. Clothing in the Old Testament identified social class. Wealthier people wore finer clothes, but all clothing was an expensive necessity. When rending clothes, people did not just tear a bit of their hem or a sleeve. They literally ripped their very precious clothing to the point of almost nakedness in a public setting. Other people saw what was happening and would know the person's distress. This was serious stuff.

But what about rending your heart? In the dictionary, the verb “to rend” means to tear something into two or more pieces. Perhaps Joel is suggesting we need to examine our lives very critically. Rending hearts would be a very private act. This is not a casual self-examination, but a tearing apart of our very essence. Who are we and what have we become? Can we admit our failures, our sins, our mistakes? Are we ready to ask God for forgiveness? With God's help can we redirect our energies towards becoming the persons He intends us to be?

Joel lived during a time when the people of Israel had been overrun by a plague of locusts. He tells them that the plague will end and God will deal “wondrously with you” (2:26). In today's world, we also live in hope that our pandemic will end or at least be controlled. Consider using this time of Lent to follow Joel's instruction—“rend your heart”—and see what God has in store for you.

## February 28 - Psalm 22

### Christy Davis

"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (v. 1)

You would be in good company if you've been tempted to voice these words in the past year. Although originally written by David to question whether God had abandoned him in the face of his enemies, we are probably more familiar with Jesus quoting them from the cross. What can we learn from both of these instances that can ease our despair in 2021?

The verse implies that a relationship built on trust feels as if it has been broken. On a positive note, we cannot feel forsaken unless we have previously known a closeness with God. How do we go about righting this relationship in times of trial? Let's look to David for suggestions. David turns to memories of the Lord's past faithfulness for reassurance of His present faithfulness.

**SUGGESTION #1:** With praise and thanksgiving, think about all of the other times God has been present and at work in your life. In a vivid, prophetic way, verses 16-18 seem to describe the agony of the cross. Christ's cry came as the weight of our sins left Jesus feeling separated from Almighty God, but we all know the Good News of this story. An agonizing situation was transformed into a glorious victory over the power of sin and separation from God. We are assured by the promise of grace and salvation through faith.

**SUGGESTION #2:** Read Romans 8:38-39. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created things, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.



## March 1 - Exodus 17:1-7

### Tom Bellamy

It is impossible not to view the world today through the filter of the pandemic that we have been experiencing for over a year now. As we observe Lent this year, I can't help but interpret this scripture through that same filter and draw comparisons between our existence now and the Israelite community then, as well as what Jesus went through during his 40 days in the wilderness. We have been sorely tested, asked to change our entire way of living. We have been forced to change the way we work, the way we educate our children, the way we interact with our friends and the way we support and love our families.

As a country, by most accounts, we have done this more like the Israelite community in this passage. We have grumbled and complained, and even ignored the advice of those who would keep us safe. Many would say God has left us to suffer for our mistakes and that these hardships are the signs of "the end of days." I don't believe this apocalyptic view of our world. I believe that in this pandemic year, God has been with us the whole time. God has blessed scientists who have developed vaccines faster than at any other time in our history. God has blessed us with technology to interact with our families and loved ones. God has brought our nuclear families closer together than they have been in years. God has blessed billions of people on this planet with comfort and guidance, whether they realized it or not. The true miracle in all of this, is that it hasn't just happened over the last year of this pandemic. God is with us every day, in every moment, and guides us and loves us, no matter what.

**PRAYER:** Lord, thank you for always being with us, no matter what. Please help us to remember this through all of our days, whether they are good or bad. Thank you for the blessing of your son Jesus, who showed us through his example to always have faith in you and to let your will be done. Amen.



## **March 2 - Exodus 17:8-17**

### **Kristin Siegel**

Right now, unlike at any other time, it can seem as though the weight of the world and the health of our family is completely in our hands. As an essential worker, I have to go to work every day of the pandemic, and I worry constantly about how that affects my family and my community. My thought process is that I alone am responsible for their health and I look, at times, upon my job as a detriment to their and my health. This individualistic mindset causes anger any time I look at my neighbors and find them to not be as conscientious as I. What I now realize, but didn't always, was that God never expected us to fight battles alone. By our very nature, we are interdependent creatures, and if this pandemic has taught us anything, it's just how interdependent we are upon one another.

All of those times that I thought I alone was fighting this battle, there were others out there: praying for me, cooking dinner for my family, providing a safe place for them to quarantine, sending words of support via text or email. Any time, if it seems as though you are alone in the battle, just pause for a moment to glance down and see those others who are propping up your arms.

## **March 3 - Psalm 19**

### **Frances Craig**

The psalmist who wrote Psalm 19 says that the law of the LORD is perfect, revives the soul, and makes the wise simple. He says that the law of the LORD is right, clear, enlightening, true and righteous. Further, it is more desirable than fine gold, sweeter than honey and keeping the law is rewarding.

Lent is a season for believers to prepare for Easter. How are we to do that? Some people 'give up' something, like chocolate, ice cream or swear words for Lent. That's good. All of us might benefit from less chocolate, ice cream or blue language. The question to think about, however, is how are we preparing for Easter if we are only change for the 40 days of Lent and then, revert to old habits?

While there's nothing wrong with 'giving up' something, another idea might be to undertake something. Let's agree that the psalmist is right when he characterizes the LORD's law as perfect and true. Who wouldn't want to be enlightened and revived? Who wouldn't want to reap the rewards of keeping the law? Maybe undertaking an intensive study of the LORD's law would be a worthwhile Lenten discipline. This Lenten discipline might be undertaken with a partner or two or three others. Think of the reward or as the psalmist says, the "great reward." And this is a Lenten discipline that could last for more than 40 days; a discipline that has the potential to be life changing and could last a lifetime. Now that is genuine Easter preparation.

May our Lenten prayer be the psalmist's prayer: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." (v. 14). Amen!!

## **March 4 - John 2:13-22**

### **Janey, Tucker, and Hayden Terry**

After reading this passage Tucker said, “Ahhh, this is the angry Jesus.” As we discussed it, we thought about how strange “Angry Jesus” is — coming in and flipping over the tables. We don’t see that emotion in Jesus often, but as our wise 16-year old said, “Angry Jesus is still human.” These people were selling doves, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, in the house of God! Simply put – Jesus was BIG mad. It just reminds us that Jesus was fully God and fully human.

That is just one piece of this passage. Our family also discussed how Jesus compared himself to a temple. “But he was speaking of the temple of his body.” (John 2:21) The first definition for temple in Webster’s Dictionary is: edifice for religious exercises; however, the third definition is: a place devoted to a special purpose. Jesus’ special purpose was to die to give each of us eternal life, and every time we come to the communion table we are given Jesus’ body — the bread of life.

**LET US PRAY:** (First stanza of “How Lovely, Lord “from Glory to God)

How lovely, Lord, how lovely is your abiding place,  
my soul is longing, fainting, to feast upon your grace.  
The sparrow finds a shelter, a place to build her nest;  
and so your temple calls us within its walls to rest.

## **March 5 - Romans 5:1-11**

### **Donna and Rick Hamric**

In chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul introduced our new relationship with God as a result of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Prior to Jesus, humankind was separated from God because of sin. After Jesus' resurrection our sins were forgiven when Christ took the burden of our sins and we can live in peace with God.

Through our faith in Jesus Christ we are provided access to God's grace from the Holy Spirit. Grace is the undeserved gift from our loving God to his people which is totally unexpected. We are to rejoice for what God has done through his son Christ Jesus and because of His Son's sacrificial death on the cross we can see God's grace and glory. God is never through with His work through our lives and the poem "His Story Is My Story" summarizes for Rick and I what Romans 5: 1-11 really speaks out to our hearts.

"His Story Is My Story"  
by Frances Rogers

No one knows half my story  
It is covered by heaven's pure glory  
Jesus came down and died for my sin.  
By His blood I am cleansed from within.  
By His righteousness alone,  
For my sins did He atone.  
So that sinners such as I  
May on His work now rely  
Signing and praising every day  
In the new and upward way.

## **March 6 - Psalm 95**

### **Peggy Roberson**

This Psalm describes the kingship of God. Verses 1-7 are a call to worship the Creator God. We are called to sing (or make a joyful noise), to come, to worship and to kneel. The reasons we are to worship God are that God created and rules the creation. We belong to God and are God's people.

The last four verses are in a different voice or tone. We are called upon to listen and not act like our fore-parents who tested God and caused God to prevent their entering into the Promised Land.

As we wait for Easter and the Resurrection let us use our time (40 days instead of 40 years) to worship and learn what God has done for us.

#### **PRAYER:**

Gracious God, we pray that this year's journey of Lent will teach us to walk closer to God, to feel God's presence seeping into our bones. That we will try to see the face of Christ in the people around us—as we pray for those we love, for people who are our acquaintances, and for those from whom we are estranged. May we see your presence in your creation as well.

Teach us how to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with you, knowing that we are all returning to dust. May we love while we are here. Amen.

*(Prayer adapted from Leslie Scanlon, Presbyterian Outlook, Vol. 203, No.2 page 10)*

## March 7 - 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

### Cliff Gilchrest

As I was thinking about these verses from First Corinthians: 18-25, especially in the context of Easter and the Lenten season, I was rereading as a bed time devotional Parker Palmer's latest book, On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity & Getting Old. I just happened to have been reading one of the essays near the end of the book, "Heartbreak and Hope for New Life," and I would like to share with you in the spirit of these verses and the Lenten and Easter seasons both the beginning of this essay and the end!

A disciple asks the rebbe: "Why does Torah tell us to place these words upon your hearts? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?" The rebbe answers: "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in!" (From a Hasidic tale)

And it closes with this poem from Mary Oliver.

"Lead"

Here is a story to break your heart.  
Are you willing?  
This winter the loons came to our harbor  
and died, one by one,  
of nothing we could see.  
A friend told me  
of one on the shore  
that lifted its head and opened  
the elegant beak and cried out  
in the long sweet savoring of its life  
which if you have heard it,



you know is a sacred thing.  
And for which, if you have not heard it,  
you had better hurry to where  
they still sing.  
And, believe me, tell no one  
just where that is.  
The next morning  
this loon, speckled  
and iridescent and with a plan  
to fly home  
to some hidden lake  
was dead on the shore.  
I tell you this to break your heart,  
by which I mean only  
that it break open and never close again  
to the rest of the world!

## **March 8 - John 4:5-26**

### **Jane Wimmer**

The story told in the gospel of John about Jesus' visit with the Samaritan woman at the well is such a perfect story for today, International Women's Day. In Jesus' time, women were not equal with men. Jesus, a Jew, was not supposed to talk to Samaritans, let alone talk to a woman from Samaria without a male escort. The prejudices in Jesus' time are not unlike those in our culture today. Jesus' words of kindness towards the woman at the well shows how we can act in situations where our or societal prejudices get in the way of honest interaction. Jesus knew this woman was divorced and had five husbands which made her scorned by many people, yet Jesus honored her with respect and explained his mission on this earth. Rather than expressing exclusivity, Jesus promoted equity and inclusivity, some traits we can choose to cultivate today.

International Women's Day, acknowledged worldwide since 1911, celebrates women's achievements, raises awareness about women's equality, and lobbies for accelerated gender parity. The theme of this year's International Women's Day is Choose to Challenge. All of us can choose to challenge and call out gender bias and inequity as Jesus directs us to do. Choose to celebrate the women in your life both past and present. If you are a woman, celebrate yourself and wear the color of the day today – purple.

For more information on International Women's Day go to <https://www.internationalwomensday.com/>.

**PRAYER:** God guide my thoughts and actions to challenge gender inequity and see the Christ in each person I meet. Amen.



## **March 9 - John 4:27-42**

### **Darlene Schneck**

"His disciples came, and they marveled that he talked with a woman..."

We with our 21st century American mindsets often fail to grasp the wondrous boldness of Jesus' actions as he walked this earth 2,000 years ago. Jesus often did shocking things as he went about his ministry. Touch an unclean leper? Jesus did. Welcome a despised tax collector to be one of his disciples? Jesus did. Scold the most respected religious leaders of his day, telling them they were "whitewashed tombs"? Jesus did.

God came to Earth in the form of a Jewish baby and lived at a time when respectable women were rarely seen in the streets. It would have been unthinkable for a Jewish man to speak in public with any woman, let alone one living a scandalous life and hailing from a marginalized group, the Samaritans. But Jesus did. Not only did he speak with her in public, he shared with her some of the deepest truths of God. She then went on to tell her townspeople about Jesus, and many came to believe in him. This story reminds us that Jesus does not prioritize our outward form or status, or any of the things we generally think of that defines a person. Jesus breaks down barriers and comes to us as we are, where we are. He looks at our hearts, to see how open we are to hear what he has to say. Are we listening?

## **March 10 - Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

### **Kathy Henderson**

Lent in the conservative Episcopalian home of my childhood was deemed a time of deprivation (no chocolate, no way!) and remorseful contemplation of sins committed (why did I blame my brother for eating the cookies now hidden under my bed?) Repent of your sins. Deprive yourself of earthly pleasures. Be miserable. You will be rewarded with spectacular trumpet music and lots of Easter candy at Lent's end.

In the ensuing decades, my view of Lent has changed. I now embrace this quiet time as one of preparation and joyful (if quiet) anticipation of the miracle to come: The Resurrection of Jesus that promises renewed energy and faith as we go about our business of praising the Lord through our actions.

In this year of the pandemic, so many of us have felt isolated, sad, angry and sick at heart because our usual ways of "doing good" have been disrupted. I've felt stuck in a yearlong version of my childhood Lent, except that staying home, washing my hands 100 times a day, and obeying all the good medical rules didn't seem to change anything.

Did we, as individuals and a nation, become sick "because we lived a bad (or foolish) life?" Are we "feeling the effects of (our) sins?" Maybe. But, here – midway between Ash Wednesday and Easter – I prefer to "thank God for his marvelous love ... For his miraculous mercy to the children he loves."

Our miracle will be here in just a few weeks: We will celebrate (albeit virtually) with wonderful music, inspiring words and maybe a chocolate egg or two. With sheer joy, we will "Tell the world what he's done — sing it out!"

## **March 11 - Numbers 21:4-9**

### **Natalie Wolf**

I worked closely with the text for a Christian education assignment a few weeks ago. We were to dive deeply into a section of Hebrew scripture and, borrowing from the rich rabbinic tradition, create a visual midrash to depict our questions and wonderings about the text. In my three-dimensional midrash, I attempted to construct all of the in-between spaces that I imagine existing in this brief story of the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness.

They have escaped their enslavement in Egypt but have yet to reach their destination — the Promised Land. Evidently, they have food, but it's miserable food. The serpents have brought about death to their journey companions, but God has given them an antidote for the bites. They have received forgiveness from God in the shape of the antidote, but the result of their complaints against God — the serpents — are still among them. It's a "two steps forward, one step back" scenario in my mind.

What brings the Israelites healing from the serpent bites? Turning their focus away from their aching feet, their sunburned necks, their frustration with how their exodus is going, and turning their faces up toward God. This action doesn't negate their suffering and all that they have endured. They will continue to exist in the in-between of the wilderness. It does, however, remind them of the healing, liberating powers of the Divine.

Lent can feel like a journey through the in-between. We're walking toward the betrayal, arrest, and death of Jesus, all while knowing what happens on the Sunday after Good Friday. This balance of experiencing anguish while knowing the truth of God's love is one that God's people have long maintained. As we continue through Lent, may we have the courage to turn our attention toward God's restorative grace.

## **March 12 - John 3:14-21**

### **John Sayers**

The Gospel of John tells us that God loves us without reservation. God does not cast us aside because we are sinners. God loves us no matter what we do. God showed us love in the most amazing way! God sent his son to the world. His only son! God sent Jesus not to judge or condemn us. Rather, we are saved through our belief and acceptance of Jesus as our Savior. What a gift! What then is expected of us for this gift? We are to love light more than darkness. We are to believe in the truth that comes from the light. We are to live our life following the path that Jesus set for us. In the end it really is simple for all of us. We should never forget that God sent his only begotten son into the world so that all who believe in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. What an amazing gift!

**PRAYER:** Thank you, Lord, for the gift of eternal life through our acceptance of Jesus as our Savior. Help us to remain focused on your amazing gift and guide us in our daily lives to best follow the path set for us by your Son. Amen.

## **March 13 - Ephesians 2:1-10**

### **Becky Wszalek**

Full confession. I eenie- meenie- minie -mo'd this scripture before reading it because I knew God would lead me in the right direction. Well, I have written this 6 times and I can only imagine that's partly God's point. Get ready for Easter. Think deeper. That's what Lent is about, right?

See, when I was growing up we didn't celebrate Lent. I didn't even know what it referred to. My Pentecostal preachers' home only celebrated Easter (and by the way, every Sunday was Pentecost!).

Anyway, here's my take on things. This scripture reading is about the saving grace of God. Grace isn't about how we do good things, we say a prayer, we read a special pamphlet or become magically saved. This isn't Hogwarts.

Now see, I personally love Hogwarts, Disney, and all sorts of other stuff but when it comes to Jesus, THE Christ. It's about what HE did. Not me.

Through faith by the grace of God we are saved from sin.  
THANK YOU, JESUS. Amen.

## March 14 - John 21:15-19

### Elissa McDonald

How many times has a controversial topic arisen in a group conversation and we stood silently or went along with the joke even when we felt uncomfortable? Denying or ignoring what we know is correct, what is right. I know I've been there probably more times than I want to admit.

By that fire in the courtyard, Simon Peter was there also. I imagine he felt alone, afraid, abandoned... his world as he knew it had just ended.

Fast forward a few days... here's Jesus and he's made the disciples breakfast. Can you imagine how Simon Peter must have felt when Jesus asked if he loved him challenging him to "feed my sheep" — three times, no less? The fact that Jesus still loved Simon Peter, even after his denial, and wanted him to continue working for good — talk about a mind-blower for Simon Peter, right?

I take this to heart very personally. While I may not have done what I should or could have in that group conversation or my daily life, God still loves me. Incredible, indeed! My job now is to share this amazing love by feeding the lambs and sheep. It's my job to help my neighbor in the small everyday way or my community or my world. It's everyone's job to reflect the love given to us. Show His love and care for our earth, love our neighbors, accept those who are different ... all of the actions Jesus taught us.

And ... feed his sheep.



## **March 15 - Isaiah 51:1-6**

**Nancy Meehan Yao**

**(Associate General Presbyter for Shenandoah Presbytery)**

When my grandmother was especially fussed with us, her noisy gaggle of 11 grandchildren, she would say in a cranky voice: "Listen here!" It meant we were on her last nerve, and we had better quiet down and behave. But in this passage from Isaiah 51, God is not scolding the people. Rather, God is calling them to hear — and to remember — and to obey and be comforted.

In Hebrew, the word for "Listen" also always connotes "obey." If you hear God's word, you will obey it. God is calling the people, who are in exile in Babylon, to hear God's word, and remember their past, their ancestors, and to see God's action in that past and in their present, and to obey, or live into that word.

The same is true for us. In the midst of this global pandemic, God is calling us to hear, and remember: remember the past, in which God acted with faith. Remember the tough times we have gone through, and how God always showed up. Remember God's faithful promises, that God's grace and mercy have no end. Other things will pass away, even the earth and heavens (and us) will eventually pass away. But God's promises will not. That is a word of deep comfort for us in trying times.

The Lord will comfort Zion. Comfort, in this passage, does not mean comfy slippers or a spot on the couch. This comfort is strong, like a rock, and fresh and green, full of new life, like Eden.

Perhaps it is hard, right now, to think about joy and gladness. Perhaps you are grieving for those who have died, or the fact that we still cannot gather together in the ways we once did.

Listen to me, says the Lord. God is speaking, not in a cranky voice, or as one who is fussed with us. God is speaking words of promise and of hope.

## **March 16 - Jeremiah 31:31-34**

### **Melissa Harmon**

I listen to a podcast called “Mythology.” I have listened to familiar myths of the West and have been introduced to myths that are not white, Eurocentric. When I looked at this text for today, I was struck by God's claiming us as God's own. In most the myths I listen to, none of those gods claim the mortals that they have created in the stories as their own. Yet our God claims us as God's very own. It is unique and vastly different, for a deity to seek out and want a relationship that does not benefit the deity. Of course, some of you may be saying that is why our God is the real deal. I am not seeking to point out the validity of our God. I want to point out what makes our God so different — covenants.

Jeremiah is presenting a new covenant in this passage. My study Bible points out this is not a new law that has to be followed. This covenant is not about earning God's grace. It is about what God is doing and going to do. I took, I will make, I will put, I will write, I will be their God, and I will forgive are God's actions in this text. Notice it does not say you will do \_\_\_\_\_. We cannot say or teach “Know the Lord,” for God's presence in our lives is not a manifestation of voices or strange visitors. Every beat of our heart tells us who we are and who God is. God is our God who will no longer look at our sins. Long before God became human and walked the face of this earth as Jesus Christ, the plan of salvation was being laid in our hearts. On this journey in Lent as we examine why God made a covenant with us to forgive our sins, take heart — literally — and hear God claiming you. Hold on to this truth and it will help you to get to the empty tomb.



## **March 17 - Romans 12:1-8**

### **Ruth Arnold**

When I read the Bible, I try to find how it relates to my life. This passage did not come easily. Paul opens this section of his letter to the Romans by telling his readers to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice" to God. What does Paul mean by this? A living sacrifice as opposed to a burnt offering? Or is he alluding to Jesus, who was sacrificed for us? Sacrifice is not a word I use or a concept I think about very often. The closest I can come is giving something up for Lent, but somehow I doubt Paul meant not eating chocolate for 40 days.

The passage began to make more sense when I read it in The Message, Eugene Peterson's Bible in "contemporary language." This suggests that we take our "everyday, ordinary life" and place that before God as an offering. "The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and by what we do for him."

Paul emphasizes that we have received gifts that may differ from those of others, according to God's grace. We are not all the same but we are all parts of one body in Christ. Our church would not function well without each of us using the gifts we have been given. Only by understanding this, can we accomplish what God wants us to do.

**PRAYER:** Dear Lord, we do not always recognize what it is you wish for us to be and do. We tend to think more highly of ourselves than we should and praise ourselves for the good we think we are doing for others, when instead it is you who does the giving. Help us to fulfill your will with cheerfulness. Amen.

## March 18 - Psalm 51:1-12

### Sarah Brodie

David's plea for forgiveness is no doubt appropriate, but it's a little over the top for me. I'll grant you that I'm viewing him through a 21st-century lens, but it all feels like the performance of someone who's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar — a self-conscious prayer of contrition, and not quite genuine.

I don't really feel David's sincerity emerge until about verse 11 when he when he reveals his fear that God will forget him and the Holy Spirit will desert him. I can identify with sometimes feeling so worthless that you think even God has no use for you.

I empathize with David even more strongly when he asks God to grant him a "willing spirit." When I'm at the end of my rope, when I feel restless for a change but I don't know what to shift, or when I know what I need to do but don't think I can, willingness is what I pray for. Anytime I find myself asking, "God, could you just give me a sign?," it usually means that I know what to do and I just need to pray for the willingness to do it. I pray for the willingness to recognize God's leadership and surrender to it. I pray for the willingness to be kinder than I want to be or stronger than I think I am. A willing spirit means that I am open to suggestions, I am hopeful about the outcome, I am teachable.

**PRAYER:** Dear God, as your will and your plan for my life are revealed, I pray you would give me the willingness to hear it, take it to heart and carried out. Amen.

## **March 19 - Psalm 121**

### **Joan Swift**

I will lift my eyes to hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of Heaven and Earth.

Each day I lift my eyes to mountains and the beauty of creation and am reassured. They remind me of all that is God's creation. But, until I explored several commentaries about this Psalm, I realized I had considered the beauty of the hills, but not about the meaning for those who were traveling to Jerusalem. They tell me that to them the hills mean both danger and safety. Danger could lurk unseen in those hills; or maybe from the hills, travelers could see the dangers below and the hills offer protection. But, the protection comes not from the hills or valleys, but from God the Creator. God is not a sleeping giant, but one who cares, hears, and sees.

Jeremy Bouma, a theologian, reminds us that the Psalmist uses metaphors to explain. Life's journey is dangerous; but God is not asleep. He tells the people:

God guards you; When your left side is busy, he watches over your right side. God is with you in sunlight and moonlight. The promise is not freedom from harsh times, sorrow, or from challenges. The promise is to be with you wherever you go.

These past few months have been difficult. People have died from Covid-19. We are separated from one another to keep safe. People have lost their incomes. Food insecurity plagues the poor. Divisions stand between us. But, we do not have to confront these difficulties alone, says the Psalmist. Lift your eyes to the hills, to the Maker and Creator of all.

Then comes the blessing:

The Lord watch over you. The Lord keep your going out and coming in, both now and always. Amen.

## **March 20 - Isaiah 43:16-21**

### **Karen Edwards**

I recently contemplated my answer to a question posed on a social media page: What are your favorite four lines of a hymn? I knew my answer immediately, then thought about it some more. We will come back to this.

God's message to Israel, living as strangers in a strange land, far away from anything familiar, long-distanced from life as they knew it: Out with the old, in with the new! Can you imagine? Can you imagine being a stranger in your own home, your world turned upside down from everything you once knew? Scared? Lonely? Isolated? Desperate for some vestige of your old life, your old God? Hmmm. Sound familiarly COVID-ish?

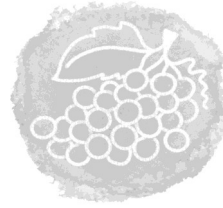
And yet, God says: Forget what has come before; turn your face and your heart to what I am about to do, to what is new. I will clear a path where there are only thorns and overgrowth and mountains and boulders. I will make rivers, running and overflowing their banks, in the driest desert. I'll do it because that's who I am – God who moves, who creates, who acts, who loves. I'll do it because you are my people, created in love by my hands, and exquisitely equipped to tell the world about all the newness that I am doing.

And here's the thing about our God – the one who makes us and all things new. This has ALWAYS been what God is up to. From the very beginning, making something from nothing. Loving us and the world into existence. Bringing life from death. What's new is not really so new at all. Praise be.

My favorite four hymn lines?

"And when, in scenes of glory,  
I sing the new, new song,  
'Twill be the old, old story  
That I have loved so long."

**March 21 - Matthew 16:13-20**  
**Adam, Katie, Logan, and Aaron**  
**Campbell**



FIFTH SUNDAY  
*in*  
LENT



## **March 22 - Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29**

### **Bronwen Boswell**

#### **(General Presbytery of Shenandoah Presbytery)**

In the upstairs hallway of my childhood home there was a framed picture of Psalm 118:24 "This is the Day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Growing up I didn't think much about it; it was just always there — a picture on the wall that I saw daily as I headed down the stairs for breakfast. I thought more about it as my parents were thinking of moving from that home because I realized how that verse had helped shape my journey in life.

Though a declared optimist, that verse was, and is, steadfast in how it reminds me of the One who created this day, the One who has brought salvation to the world, the One who is steadfast in loving us every day and that is an amazing gift. We give thanks for the journey God has called us to be a part of.

What happened to the framed verse? I don't know. When I asked my mother if I could have it, she wasn't ready to part with it, and when the house was being sold, she was in assisted living and well, things got cleaned out. What I did learn was that the verse was the front cover of a magazine and my mother had framed it. It was a verse she saw daily that informed her life and came to inform mine.

"O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good: his steadfast love endures forever."

## **March 23 - Isaiah 50:4-9a**

### **Laura Lawson**

As people of privilege, it can be difficult to read a passage that advocates for those saying, "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard," and not somehow feel guilty that we cannot relate. In this passage, the one who gets God's help is the servant who is humiliated. It can blur the lines between humility and humiliation. While God calls us to be humble, God does not call us to be humiliated. Then how, as people who may not already experience regular humiliation, does this passage apply to us?

In verse 8, the servant says, "Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together."

Think of a time in your life when you were humiliated. Was there a person who stood with you?

The scene opens on a middle school cafeteria. Kids are sitting at tables, filling the spaces with yelling and laughter. Twelve year old Laura is sitting with her best friend, Brittany, quietly talking about the morning they'd had so far. From a table nearby, Chris (a loud boy who is always struggling to get attention) stands up, beef jerky in hand, and stalks over to where Laura and her friend are sitting. He throws the beef jerky at her, while laughing and yelling out, "Look! She had an accident!" (Although, Chris's actual words were much more colorful than is fit to print in this devotion.) Tears start to fill Laura's eyes when around the corner comes Shaun (a tough kid who didn't care to be in school, but got help from Laura in Spanish class). Shaun pieces together what is going on, grabs Chris by the shirt and lifts him up against the wall. Shaun asks, "You have a problem with her?" "Uh....no," replies (now very scared) Chris. Shaun says, "Good. Then it shouldn't be a problem for you to go over there, pick up your mess, and apologize to her for what you've done." Shaun lets go of Chris's shirt, who quickly scrambles to pick up the pieces of beef jerky from the floor while saying, "Sorry," and then runs back to sit at his table.

This story could have been one that I hung onto for a long time as an incredibly humiliating moment in middle school. Instead, because I had someone to contend with me...to stand together with me, it is one of my most favorite stories to tell (especially to the youth).

Let us stand together, fighting for those who God stands with — changing humiliating moments into stories that people love to tell.

## March 24 - Philippians 2:5-11

### Martha Pierce

This is a new passage for me. It shows our Lord Jesus from servant to king. In verse 5, Paul exhorts us to have the same thoughts or attitudes as Jesus which in turn will influence our actions. This is the same Jesus who served the undeserving to the point of dying on the cross.

In verses 6 through 8, Paul gives us a reference to what we are to do to be like Jesus. Paul encourages us to take on the likeness of Jesus:

- ◆ To not use our advantages over others.
- ◆ To have a servant attitude.
- ◆ To humble ourselves.
- ◆ To be obedient to God.

I know that I struggle daily to be like Jesus. I can be unloving, lofty, and disobedient. I am definitely an undeserving. But Jesus died for me. I was once told that if I was the only one on earth, Jesus would have died just for me. He loved me so much that he wanted me to have eternal life with him in heaven. How amazing!

In verses 9 -10, Paul lets us know that because of Jesus' obedience, God exalted Jesus and gave him a name above all names. I'm reminded of a famous quote from William Shakespeare, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Shakespeare suggests that names do not hold worth nor meaning. That thought in regard to Jesus' name is in opposition to what God intended for Jesus. I think a quote from Canadian writer, Kelley Armstrong, is more significant. She said, "A name is so important. A surname connects you to your past, to your family. Even a given name has meaning — why did you parents pick that particular one?" My mother encouraged me to select names for my children that would look good on a business sign. She was basically telling me that names mattered and were important. God gave Jesus a name at which at the utterance of his name every knee will bow and every tongue will say that Jesus is Lord. Jesus' name is significant — it means Savior. One who saves, delivers, and rescues. We know that because of the death of Jesus, we are saved. Matthew 1:21 says, "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, let us remember as we move toward Good Friday and Easter, that Jesus came to earth as a humble servant who had a desire to help the undeserving. Help me remember that because of his death on the cross, Jesus is still helping us all! And most of all, help us remember that Jesus has been exalted and is my God each and every day not just at Lent. Amen.



## **March 25 - Mark 4:35-41**

### **Thom Jennings**

As the first of the Gospels, Mark particularly appeals to me. Written perhaps as early as fifty years after the resurrection, it is concise yet loaded with information. For instance, Mark's recounting of the time Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee is only 6 verses long, yet it is filled with detail, answering the kinds of questions the late Larry King might have asked: "Why did they get in the boat? Where were they going? Were there other boats? Where did Jesus sit? What did Jesus do? Was Jesus afraid? What exactly did Jesus say?" And of course, the biggest question—asked by the disciples themselves that unusual day: Who exactly is this Jesus?

Mark does not answer that last question here in this passage because he previously answered it at the very beginning of his book. It is the question we still ask two thousand years later. The answer is found in our deep faith and is given by Mark in the very opening lines of his book when he declares "... Jesus, the Son of God."

**PRAYER:** We pray for calm, O Lord, particularly in storm filled times, and for that inner peace only You provide. Amen.

## March 26 - Psalm 42

### Linda Owen

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

As a lifelong church chorister, I have expressed in music the psalmist's longing for God in times of distress. Music provides a path to share deep emotions of grief and despair, praise and hope, and I can hear familiar refrains as I read and reread Psalm 42. Job's trials come to mind, too, as the psalmist shares internal struggles to overcome doubts with faith.

God created us with the capacity to feel deeply. I share two meaningful life events when I experienced the mystery of holding despair and hope alternately and simultaneously.

When my father-in-law died unexpectedly at age 60, I gathered with family and friends to grieve. Rod and I felt his death keenly, mourning not only for ourselves but for his loss as a new grandfather to our 3-month-old son. It was a few days before Christmas. I held Bryn close and prayed, feeling both distress and gratitude for John Owen's life, for the gift of his grandchild's life, and for the promise of new life in the birth of Jesus.

Years later, I gathered with a beloved group of women, my sister and nieces, to say goodbye to our mother and grandmother around a nursing home bed. This time those deep emotions of grief, hope, and praise, did not cause as much internal conflict. This time there was joy and acceptance when she died the next morning, Easter Sunday, holding my sister's hand, surrounded by a chaplain's prayer, our family's love, and God's peace and promise.

**PRAYER:** Loving God, You created us to feel simply and deeply. Thank you for walking with us on this Lenten journey and through all of our life journeys. Thank you for giving us sacred memories to cherish. Amen.

## **March 27 - Micah 7:1-7**

### **Robyn Sommerfield**

In reading this passage, it has come to my attention that Micah may know exactly how it feels to live in a house with teenagers who aren't "sharing the space well" during a global pandemic. Micah has perhaps heard the lamentations of two teenagers crying injustice regarding their treatment at the hands of the other. Micah has perhaps opened the fridge, to be confronted with an empty milk container. And perhaps he has been in the bathroom, realizing too late that no square remains on the roll.

Trying times can make for frustrating circumstances — which often escalate an already volatile environment. Each of us defines personal struggle as something different. But all of us are experiencing it on an exacerbated level due to political partisanship, families in crisis due to housing and food insecurity, or COVID-19 restrictions in seeing loved ones. Micah bears witness to the fruitless vines, political corruption, and familial discontent. But I believe Micah's most powerful statement is, "as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me."

In this, we know that no matter how trying our current experiences may be, we can always speak to God – and he will listen. I never imagined or contemplated the challenges that current events have brought forward; but in turn, perhaps I've never imagined or contemplated the positive elements that will be left in its wake. To this, I will patiently wait for the day that my children change the empty toilet paper roll through their own industry. I believe better days are coming and that it will happen. Because with God, all things are possible.

## March 28 - Mark 11:1-11

### Sarah Brodie

I know this scene. Palm Sunday, Jesus' big day. I read this passage several times, trying to find an emotional connection to it. I'm having no luck so I jot down some notes. "Why did Jesus ride when he's been walking everywhere his entire ministry?" "Why a donkey?" Good old Google helped me find answers: fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy; riding is more "kingly"; in Biblical times, kings rode a donkey to symbolize peace; the donkey is a humble animal of the common people; Mary rode a donkey into Bethlehem; etc.

So now I have a more intellectual understanding of Mark 11. Not good enough. I shift my perspective and try to imagine this scene from Jesus' POV, and then I get it. At this point, Jesus already knows what lies ahead of him. His betrayal and death will be a surprise to everyone but him. How bittersweet those Hosannas must have sounded to his ears. People recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the one who will save them, and yet he will not be saved.

Jesus was divine, but he was also human. He lived as one of God's people not only to save us, but also to understand us. Jesus was flesh and bone and blood and feelings, like you and me. Was he afraid? Was he unsure? Did he want to quit? This part of Mark's Gospel doesn't reveal Jesus' state of mind, but I think it took tremendous courage for him to stay on his path. I can borrow his courage when I am struggling.

Dear God, I am grateful that there is nothing that I can confess that you don't already know, understand and love about me. There is nothing that I can't face with you as my partner, savior and friend. Amen.



## March 29 - John 12:1-11

### Bill Terry

The Gospel of John moves quickly from one episode to another. When reading it, I find myself wanting to stop the narrative and say, "Slow down, Jesus! I need an explanation!" By the time we reach the twelfth chapter, the chief priests are already calling for the arrest and death of Jesus, the tables have been overturned in the temple, and Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. This short series of verses is full of implied action and intrigue.

#### **The scene:**

We are in Bethany, at the home of Lazarus. A dinner for Jesus is planned.

#### **The actors (and their actions):**

**Lazarus** -- quiet, in the background

**Mary, sister of Lazarus** -- anoints the feet of Jesus with costly perfume and wipes his feet with her hair.

**Judas** -- Incredulous that the perfume was not sold, with the money to go to the poor -- and then we are offered a timely parenthetical comment that reads like a narrator's voice-over: "Judas doesn't really care about the poor . . ."

**Jesus** -- having dinner with friends -- with a comment that leaves me with questions: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

**The crowd of Jews** -- interested in Jesus and the newly raised-from-the-dead Lazarus.

**The chief priests** -- call for a death sentence for Lazarus because Jews were following Jesus due to the miracle.

I tend to look for myself in these stories. Which part would I play? Can you find yourself? Which part would you play?

Are you Lazarus? Has Jesus performed a miracle on you?

Are you Mary? Would you genuflect and anoint the feet of Jesus?

Are you Judas? Do you look out for yourself, wondering what could be in it for you?

Are you in the crowd of Jews? Are you interested in the spectacle, willing to be moved?

Are you a chief priest? Do you value the status quo, justice be damned?

As for me, my answer to all of these questions is a resounding YES! -- and I still implore Jesus for an explanation that satisfies me.

## **March 30 - John 12:20-36**

### **Savannah Faith Clark**

For most people, the legacy that is left behind as they move through the phases of their life is a significant weight on their hearts. We constantly work to ensure that one day when we're gone, people will remember us through our kindness, hard work, faith, etc. The concept of death is frightening because as humans we closely associate it with the idea of being forgotten. Jesus shows us in John 12: 20-36 that as Christians, it is quite the opposite.

In this passage, Jesus stood before a crowd and predicted his own death. By doing so, he revealed his legacy. It was one of eternal life for us in heaven because he had lived a life of self-emptying love on earth. In this passage he explained to the crowd that in order for us to live he must go. His death was a physical glorification of God. His legacy was not about his worldly accomplishments. Rather, it was about what he had accomplished through his death. Not only did he die in order to save us, but also to draw more people to the cross. Jesus was calling all of us to do the same and pour our hearts into our neighbors near and far to be beacons of his God's love. We can never be Jesus but we can follow in his footsteps if we are willing to love all of God's people fully and deeply.

## March 31 - John 13:21-32

### Rebecca Allison

"From the Table to the Promised Land"

Scene - Jesus, 12 disciples arranged around tables of food.

Everyone's lounging in the Greek style of dining, relaxed or reclining. Jesus feels troubled in spirit and tells the disciples he knows who will betray him.

Curiosity spreads through the Twelve. John coaxes Simon Peter to ask Jesus who it will be. Jesus dips his bread and announces that the person he gives the bread to will be the one who betrays him. He hands it to Judas.

Jesus asks Judas to not dilly-dally about it.

Judas exits quickly – it is dark out, it is night.

Jesus states that, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified and God has been glorified in him."

etc, etc...

DUN-DUN- DAAHHHH

End Scene

This was prophecy. This was scripture revealed. Jesus knew what would come to pass. Some scholars say that Judas was taken over by Satan, that he gave into sinful influence. The devil made him do it.

I like Dr. Benjamin E. Mays' Morehouse College sermon that offers a different view. Judas didn't have to take the bread but he did. He embraced the darkness of that particular moment. Was this an act of courage? To accept this role? The other disciples didn't tackle Judas to keep him from leaving. Did Judas just play his part in creating the path to redemption for all of mankind? Maybe he helped set the table for the greatest commandment of all.

It's no surprise that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., set the stage in his Memphis speech noting the will of God, the mountain top, the darkness and the promised land. How often does our contemporary life reflect on scriptures lessons? What stands between us and the inexhaustible Living and Loving God?

**PRAYER:** Creator and creating God lend your light to the path that we must seek, places that we must go, and words that need to be said and heard blended with the actions that glorify all of Creation. Let us embrace being part of your plan. Amen.

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

### John Peterson

Maundy Thursday gains its name from the Latin word for commandment. Traditionally on this night we recall Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples when he broke bread, poured a cup, gave them to the disciples, and said, "Do this in remembrance of me." But John's gospel lifts up a different commandment for this night, the command to love one another. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another," says Jesus. Earlier that evening Jesus showed the disciples what love looks like when he knelt and washed their feet. He did this, writes John, knowing what lay ahead of him — the arrest, the trial, the cross, the tomb. He did this, saying, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."



Jesus does not command the disciples to do anything that he was unwilling to do himself; he does not command them to do anything that he did not show them how to do. In his words and example, he prepared them for that time, soon to come, when he would no longer be with them in person, and they would have to fend for themselves. It is that time in which we live; Jesus is not with us in person, but his words and example endure: love one another, serve one another, do this in remembrance of him. Not only at the Lord's Table on this night do we remember him, but in every act of love, in every act of humble service, in ways big and small and seemingly insignificant, like washing feet, we remember him. For that is what he taught us, that is what he showed us, that is what he commanded us!

**PRAYER:** Lord, we remember you this day with great gratitude for your words, your example, your love that never ends. Help us to love, to live, and to serve as you showed us, taught us, and commanded us. Amen.



## April 2 - John 18:1-19:30

### John Peterson

Good Friday always seems badly misnamed. There is nothing good about Good Friday for Jesus! It begins in the dark of night with his betrayal and after a whirlwind of activity — arrest, denial, trial, sentencing, crucifixion, suffering — it ends on the cross as he draws his last breath and whispers, “It is finished.” It all happens in less than a day! It is a day when pulpits are often stripped bare and crosses are draped in black. The music of the day evokes lament and repentance for the pain he suffered for us. What then can possibly be good about Good Friday?

The name Good Friday is variously attributed to roots in “God Friday” or a word meaning “Holy” Friday or its tie to the good news of Easter. Many Christians just skip over it in Holy Week on their way from the palm-waving hosannas on Palm Sunday to the joyous alleluias of Easter. But there is no empty tomb without the cross, no resurrection without Jesus’ death. On this day we pause to remember the grim reality of that day and those events – crucifixion, suffering, and death. We remember them because they bear witness to the great love Jesus had for us and for the whole world. What he endured, he endured for us. What he suffered, he suffered for us.

One of our hymns, Ah, Holy Jesus, captures it well:

“Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.  
‘Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;  
I crucified thee.”

On this day we remember that it was for our sins that Jesus died, and we dare not take that great gift for granted! In this pandemic we all have suffered in one way or another, but our suffering pales in comparison to what Jesus suffered for us. Because he did, in the midst of even our worst days, we still dare to hope!

**PRAYER:** Lord, forgive us for ever taking for granted your great suffering sacrifice of love for us. We are grateful, eternally grateful. Have mercy upon us and grant us your peace. Amen.



Good  
FRIDAY

## **April 3 - John 19:38-42**

### **Patti Seaton**

They didn't know.  
The body of Jesus had to come down  
Before the Sabbath.

They only knew.  
It must be prepared and  
Could not be hanging after sundown

They wanted to know  
He was in a lovely place.  
Unused by others.

And so it was.  
The preparation was accomplished.  
He was in the tomb.

We know the story.  
We know the tomb didn't hold Him.  
Is our personal preparation for His return complete?

**PRAYER:** Almighty Lord of all, we ask you to guide us in our preparation for your return. Help us to know.

## **April 4 - John 20:1-18**

### **Sarah Wolf**

The sanctuary of my home church in Durham looks very similar to our sanctuary at Covenant. The only big difference is that there are windows down both sides of the sanctuary, instead of just one side at Covenant.

We used to have this grand tradition at Easter where we would enter the sanctuary on Easter morning and it would still feel like Good Friday/Holy Saturday. Heavy, dark boards were placed on the outside of the windows. A black cloth draped the large cross in the chancel. Not a lily could be found.

The minister would get up into the pulpit and begin to read the familiar Easter story.

Then the processional hymn began.

As the congregation sang, "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today," folks standing outside the sanctuary, waiting for their cue, would take down the heavy boards from the windows, one by one, as the choir processed down the aisle, light slowly starting to flood the sanctuary. The flower guild would surround the Communion Table, pulpit, and lectern with lilies. The black cloth from the cross came down, revealing a now empty cross.

Despite being (at best) a mediocre trombonist, I had the privilege of playing in our church's brass ensemble. And as such, I got the best seat in the house. I loved the view I had from my seat in the chancel as the sanctuary slowly got brighter and brighter. I could see the congregation in all their Easter finery as well as the choir waiting to process in the Narthex.

One especially memorable year, I watched as Esther, a professor from Ghana who was teaching at Duke's Divinity School, danced in the Narthex. Her eyes were closed, the biggest, widest grin ever transforming her entire face, her hands reaching up to heaven as she twirled around and around, her choir robe swirling around her. She was visible only to the choir and to those of us already



in the chancel. It was her own private Easter celebration and we were blessed to witness it.

I remember thinking, "Ah, this is what Easter is about. This is what Easter joy looks like."

I pray that you are able to find joy today. The long 40 days of Lent are over. Death has been defeated once again. We can loudly proclaim our "Alleluias!" once more.

Take time to celebrate that. Have a dance party with your family. Dance by yourself. Dance in your living room. Dance in your recliner. Not a dancer? That's okay! Find some way to dance metaphorically: Sing out LOUD. (I recommend Handel's Hallelujah Chorus.) Compose a poem or song. Paint a picture. Offer joyful prayers of gratitude to God.

Find your own way to celebrate the Easter Good News. Dance in your own way. This has been one of the hardest years of our lives for many of us. Let's celebrate that we have made it through once again and celebrate the God who leads us there.

So matter what form it takes, to quote the great Lee Ann Womack: Today, I hope you dance.

**PRAYER:** God of Easter morning who raised your Son from death into life everlasting, help us to find true joy today and all our days as we give thanks for being your children, your Easter people. Amen.

2021 Lenten Devotion of  
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