

2013 Lenten Devotions

by Members of
River Road Church, Baptist

Editor: Tom Graves

Produced by the Devotions Subcommittee of the Communications Committee & Team

Tuesday, February 12

INTRODUCTION

Lent is one of the most ancient observances of the Christian church. It occurs during the time between Ash Wednesday and Easter, and spans some 40 weekdays in addition to the six Sundays of Lent. The name is derived from the German and old English words for “length,” referring to the springtime lengthening of daylight.

Lent is a time for Christians to prepare themselves personally for the proper observance of the passion of Christ during Holy Week, the crucifixion, and Easter. Preparation for those events is a time for believers to confess their sinfulness, reflect on the suffering of Christ, accept God’s loving forgiveness, and rejoice in the fact of the resurrection.

The words of the prophet Isaiah express very clearly the attitude of Lent: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). We have the opportunity to grow in our faith during the Lenten season by recognizing that we are all stained with sin, realizing that Christ takes upon himself the punishment for our sin through his suffering, and understanding that the resurrection validates this pattern of suffering service.

With thanks to all who participated in the production of this Lenten Devotional Guide we invite you to a time of growing faith and dedication as we prepare our lives to follow more closely in the way of Jesus Christ.

Tom Graves

Wednesday, February 13

The Challenges of Temptation

Luke 4:1-15

The first day of Lent shoves us into the solitary wilderness of temptations. Who else but Jesus could report on these struggles, since he was in this desolate place by himself? One main function of the season is its call to self-reflection, where our strengths and weaknesses are laid bare.

When we are by ourselves, there is no one else to fool but ourselves. In the places where we hunger and thirst, our capacities and character rise to the surface. Temptation in the context of this chapter is synonymous with testing, those moments when we press theory against practice to determine if the “product” will survive.

The first challenge, under the privation of many days without food, was to assess whether he would use his power mainly to care for himself. Would his skills be employed mainly through the “magic” of shortcuts (stone to bread)? Would such powers mostly be engaged in self-serving purposes?

The enemy he faced was within himself. Again, why not indulge oneself in the acquisition of possessions and power? Could greed and self-indulgence trump the power he already owned? (“All these kingdoms will be yours, if you will only surrender principles and purposes.”)

The next struggle was apparently a measure of his discovered skills (at a wedding in Cana?). Why not leap without looking and make a spectacular attraction of yourself? (Or, a spectacle of yourself?) Each wooing invitation forged a personal opportunity for defining self— how he would choose to live.

We too are tested daily by the seduction of the selfish, the immediate, the acquisitive, and the superficial. In the wilderness of plenty we can easily believe the lie that focusing on self, or acquiring possession and power, or entertaining ourselves—will fill the void inside. We understand and confess that our idolatry of self, of things, of power, and of status have often controlled our life.

He also understands. He was here. He heard the same voices. He just knew better. And he hopes we’ll know better because he was here. Temptations do not haunt us only where we are weak; they assail us also in our strengths.

Daniel G. Bagby

Thursday, February 14

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist is in the Judean wilderness preaching to the crowd and baptizing them. John was, in modern lingo, the “opening act” for Jesus.

My mental image of John, from reading the scripture, is that he was a bit of a hippie; very organic, before organic was in vogue, or outside the norm for that matter. He wore clothes woven of camel hair tied with a leather belt; he ate locusts and wild honey. Yet, here he is, preaching to all who come to listen: rich, poor, Jews, Gentiles, etc.

One group looking on must have been less than sincere for John addresses them harshly. Maybe they came simply to “watch the show.” Can’t you imagine it? Wild-looking John, preaching and baptizing in the river and the fancy Pharisees and Sadducees looking on piously at the activity.

Straightaway, John calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers! “You can’t just watch; you must prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. You cannot rest on your laurels, children of Abraham. You must produce good fruit or be cast out of the kingdom of God.” Note that John is referring not to works, but fruits. Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruits of the Holy Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

John baptized with water, a baptism symbolic of death to life without Christ and rising to life anew with Christ. John said that Jesus would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus wants us to produce good fruits so that we are like the heart of the grain, heavy with substance, not shallow and lightweight like the husk from the grain that will be blown away and burned up in the fire. He wants us to be vessels that are ready to be baptized with the Holy Spirit, to live our lives for God.

Prayer:

Lord, let us accept your baptism of the Holy Spirit, and let our fruits of the Holy Spirit burn brightly for all the world to see You through the way we live.

Mark Miller

Friday, February 15

A Cry of Faith?

Psalm 22

“My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?” (Psalm 22:1)

Jesus cries on the cross because life at that moment hurts. Was Jesus being faithless when he cried out? We cry also when we experience pain, desolation, and loneliness. When we cry like Jesus are we being faithless? Is it faithless or profane to question God when life is horrible? It is not.

Crying out is an act of faith. It may be the only faithful thing we can do in the moment. But it is an act of faith. When we call on God, it is proof that we believe that He is, that we are His, and that we trust Him in the midst of our most trying times ... even when we don’t understand why life is the way it is. Faith is an act that bears out our belief.

In our hardest moments, when we can see Him least, we still call out to Him because we believe He is standing for us even though we don’t know how. These types of cries are an expression of a faithful one seeking understanding, not an expression of a faithless one. This type of “cry” affirms (“proves” if you would) that we believe that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor heights, nor depths, nor any other created thing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38).

It would be a strange God and a stranger faith that defined faithfulness as only faithful when life was easy and things were good.

Prayer:

God, when I feel faithless, show me who I truly am that I not demean myself whom you have fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139).

Currie Carter

Saturday, February 16

Confession and Forgiveness

Psalm 32

All of us hope for happiness. I certainly do. The Psalmist says, “Happy are those whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs are pardoned.” It is amazing, though, how we sometimes hang on to the very thing that keeps us from being happy! Pride and defensiveness rear their ugly heads and prevent us from the very confession that will bring relief from our anguish. Pride has not only kept me, on many occasions, from confessing that I’ve done wrong, but from even recognizing that wrong in the first place.

The recipe for bringing relief for our burdened heart is this: First, is self-examination and yearning for God’s leadership in our lives. Then setting aside pride in order to see things for what they are, followed by sincere confession to God. And, at last, accepting that God has love large enough to forgive us. The Psalmist gets right to the point, and says in verse 9, “Don’t behave like... a mule...” He also reminds us of God’s unfailing love, and how He guards us and enfolds us in salvation. We are to obey Him, and then rejoice - shout for joy! We are loved and forgiven!

Ann Hays

Sunday, February 17

The Lord Is My Refuge

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

The Psalmist writes as one who by faith chooses God for his protection and who will find all in Him that he needs and desires. Those who have found the comfort of making the Lord their refuge, cannot but desire that others may also do so. The spiritual life is protected by God’s grace from the temptations of Satan, which are as the snares of the fowler, and from the contagion of sin, which is an offensive pestilence. Great security is promised to believers in the midst of danger. Wisdom will keep them from being afraid without cause and faith will keep them from being unduly afraid. Whatever is done, our Heavenly Father’s will is accomplished and we have no reason to fear. God’s people shall see, not only God’s promises fulfilled, but also His judgments. Let sinners come unto the Lord by his mercy through the name of Jesus Christ and encourage others to trust in Him also.

No matter what occurs in life, nothing will ultimately hurt the believer. When trouble and illness come, they come not to hurt us. Those who believe and know God will pray constantly and focus their love upon Him. His promise is that He will in due time deliver the believer out of trouble and at the same time will be with us in the midst of trouble. Following the Lord's ways will help us avoid people and places of trouble where no good can be done, but only evil results. When the end of our life does come, God will save us and give us eternal life by grace through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Gladys Fleming

Monday, February 18

A Longing for the Divine

Psalm 42

While on a winter walk in our suburban neighborhood, my wife and I halted when a deer leapt across our path and disappeared into the woods. Four more deer, in quick succession, followed after the first. These graceful creatures are resigned to a restless, exhausting life of running from the suburban sprawl shrinking their safe habitat.

The writer of Psalm 42 confesses that his spirit is like a deer – weary and panting from being chased and in search of a flowing stream of fresh water to quench its terrible thirst. We do not know what circumstances have left the Psalmist so depleted, but it is clear that he feels harassed, pursued, and anxious.

In his distress, the Psalmist announces his longing for the Divine, the living presence of One who is water for a thirsty soul: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (42:3a).

Eugene Peterson, in a book titled *Praying With the Psalms*, reminds us that God “comes to us in the depths, sharing what is most eternal in Himself with what is most needful in us.” When life chases us to the point of exhaustion, body and soul, we offer ourselves over to a Divine Mercy.

In this Lenten season we need the twofold reminder of the Psalmist: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my help and my God (42:5, 11).”

Eugene Peterson voices a prayer we all could speak:

“Eternal God, I thank you for getting underneath the surface clamor and frenzy of my life and creating a reality in me that is impervious to oppression, springing up in hope and praising your great name in Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Mike Clingenpeel

Tuesday, February 19

God Is Our Refuge

Psalm 46

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1 NRSV).

As we make our way through Lent, let us take refuge in God’s promises. Our hope is secure in the strength of the Lord.

Let us take refuge in God’s love. He will never forsake us. He is forever in our midst.

Let us remember that God redeemed us through Jesus Christ. Let us take refuge in His sacrifice.

Let us take refuge in the power of Christ’s resurrection. It is our eternal hope.

Let us remember that God has made His dwelling place in our hearts. We can take refuge in the spirit He has given us. Our strength is in the name of the Lord.

The Almighty God is our rock and our salvation. We have nothing to fear. In praise and thanksgiving let us take refuge in God.

Prayer:

Loving God, thank you for being our refuge and strength. Thank you for being a very present help in trouble.

Frank Schwall

Wednesday, February 20

A Penitent’s Prayer

Psalm 51:1-17

David, mighty warrior and King of Israel during its Golden Age, was “a man after God’s own heart” and yet David sinned. He seduced Bathsheba and sent her husband, Uriah, to the front lines of battle where he was killed. David then made Bathsheba his wife.

When he was confronted by Nathan the prophet, David confessed his sin. In Psalm 51 he asked God to wash away his iniquity and create in him a pure heart, recognizing that ultimately he sinned against God.

God forgave David and God forgives us our transgressions if we sincerely repent and ask forgiveness.

I find that I frequently ask forgiveness for the same sins over and over again, not quite accepting that God blots out my transgressions when I am truly repentant. I think He forgives us more readily than we forgive ourselves.

By definition, to repent means to turn from sin and to reform one’s life. We can’t continue to do wrong if we’re truly repentant; and when we ask forgiveness for our sins of omission, we are called to action in being God’s hands, feet, and voice in His world. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and offer hope to the hopeless. May it be!

Beth Wilson

Thursday, February 21

In the Potter's Hands

Jeremiah 18:1-11

I have always wanted to control my own destiny, to know what was lying around the next corner. So In my first semester of college, I spent several days studying the course book. I carefully planned each course that I would take for every semester. So by the middle of my senior year, I managed to pick up a third major and start a full-time job – my plan had worked, and I was the master of my destiny.

Jeremiah speaks of a Potter making vessels or jars out of clay, forming them with his hands. This was appropriate imagery for ancient Israel, whose destiny directly relied on their obedience to the Almighty. But as for me, I have always desired to be the one to form my future and my present. Though perhaps imperfect, this vessel has been set for many years, hardened by the kiln of my own choosing.

Recently that mindset was shattered. Within a span of seven months, my brother David committed suicide. My sister Melanie died from a cruel combination of MS and MD. Then my father died, more than partly from a broken heart. All of a sudden this seemingly hard, sturdy vessel was being smashed back down into a pliable lump of clay. And all of a sudden, I find myself more than ever relying on the hands of the Potter to re-mold and form me into a more useful vessel.

It is a cruel world that brings us suffering, grief and despair. But we have a loving God who is ready, like a Master Craftsman, to help us pick up the pieces of our lives and carry on.

Matt Straw

Friday, February 22

Doing the Right Thing

Isaiah 1:11-17

While Dr. Cecil Sherman was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina, he told the following story about himself: One day he was approached by a group of ladies in the church who wanted to start a clothing closet for the needy in Asheville. They informed him that they had found some space in the basement of the church and that they would collect, organize, and staff the project. They were only asking him for permission and his support. He wished them well and said that he would be praying for them. After several months, the ladies came to him with a problem. They needed someone to help staff the closet on a Friday evening and they were asking him to help. All of a sudden his outlook changed. It was one thing to pray for a project and offer words of support, it was quite another thing to actually put your hands to the project. It put you in close proximity with folks who were dirty and who smelled unwashed. He noted that performing the task had far greater value than thinking about the task or praying for the project or even giving your money.

The passage in Isaiah presents a similar truth. The Lord had become weary of the Israelites' token sacrifices, offerings, and convocations. If one prayed hard enough, gave enough offering, and attended enough services, they believed they had done their part. Isaiah reminded the readers that the Lord required more from them. They had to leave

their “comfort zones” and become active participants in the affairs of the greater community. Do justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and care for the widow, do these things and the Lord will be pleased with your sacrifice. During the season of Lent, we are to examine ourselves, listen quietly for the voice of instruction, and then prepare ourselves for the task that is presented to us. It is not only the right thing to do; it is the godly thing to do.

Prayer:

Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving, I will be a living sanctuary for You. Amen

Chester Phelps

Saturday, February 23

Have You Heard?

Isaiah 40:1-11, 21-31

Today is my son, Nathan's birthday. Twenty years ago, we were waiting and waiting and waiting for him to be born. I was induced the day before and still labored for almost 24 hours. I grew weary, but he eventually emerged and was so worth the wait!

At the very same time, my mother-in-law, who had been diagnosed with a brain tumor at age 55, had suffered a major setback and was rapidly declining in health and in life. We were waiting for her to die. I had been induced so that Nathan would enter this world before she departed this world.

Waiting is often equated with inactivity. The very idea of waiting seems so counterintuitive to those of us who yearn to be productive. During periods of waiting, God is refining us for what he has in store. He is replenishing our energy and refilling our emptiness. He is giving us fresh strength.

During my labor with Nathan I often felt like I went hours with idleness. And just as some days there didn't seem to be much progress, or even regress on the part of my mother-in-law, that interlude was purposeful preparation for me from God's perspective. Those who wait, says the Lord, may end up even stronger.

To wait is often more difficult than to work. To wait for God is not simply a matter of patience or endurance. To wait for God is about trust and hope. God doesn't come and go; God lasts. Therefore, we do not lose heart.

Do you not know? Have you not heard?

Audrey Thomson

Sunday, February 24

Trust in the Lord

Psalms 27

Like the 23rd Psalm, Psalm 27 eloquently expresses a central theme of the biblical faith: trust in the Lord. Also like the 23rd Psalm, Psalm 27 looks realistically at a

fear-filled world that surrounds us and threatens to overcome us, yet the Psalmist insists, I will trust in the Lord.

Verse 1 states the clear theme of the passage: “The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” But then we read of trials and terrors being faced by the Psalmist: “my enemies rise up to oppose me, a hostile army is ready to attack me, my enemies are lying about me, my enemies are prepared to hurt me, and all the while God seems hidden and to have forsaken me.” In desperation the Psalmist screams out for help, facing overwhelming threats and fears.

Then there is a pause... who knows for how long the Psalmist waits in hopeful silence. When finally the waiting is over, we are advised in the last verse: “Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage.” Against every enemy that one can imagine the Lord prevails. In the end the Psalmist proclaims with confidence: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”

How do we move from fear to trust? In his time of trouble and need the Psalmist asked for only one thing, to be in the presence of God. In God’s presence the Psalmist finds salvation to overcome all enemies, light to drive out all darkness, and strength to uphold us in all of our moments of weakness.

Prayer:

In times of fear and doubt, Lord, let me see your presence that I may trust in you alone.

Tom Graves

Monday, February 25

Servants for Justice

Isaiah 42:1-9

From internal historical references, this section of Isaiah has been dated to approximately 545-539 B.C.E. The author would thus have been addressing the Israelites toward the end of the Babylonian exile. In these specific verses, a servant is presented (vv. 1-4) and is commissioned by God (vv. 5-9).

Who is the servant? One common interpretation is that servant is the nation Israel, God’s people; this identification is explicit in nearby passages of Isaiah. If true, Isaiah’s audience would likely have seen themselves as “the servant.”

It is remarkable that God’s message to the servant, and thus to people in the “despair of exile,” is a call to action: they are to be “servants for justice.” What does “justice” mean in the Bible? The Mosaic tradition of justice involves reordering “social relations for the sake of the vulnerable,” so that the poor may live with dignity and in security. Freeing prisoners may be understood as one example of this social reordering, since imprisonment was often related to poverty. In bringing forth justice, the demeanor of the servant is one of gentleness (“a bruised reed he will not break”), but also firmness (“he will not falter”).

Prayer:

Dear God, in our times of despair, call us to action. Make us servants for justice. Teach us to lift up the poor. May we do your work with gentleness and firmness. Amen.

Seth Roberts

Tuesday, February 26

A Challenge to Our Faith

Isaiah 53: 1-9

This chapter begins with a challenge to our faith. It then offers us a story that, when read from a point in time after Easter, pulls us through an explanation of the gospel that leaves us refreshed in our faith and filled with gratitude for God's forgiveness.

"Who has believed?" this chapter asks us. It is easy to believe as Christians that the rejected one described here is the Christ, and that He was vindicated after his death, as verse 9 tells us. The middle part, though, is more difficult. Do we believe in our hearts that we are the cause of His suffering? Do we believe that we are the ones who turn away from Him, refusing to see our role in it? Do we really believe in a way that makes sense to us that God afflicted Him for our sins? Is it truly credible to us that His suffering heals us? As often as we are taught these lessons, they are still hard ones. If we can own that we do cause others suffering, that we are not wholly innocent of tremendous suffering on this earth, and that God bears all of it, then we can come to recognize ourselves in this story. As Christians, we can understand that when we are united with Christ through faith we are deemed, with Him, to have borne the suffering we caused and so to have been cleansed of it. As we see ourselves in this story, we are again amazed and grateful for this gift.

Sheila Marsh

Wednesday, February 27

Junk Food or True Nourishment

Isaiah 55:1-9

The context of these words as originally written by the prophet Isaiah concerned the Israelite exiles held captive in Babylon. Many of them had grown so accustomed to Babylonian ways that they had forsaken the practice of their faith. Ridiculing these unfaithful exiles for satisfying themselves with junk food, Isaiah asked, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread...which does not satisfy?"

The exiles had been captured by the tantalizing glitter of Babylonian wealth and power. Isaiah was preaching that the fall of Babylon was imminent and history was to prove him right, but the exiles had become so comfortable they resisted Isaiah's message.

Isaiah was encouraging the exiles to return to Jerusalem. The long journey through the desert would be long and risky, but it would end with a joyous homecoming.

Isaiah is asking the exiles to embrace a dramatically different future for themselves, to leave the Babylonian culture behind and to journey home. The “wicked” and the “unrighteous” of verse 7 are the exiles ignoring God’s offer of mercy and pardon and deciding instead to stay in Babylon. They are trusting in the ways and thoughts of this world instead of clinging to the covenant relationship with the God of Israel.

Isaiah 55:6-9 is a familiar passage used often as a call to worship. The reason is obvious – we are so much like those Israelite exiles, for we too have become very comfortable with the glittering culture that surrounds us. Isaiah’s words are truth for us – modern society is offering us junk food. We are called to feast on something much more lasting, the truth of God’s way and the trustworthiness of God’s covenant.

Prayer:

O Lord, teach us to desire the nourishment of your kingdom and forsake the junk food offered by the world.

Tom Graves

Thursday, February 28

When We Are at the End of Our Rope

Joel 2:1-3, 12-17

There are times in life when we were at the end of our rope, when we are hanging on to life by our fingernails. Joel is speaking to the children of Israel at such a time. They had just endured a terrible pestilence of a locust plague and now they are living in fear of another coming cataclysmic event that could bring doom and destruction to all of Israel. What is one to do in such dire circumstances? Joel’s message is simple and straightforward: when you do not know where to turn for help, return to the Lord!

How does one do that? For Joel the answer begins with prayer and fasting and he provides very specific instructions as to what to say and even what to wear. But for Joel what is of utmost importance for a true returning to the Lord is a redirection of the heart. The outward practices of piety are not condemned by Joel, but what is most essential has to do with one’s inner spirit. The outer show of faith is inauthentic unless the disposition of one’s true self is focused upon God’s love.

Why should one return to the Lord? Joel’s answer in verses 12-13 is that we should return to the Lord because of what God is like. “God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” One is reminded of the return of the prodigal son who went home because he remembered what his father was like; then in coming home he found his father running down the road to welcome him with a fond embrace. In our desperate hours Joel provides for us a helpful roadmap home.

Prayer:

Lord, help us in our times of desperation to return to you and your merciful love.

Tom Graves

Friday, March 1

When Religion Becomes A Sin

Amos 5:11-15, 21-24

“I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.”

Is that really possible – our worship, our singing, and even our prayers can be a sin? The prophet Isaiah raises the same questions when he pictures God as saying, “I will hide my eyes from you, even though you make many prayers, I will not listen” (Isaiah 1:15). The practice of religious ritual and the appearance of religion do not come off well in scripture. Remember Christ himself criticized those who prayed publicly for show and the book of James condemns those whose supposed faith was unrelated to their everyday life.

What Amos criticizes is a religious life disconnected from one’s responsibility to care for those in need. We cannot worship God, while ignoring others in need. We cannot pray to God in truth, while living a life filled with lies. We cannot praise God with our hymns of love, while living a life filled with prejudice and hate. “Take away from me the noise of your songs,” says Amos, “but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

In Matthew 25 Jesus tells the parable of the last judgment where persons are separated not according to the length of their prayers, the beauty of their singing, or the amount of time they spent in worship, but rather, the sheep and the goats are separated according to how they cared for the “least of these.”

During this Lenten season let us learn the lesson of Amos: we cannot come before God without holding our brother and sister by the hand.

Prayer:

Lord, forgive us when our worship speaks of devotion to you, while our lives fail to demonstrate your love for all humankind.

Tom Graves

Saturday, March 2

What Are You Adding For Lent?

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Growing up Baptist, I didn't have much exposure to Lent at the church I attended. Much of my limited knowledge of Lent came from the Ash Wednesday chapel services at my Episcopal elementary school. Once, I asked my mom about giving things up for Lent and she told me that she used Lent not as an opportunity to give something up, but rather as a chance to add something to her life.

Although today's scripture passage mentions the sacrifice of Jesus, it is not explicitly about Easter. But even so, it reminds me of what my mother said to me about Lent. Not only does this scripture admonish us to give up negative behaviors, but it also suggests behaviors that we should add to our lives in the place of those negative things. For example, in verse 4:31, we are told to "get rid of bitterness, rage, and anger," and

then immediately after that in verse 4:32, we are told that we should instead "be kind and compassionate to one another."

This year, let's give up more than physical comforts like soda or chocolate for Lent. Let's use Lent as the nudge we need to give up talking negatively about and to others. Let's also add behavior that reflects God and God's love.

Prayer:

Lord, May we use this holy season to become more like you. Help us give up negative words and ways, and help us add compassion and kindness to our lives. Amen.

Jennifer West Freeman

Sunday, March 3

Does God Punish You for Your Sins?

Luke 13:1-9

Do you believe that when something bad happens to you, God is punishing you for something you did wrong? In Jesus' day, many Jews held such a belief (see John 9:2-3), partially because numerous passages in the Old Testament speak of God's punishing the Jews for their misdeeds.

Jesus, however, teaches that God simply does not punish persons for specific misdeeds or reward them for specific good deeds. In Matthew 5:45, he says that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." This, of course, does not mean that God does not punish persons for their sins, but only to say that God does not engage in "tit for tat."

The text for today clarifies this point. Jesus denies that those who were killed by Roman soldiers or by a falling tower were being punished by God for certain sins. He adds, however, that all of us are equally sinners and will indeed "perish" – unless we "repent."

By "perish," Jesus is referring to the *final* judgment that he will render on us all, and his point is that this verdict will not be determined by our good or bad deeds, but by whether we have repented of our sins and asked for his forgiveness. In short, there is really only one sin for which God punishes us—our refusal to repent and believe in Jesus as our Savior. Praise God!

Ellis M. West

Monday, March 4

How Not to Pray

Matthew 6:1-6

As Jesus begins his teachings on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, he starts by telling us how not to pray. Jesus is critical of mechanical piety, praying with the attitude that if you simply say the correct words often enough, you can purchase the favor of God. That is, some people approach prayer as a way of controlling God, rather than

understanding prayer as the avenue by which our human will is transformed by God. The purpose of prayer is not to force God to accept our way, but to learn and then heed God's will.

Jesus is also critical of ritualistic piety, the practice of religion that reserves the expression of faith for only certain places, at certain times, and on certain occasions. Christian prayer is an attitude of life that is always seeking to be filled with God's presence. That's the meaning of the biblical admonition, "pray without ceasing."

Jesus is also critical of public piety, the practice of religion that is motivated in large part to be seen by others. Jesus refers to such people as hypocrites or mere actors playing to the crowd. The purpose of prayer is not to impress others but to commune with God.

And Jesus is critical of prayer disconnected to life and the needs of others. We cannot seek to come into communion with God without recognizing we are in a community with others. The very first word of the Lord's Prayer is "Our"; we cannot pray in isolation.

How then are we to pray? Our prayers are to be offered to God. Our prayers are focused on seeking God's will. Our prayers should transform our life in community with others.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us, for we are sinners. Help us as we seek to follow your will.

Tom Graves

Tuesday, March 5

Belief and Behavior

Philippians 2:5-11

During the time Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote a loving, parental type letter to the church at Philippi, a church that was dear to his heart. He had previously received word that there was disagreement and discord in the fellowship. In trying to address the problem and offer guidance for healing and unity, he admonishes them to "have this mind which was in Christ Jesus." Or as some translations read, "have within yourselves the same disposition of mind that was in Christ Jesus."

Paul is pleading with the Philippians to put aside their petty jealousies and selfish ambitions and look to Jesus, taking on the disposition of one who emptied himself in service and obedience. Then he immediately launches into an uplifting and exalting hymn extolling the majesty and glory of Jesus and his relationship to the Father. It is a theological treatise of the highest order.

Every Christian would do well to read this passage often during the Lenten season. As we dig deeper into our own spiritual lives approaching the crucifixion and resurrection, we need to read Paul's powerful words. But as we read, we need to caution ourselves, not to remain in worship and adoration, but remember Paul's command to have the disposition of Jesus. Belief and behavior are interconnected. What we say we

believe is meant to take shape in how we treat others. Great beliefs have little effect unless they produce right actions.

Emily Campbell Tuck

Wednesday, March 6

Power of the Cross

I Corinthians 1:18-31

I was 12 years old when I was baptized. I remember saying the words “Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior” and then being lowered into the water. Another thing I remember about that day is receiving a gold cross necklace from my parents to mark this important occasion in my life. At that time, I didn’t really understand the symbolism of the cross. I just knew that my necklace was shiny and pretty. I wore the cross to church every Sunday for many years without ever considering the significance of what I was wearing. Now, it sits in my jewelry box as a reminder of that day so many years ago. I look at it every so often, but rarely do I stop to ponder the significance of the cross and the sacrifice it symbolizes.

Today’s scripture says, “for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). As I look at the cross today, I don’t see it as just something pretty to wear around my neck. I know that believing in the power of the cross sets me apart from others who see the cross as foolish or merely a decoration. During this Lenten season, I challenge you to think about what the cross symbolizes for you.

Prayer:

Dear God, please help me to be more aware of the power of the cross and the sacrifice which it symbolizes. Amen.

Melanie Gray

Thursday, March 7

Focusing on Our Sins

John 8: 2-11

If you search for today’s scripture passage in other than the King James Version, you may have difficulty finding it. More modern versions of the Bible include it in brackets or even in a footnote rather than the text.

The explanation given by scholar Bart D. Ehrman in his book, *Misquoting Jesus*, is that this story is not found in the oldest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of John. It is thought that it was a well-known story in the oral tradition added in the margin of a later manuscript by a scribe.

However it came to be part of our Bible, I am glad that it was included. It teaches us, as Jesus taught the scribes and Pharisees, that it is more important to focus on our

own sins, rather than the sins of others. We have all fallen short of God's plan for us and can only be saved by His grace.

This story is yet another beautiful example of Jesus using his wits to answer a question from those whose intentions were to entrap him. By his response, "Let the one who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her," he did not show disrespect for the ancient law of Moses, but instead showed love, mercy and forgiveness toward even one accused of a capital offense.

Prayer:

Dear God, during this Lenten season and throughout the rest of the year, enable us to resist being judgmental of others, but rather to seek repentance for our own sins and to seek your mercy and forgiveness to us.

Dan Stevens

Tuesday, March 8

The Acceptable Time

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

"Ambassador for Christ." I remember hearing that phrase growing up, usually in the context of missions and spreading the gospel. When I first read this passage, this was the phrase that caught my eye and made me select the passage to write a devotion. But as I sat down and spent some time with the text, the phrase that kept leaping out at me was "acceptable time."

When I think of something being acceptable, I think of it as adequate or satisfactory, a far cry from the images of exotic places and important people the word ambassador stirs up in me. Paul is telling the church that now is the suitable time, the time to work together and receive the grace of God and be reconciled.

Note that the text does not say it is the perfect time. Paul goes on to talk about the need for endurance through hardships and afflictions. He mentions times of sleeplessness, distress, and hunger. But he also mentions kindness, patience, and genuine love as hallmarks of the acceptable time.

How many times have we heard ourselves say, "Now is not a good time," or "The timing of this couldn't be worse?" We use not having enough time as an excuse. But we also fool ourselves into thinking we have plenty of time, and that it won't hurt to wait until later.

What time is it for you? What is it the acceptable time for you to do?

Sheryl Johnson

Saturday, March 9

A New Covenant

Hebrews 8:8-12

This passage found in the New Testament book of Hebrews is a quotation from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, chapter 31. It speaks of God's desire to make a new covenant with the "house of Israel" that will be written on their hearts. The author of the book of Hebrews now proclaims this new covenant has been established in Jesus Christ.

The term "covenant" has very deep roots in the religious life of Israel. The word is derived from the sphere of international politics and refers to a treaty drawn between two sides making mutual commitments to one another. Such a covenant would establish peace between the two parties and usually the weaker of the partners in the treaty would make the larger pledge. But such is not the case with the Old Testament covenant where God pledges divine presence and guidance if only Israel will remain faithful.

Israel has so radically broken the old covenant as to render it null and void. Jeremiah foresees God's offer of a new relationship, based not on the keeping of external laws, but established upon an entirely new internal and personal relationship. Jeremiah 31:33 states, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts."

This new covenant or new testament is now realized through Jesus Christ. What had been foretold in ancient times is now a promise fulfilled. Christ has come to offer us salvation as we confess our sins and enter a spiritual relationship with Him. And we are promised that God will remember our sins no more. That is the good news of the Lenten season.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us, for we are sinners. Help us to deepen our relationship with you and follow you more closely every day of our life. Amen.

Tom Graves

Sunday, March 10

"My Son Was Lost, But Now He Has Been Found"

Luke 15:11-32

This familiar parable told by Jesus can only be found in Luke. It is often called "the return of the lost son" or "the forgiving father." It is basically a story involving a father and his two sons or an emotional triangle. The reader can easily identify with any of the three characters. The mother is not an active participant in this story.

From the younger son's perspective, he asked his father for his share of his father's property. Somewhat surprisingly the father divides the property and gives one half to each son. The younger son sells his portion and leaves home. He spends all of his money and has to work for gentiles. A famine occurs and he is actually caring for swine, which is forbidden food for Jews. He realizes the reality of his situation and concludes that he would have a better life working for his father than living among swine and remaining hungry. Thus, he finds his way home and is greeted by his father with a major celebration.

From the older son's perspective he hears that his younger brother has come home and his father has greeted him with his robe and will kill the prize calf for a celebration meal. The older son accuses his brother of spending money on prostitutes

and he is jealous that he is getting no special treatment for being the obedient and loyal son.

The father is forgiving and accepting because his son who was lost is now found. This parable follows two other parables regarding the lost sheep and the lost coin. Thus, Jesus is emphasizing the joy related to one sinner being forgiven and found or converted. The forgiveness of God is there for all of us. We are not perfect and should not forget that God will forgive each of us also.

Henry Holland

Monday, March 11

God's Irrational Love

Romans 5:6-11

Some of the very first attacks aimed at the Christian faith came from those who argued that the Christian view of God's love was just too irrational to believe. Why would a good and holy God even be concerned with sinful persons, much less send His son to die for their benefit. Paul was aware of such criticisms and he understood that the Christian faith was foolishness and folly to many in the Mediterranean world.

In this passage Paul confronts that criticism and embraces it with a dramatic answer. It is true that some might deem it possible that someone would die in the place of a very righteous person. It might also happen that someone would die in the place of a fairly good person. But who would die in the place of sin stained miserable creatures? Such love just doesn't make sense!

It is true. God's love is irrational and far beyond what we have ever seen. But for Paul that doesn't disprove the Christian message. Instead it expresses the very center of our faith. God's love is beyond all reason.

In his book, *The Chamber*, John Grisham tells the story of Sam, a hate filled murderer awaiting execution. In a meeting with the prison chaplain Sam confesses his guilt. When the chaplain responds, "God can forgive that", Sam answers by saying, "I don't think you heard what I said." Then Sam launches into another confession mentioning even more horrendous acts of hatred and anger. Again the chaplain responds, "God can forgive that." Sam replies, "That's just too good to be true." It's not too good to be true; it is in fact the gospel truth.

Prayer:

Lord, we are sinners undeserving of your love and grace. We cannot fathom the depths of your love, but we praise your name and thank you that you care for sinners like us.

Tom Graves

Tuesday, March 12

An SOS Call to God

Romans 10:8-13

Though Advent is the traditional season of waiting in the Christian church, I find myself more impatient during Lent. At the conclusion of Lent stands the Cross, where sins are absolved and salvation is sure. Lent, however, is fraught with the constant recognition that I am sinful and that I am incapable of self-rescue. I imagine myself during Lent as a drowning person totally aware of the weights tied to my ankles, and yet, unable to remove them.

Our passage today details how to get the attention of the life guard on our soul's beach. Beyond acknowledging our own sin, Paul reminds us that true confession is God-focused. He writes that "if you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from death, you will be saved." Deliberate confession converts our passive faith in Christ into active saving Grace. And further, we have this assurance that "whoever believes in him will not be disappointed." With no exceptions. What a tremendous guarantee.

Lest we forget that Lent is also a season of waiting for God. He who can do all things abundantly, far beyond what we could ever imagine or hope, can do nothing until we call on Him confidently to rescue us as we flail about in a sea of sin. It gives Him great joy to bring us safely to shore.

Prayer:

God, I honestly confess who I am and what I have done, and I confidently confess who You are and your great power to save. Amen.

Bailey Thomson

Wednesday, March 13

Mess up...Fess up

1 John 1:5-2:6

I once knew a woman who went to see a therapist because she and her husband were considering divorce. The woman had been cheating on her husband for several months. She tearfully told the therapist on her first visit that she felt so guilty. The therapist said to her, "well, you are guilty." This woman had done something wrong. It was natural and good for her to feel remorse. Those feelings plus the therapist's accepting attitude made it possible for the woman to move forward and make a change.

As far as I see it, there are two things that all human beings have in common. We all mess up and God loves us in spite of it. Experiencing remorse is only half of the equation toward making amends. If we confess what we did, but stay in a place of feeling bad about ourselves and unworthy of God's love or someone else's, then we miss the greatest gift of all - the gift of unconditional love. It is that gift which leaves us with a grateful heart, which in turn gives us momentum to change. Recognizing that we ALL make mistakes is what helps us relate to others; remembering that we ALL are loved even when we make mistakes, helps us reach out to others with a grateful heart and show them the love and acceptance we have experienced ourselves.

Prayer:

Dear God, help me remember that your love is present and always available, without strings, without regard to anything I do. I don't know why that is some days, but I am so grateful. You know that I will mess up and move away from you, but still you stay put, waiting with open arms. Thank you for Jesus who knows my human heart and, when necessary, whispers in your ear, "This one's having a tough time of it. Let's pull her in closer." Amen.

Eleanor Nurney

Thursday, March 14

“Anyone Can Sell Shoes, Right?”

John 6:27-40

While listening to a seminar on sales techniques, I was struck by a statement of the instructor. She was talking about how you should approach different types of people, the difficulty of selling some types of products, and how selling her product was more difficult than selling shoes. Her statement was “after all, anyone can sell shoes, right?”

While this sounds like an obvious statement to some people (probably to many husbands who look at the shoes in their wife’s closet), the reality is that shoes can be quite difficult to sell. When I go shoe shopping, I am quite particular. The heels cannot be high. The shoe has to be exceptionally comfortable. The shoe has to have good support. And on, and on, and on...

The point is that it is not always easy to sell something that should be easy to sell. Jesus understood this. It should be easy to sell eternal life. It should be easy to sell the “bread of life.” It should be easy to sell a source of comfort and joy. It isn’t.

Today’s scripture talks about the concept of eternal life, and puts it in words that we should have no trouble understanding. But it was not easy for those listening to Jesus to understand, and it is not always easy for us to understand.

Jesus has given us bread that will keep us from being hungry (if we will eat it) and water that will keep us from being thirsty (if we will drink it). The problem is, we don’t always eat and drink what is good for us. The sale is not always made.

Lent is a good time to rethink our diet. It is a good time to think about what we eat and drink every day. It is a good time to recommit to our relationship with God.

Prayer:

Lord, please help us to remember that you provide us with the bread of life. Help us to eat that bread each day, and to live our life as you would have us live it.

Susan Rucker

Friday, March 15

True Prayer

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus tells a parable of two men at prayer in the temple, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee *stands by himself*. As a member of a popular, influential, religious party, he takes his faith seriously. He's a good guy, an exemplar and spokesman for Orthodox Judaism. "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." The Pharisee *asks nothing* of God; instead, he reels off some of the blessings of identity and achievement that set him apart from others.

The tax collector *stands far off*. He makes his living by collecting tolls, tariffs, and custom fees for Rome in a system rife with corruption. In the eyes of most — in his own eyes — he's a bad guy. Prayer is an ordeal for him. He bows his head and beats his breast. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He *asks everything* of God. All he knows of himself is that he's a sinner.

"I tell you, this man," Jesus says of the tax collector, "went down to his home justified rather than the other . . ." It's a surprise ending to the parable, a reversal of expected outcomes.

You and I work to put our faith into practice. On some level, we know we cannot put ourselves right with God. That is God's unfathomable work. Still we can get caught in the habit of keeping track of the good we do, the good as we see it. And the very blessings that flow from our faith may come to signify the divide between us and those whom we *are not*, and *do not like*.

Jesus warns that pride and self-sufficiency not only separate us from others, but separate us from God, as well. Love *God*; and your *neighbor* as your self, Jesus commands: *Either*, or is not an option. And, apart from God's mercy, we can do neither.

Carolyn Briggs

Saturday, March 16

"Jesus Wept"

John 11:17-44

It is the shortest verse in the Bible – two words. What can two words tell us about anything, much less about Jesus?

Actually they can tell us quite a lot. They tell us that Jesus felt sadness. We also know that he had empathy for Mary and Martha in the loss of their brother. Empathy is the ability to "experience the feelings, thoughts or attitudes of another" (Dictionary.com). The scripture says when Jesus saw Mary weeping "he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." Why does this matter?

Each of us wants a relationship where we are known and loved. We want to have our feelings and emotions understood, and to have our perspective taken into consideration. We want a relationship where we can feel free to express our thoughts and feelings, and where the other person in the relationship will be considerate of our emotional state of mind. These relationships are hard to find.

What we many times fail to remember is that such a relationship is always there for the asking. Just as Jesus demonstrated that empathy while here on earth, it is still

there in our relationship with Him today. He knows what we are feeling, empathizes with it, and takes it into consideration.

The flip side of this is do we do the same? God wants to be loved as well. He asks for our hearts, and he asks for us to talk with him on a daily basis. Many times, we only turn to that relationship when we need it. We don't nurture it to strengthen it as we should.

The challenge of these two words is for us to remember that God loves us and understands us, but we need to invest in the relationship to get the most benefit from it. Have you shared your thoughts with God today and then listened to what he is saying to you?

Prayer:

Lord, help us to remember that you are always there for us to talk to. Help us to know that you understand and empathize with us, and that you are always there for us to fall back on.

Susan Rucker

Sunday, March 17

The Prize

Philippians 3:4b-14

“When Paul wrote this letter he was a prisoner in Rome facing possible death, yet he was cheerful. He was urging the people of Philippi to be persistent in their faith and to ‘rejoice’ in the Lord. Before Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus he was a distinguished Pharisee of impeccable ancestry. He was a persecutor of the Christians; he had even approved of the killing of Stephen” (Acts 8:1).

Then he met Jesus!

After that he considered his past as rubbish and was willing to follow Christ “all the way to the cross.” “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection in the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Rick Warren says Paul's life had been transformed because the grace of Jesus had taken hold of him. His was a purpose driven life. He was in prison but he still managed to witness to the prison guards and the people who visited him.

Are we willing to go that far for Christ? He has given his all for us, yet we allow so many things to stand in the way of serving him. We need to be able to say with Paul, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Beth Hooker

Monday, March 18

Faith of Our Fathers

Hebrews 12:1-3

What a heritage we have at River Road Church! I am grateful for the faith of those men and women who poured their time and money into founding our church. I am grateful for the faith of those who risked life, family, and resources to settle in this new land of America in order to worship as they believed.

The writer of Hebrews includes a list of our spiritual forefathers who exhibited amazing faith. He then concludes his list with these words: "By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle.... Some were mocked, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in dungeons. Some died by stones. Some went about in skins of sheep and goats, hungry and oppressed and mistreated (*The Message*)."

Eugene Peterson's contemporary rendering of our passage for today really makes it clear to me:

"Do you see what this means--all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running--and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed--that exhilarating finish in and with God--he could put up with anything along the way; cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!"

In this season of reflection, keep your eyes on Jesus, who began and finished the race we're in. Go once again over the stories of how he did it. If time allows, read Hebrews 12 and 13.

Bob Shoemake

Tuesday, March 19

She Lived Her Eulogy

John 4:7-30

I recently attended a funeral for a woman who spent her life in service to other people and her church. Martha was the woman that helped my in-laws as their primary care giver in the last years of their life, just as she had helped countless others during her life.

Her funeral was packed. The church held about 250 people, and about 350 showed up. Michael and I stood for the entire service (all 2 ½ hours of it!). She was from a large family, and they all turned out – as did many of her friends and acquaintances.

The minister started off his portion of the service talking about the fact that he was supposed to give a eulogy, but that his words were inadequate – Martha had lived her eulogy. How many of us would have that said at our funeral, and how many of those

in the audience would agree? When the minister made that statement about Martha you could see heads nodding and hear murmurs of agreement.

Our scripture today is a familiar one – the story of the woman at the well. Jesus conversed with this woman, even though she was a Samaritan, someone that Jews would not normally talk with. Moreover, she had married five times and was not someone of “high morals.” He engaged with someone that needed him.

There are many lessons that can come from this scripture, but perhaps the most important one is that Jesus gave us a lesson on who we should care for. The lesson is that we should care for anyone that needs us. That is what Martha did with her life. Can we say that about ourselves?

Prayer:

Lord, help us to recognize those that need us, and to treat them like you would have treated them while you were here on earth.

Susan Rucker

Wednesday, March 20

The Light Shines in the Darkness

John 1:1-13

I first wrote about these verses in a devotion this past Advent, remarking on the depth of meaning of the term “logos” that is so central to this passage. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

But here and now, on this first day of spring in the season of Lent—which itself means “spring”—the very day that marks day growing longer than night, I am struck more by the verses in this passage that have to do with light. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

During Advent, this last sentence might refer to the coming of the infant Jesus. Now that it’s Lent, it feels like John is describing the darkness of the human condition before Jesus died for us only to rise again in glory at Easter. “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” What darkness is our ignorance!

We did not know Jesus until he died for us, but when he did, true light entered our world. And that light—light out of darkness, life out of death—means regeneration, nourishment, and flourishing for our spiritual selves. As the natural light grows around us this season, so does the spiritual light within us.

Eric Johnson

Thursday, March 21

What Would Jesus Do?

Mark 8:27-38

While walking with his disciples, Jesus had been preparing them for his suffering, death, and three days later, his resurrection. Then speaking to the assembled crowd and his disciples, Jesus explained how to become a disciple of his: "... Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

Most of us have read and heard these words many times. Sometimes, with words as familiar as these, it is easy to read or hear them without reflecting on their deeper meaning – at least it is for me.

Certainly, following Jesus means that we must do our best to follow his example and his teachings in all aspects of our lives. Jesus is saying, though, that following him within the boundaries of our comfortable lifestyles, among people of similar backgrounds and values, is not enough.

We must also be willing to deny ourselves, to give up whatever is important to us, if it is not important to Jesus. We must be willing to go outside of our comfort zones, to the point of paying a personal price and actually suffering for following Jesus.

Perhaps that means proactively and personally helping those who are hungry or homeless, or those who can't provide for their families, or those who have no job and little prospect of finding one, or those who are otherwise neglected or without hope. At a minimum, it means asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" and responding accordingly.

Bill Stanton

Friday, March 22

Messiah, Shepherd, Lord

John 10:1-18

In the time when Jesus of Nazareth lived there existed a great deal of political unrest. The Jews were tired of Roman rule and occupation, and some were actively seeking a change. For those who were of a religious bent, there was fodder for their discontent: religious scripture included a prophecy about a new, just king arising from their land. The new king would be ordained by the Lord himself, a shining knight who would save them from the crummy situation in which they found themselves – nothing less than a messiah.

So it should come of no surprise that Jesus was not the only "messiah" of his day. Not by a long shot. There was Simon of Peraea, a former slave of Herod the Great who rebelled and was killed by the Romans; Athronges, a shepherd turned rebel leader; Theudas who attempted a short-lived revolt against the Romans before being slain; and many others.

So how is it that we believe, so many years later, that Jesus was and is the real Messiah? How did he win out? Why do we claim that he is the Good Shepherd, The Son of God – even God himself? He won no war and led no army. The government was not upon his shoulders. It executed him for treason.

For many believers, faith is belief in truth beyond reason. We believe what Jesus said and did to be true because somewhere, in our heart of hearts, we have been

convicted by the Spirit. We hear the voice of the Shepherd and we follow. We believe, quite simply, because that is what the Lord created us to do.

Matt Straw

Saturday, March 23

What is Worship?

Romans 12:1-21

Most of us think of worship as the one hour on Sunday morning where we sit in the Sanctuary, listen to beautiful music, and hear the word of God. In Romans 12:1-21, we are encouraged, not to think of worship as a ritual, but rather to think of worship as how we should live our lives every day. Everything we do and think should be in dedication to God.

These straightforward verses give us specific instructions on how to treat others and how we should act ourselves. It's nothing new, we know it all, but abiding by it is the only way to fully worship God at all times. By following the advice given in this scripture (live in harmony, feed your enemies, love your brother, do not be proud, be faithful in prayer, overcome evil with good, mourn with those who mourn, do what is right), you are worshipping every day, just as God expects us to.

This is a great concept and seems so easy, but much harder in practice. We lead very busy lives with many distractions. In order to have better, fuller, Christian lives, we should worship all the time, not just on Sunday mornings.

Prayer:

Dear God, during this time of Lent, please help me to reflect on what is important in my life; help me to worship not just on Sundays, but every day through my actions and thoughts. Amen.

Katie Merritt

Sunday, March 24

The Shouting of the People

Luke 19:28-40

During the Passover Feast in Jerusalem, the people from all over Israel came to celebrate this national feast. The Jewish historian, Josephus, estimated that almost three million people crowded the Holy City for this celebration. When Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, the crowd was inspired and threw palm branches and their outer garments in his pathway. They shouted "Hosanna," which meant literally "save now." The crowds were inspired by the presence of Jesus and hoped he might be the long-awaited Messiah. "Here comes our king. Save us now," they shouted.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey not a horse. In the ancient world a king rode a horse when he was going to battle, but when a king rode upon a donkey, it was a symbol of peace. In the day of Jesus a donkey was not looked upon as a contemptible or

amusing animal. It was a symbol of peace. Through this vivid prophetic picture or dramatic parable, Jesus attempted to teach the crowd a lesson about who he was. Drawing on Zechariah and other prophets who depicted the coming of the Messiah upon a lowly beast (Zechariah 9: 9), Jesus portrayed his kingship as a way of peace not war.

Most in Jesus' day missed the symbolism of his dramatic entrance into Jerusalem then and so may we if we are not careful. The inspired crowd that shouted "Hosanna" soon, days later, became an incited mob and yelled, "Crucify him."

On this Palm Sunday, may we choose to follow the Prince of Peace by the way we believe and live and not join the crowd that rejected our Lord.

Prayer:

Help us, O Loving God, to follow the Christlike way of service and not be led down the crowded streets of a shouting mob to self interest and rejection of the narrow path of our Lord.

Bill Tuck

Monday, March 25

Cleansing the Temple

Matthew 21:12-17

We know from rabbinic sources that the chief priest, Caiaphas, established markets inside the temple in order to compete with his political enemies who controlled the markets outside the temple. Jesus was not opposed to the necessary business of the money changers or those selling sacrificial animals, but he clearly objected to this new innovation that allowed it to happen right inside the temple – all sanctioned by the high priest himself.

In expelling both buyers and sellers, Jesus quotes the words from Jeremiah, "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers?" The full passage from Jeremiah 7:9-11 also says, "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely... and then come and stand before me in this house... and say, we are delivered." The marketplace certainly profaned the holy place of worship, but Jesus is also concerned that persons whose lives in no way conformed to the expectations of faith felt righteous and justified simply because they were inside the temple. With anger, Jesus rejects such an idea.

Matthew gives another side of the story by relating the positive actions of Jesus that day as He healed the blind and the lame in the temple. Matthew also tells of children who see the healing miracles and shout the same cries heard on Palm Sunday, "Hosanna to the son of David." The blind, the lame, and the children – all representing marginalized people – experienced the miraculous presence of Christ, while the religious leaders expressed their opposition.

In cleansing the temple, some are expelled by Jesus, some object to Jesus, but others are invited even closer as Jesus displays care for those in need.

Prayer:

Dear God, like the children in the temple, lead us to proclaim that salvation is found in you alone and not in the busyness of our lives, not even in the religious busyness of our lives.

Tom Graves

Thursday, March 26

Live Like You Are Dying

John 12: 23-36

In The Last Lecture by Randy Pausch, Randy gives a great example of living for something more than himself. He bought his first new car and was really excited about it. He drove over to his sister's house to take his niece and nephew for a ride. His sister, as most parents might, warned her children not to make any mess in Uncle Randy's new car. With that, Randy opened a can of soda and poured it all over the back seat of his brand new car. He said he didn't want the kids' time with him to be spoiled by worrying about messing up the car. No matter how excited he was about having a new car, Randy knew that his relationship with his niece and nephew and the time they could spend together was way more important than keeping a clean car. If you know this story then you know that Randy Pausch died from pancreatic cancer. Yet, even before he knew he was sick, he lived like he was dying.

Jesus knew his time on earth was limited. From day one, his life was threatened and was full of hardships most of us can never imagine. Despite the adversity he faced, Jesus remained focused on something much greater than himself – the knowledge that his life here was intended to make a difference beyond his physical death. He knew that like the grain of wheat, his earthly life would transform into something much more sustaining. He didn't live seeking glory or recognition. He used every moment he had to show the love of God to others. He lived like he was dying.

Prayer:

Dear God, please allow me to learn from your example in Christ. Help me to look away from myself and more toward you and others. Help me use every moment in my life to show your love to those around me. Amen.

Eleanor Nurney

Wednesday, March 27

A Prayer for Help

Psalms 71:1-14

Because Psalm 71 repeats many of the phrases and themes of Psalm 22, which was quoted by Christ on the cross, it is associated with the passion of Christ and is a common lectionary reading for Holy Week.

This Psalm is a prayer for help for those who seek to find a refuge in the Lord and begins with the words, "In thee, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame!"

The Psalmist pleads to be rescued from his enemies who surround him with their cruel taunts, ridiculing him by saying, if you are so holy then why are you so weak and sick? In particular, the Psalmist feels vulnerable and forsaken because of the infirmities of growing old, so he cries out, “Do not cast me off in the time of old age, forsake me not when my strength is spent.”

In fact, the image of Christ on the cross has been seen by some as the picture of one who was disabled. The one who brings us hope and redemption appears as one who was himself broken, weak, and suffering. On the cross God sets aside the glorification of power and takes up instead the humiliation of weakness. Then in the Easter event we discover that the only way to true and lasting glory is by way of the suffering of the cross.

Like the Psalmist, Christ as he hung on the cross was ridiculed for his powerlessness and weakness. What the cross teaches us is that God’s powerful love is demonstrated through this supreme act of weakness – Christ would rather die than stop loving us.

Prayer:

O Lord, lead us to find our refuge in the woundedness of Christ. May we be enabled by the disabled Savior who died for us.

Tom Graves

Thursday, March 28

A Lesson in Humility

John 13:1-17

The purpose of foot washing is to illustrate Jesus’ philosophy of ministry, which is servant leadership.

It’s hard to respect someone who considers themselves the most important person in the room and who puts their needs ahead of everyone else.

Perhaps you think I’m talking about someone you know. I’m talking about you and me. Have you ever said: “No one’s going to tell *me* what to do!” “I don’t have to put up with this.” “They don’t realize who I am.” “They don’t appreciate all I do around here!” “I don’t get any respect.” If the truth be known, we’ve all thought these things, and most likely, even said these things out loud. We need to be reminded that there is no job beneath us.

No needful task is beyond the dignity of anyone, even the Leader, Boss or CEO. Task has no ranking; anyone who sees the need should just do it without considering one’s rank or waiting for another to do it.

Jesus set the example by serving His disciples. Leaders must serve also. Whomever would be great among you must be your servant.

Greatness is about serving others. Humility lessons cannot be taught but must be done first. It is leading by example.

It isn’t enough to know what to do...we must do it! It is one thing to be willing to serve Jesus, but to do so we must forgive and serve one another!

Actions speak louder than words. May you and I follow in the sandals of Jesus and become foot washers.

Friday, March 29

Dying Love

John 19: 17 - 30

Surely one of the most painful experiences a parent can ever face is watching one of their children die, and watching that child being tortured and executed has to be the worst. Roman crucifixion was designed to scare people into thinking twice before becoming violent criminals or revolutionaries. Those who were condemned to crucifixion would suffer for hours, and perhaps days, before death finally brought them release. A revolutionary and a murderer, Barabbas, was scheduled to die, but the Jewish leaders hated and feared Jesus more than Barabbas. They demanded that Jesus be crucified instead and requested that Barabbas be set free.

As Jesus saw His mother and His closest disciple helplessly looking on, He made a final request to His mother. Eugene Peterson translated Jesus' words in *The Message*, "Woman here is your son." To His beloved disciple He said, "Here is your mother." Jesus was suffering and dying for the sins of the world, but still He cared about what would happen to His mother after He was gone. He placed her in the care of His most loved, and probably most trusted, disciple. He was concerned about His mother's future living arrangements! Verse 27 notes that "from that hour that disciple took her into his own home."

As we contemplate the enormous sacrifice Jesus made for the world, let us not forget that He also is concerned about our daily lives, that we are cared for and loved on a daily basis and especially in our times of deepest need!

Prayer:

Loving and forgiving Lord, may your example on the cross help us to always remember that changing the world means serving the world as you would. Enable us to see each person as one of your children, worthy of our service and our love. In Jesus' holy name, Amen

Rob and Bettina Sandford

Saturday, March 30

Easter: Not Just a Day but a Season

Acts 1:3-4

I'm glad Easter is not just a day but a season. Even when all is going well in my life, it takes me longer than one day to leap from the desolation and grief of Christ's death on the cross to the joy of his resurrection. When death's shadows hover close over those I love personally, it takes even longer. Then when death's stark finality strikes hard -- when emptiness... void... absence seem suddenly permanent, it takes longer, still.

Yet, somehow, I think that's ok! I think it's ok to take my time... ok to move at my own pace through grief and despair to hope.

The synoptic Gospels – with compact description, scarcity of detail, and omission of any defined time lapse between events – suggest by assumption that it may have taken only ONE DAY for Jesus to vacate the tomb, appear alive, make personal post-resurrection encounters, and convince most of his apostles he would be with them always. Only in John's Gospel do details relate Jesus' post-resurrection time on earth as not one day, but at least eight. Why eight? Because it took eight days to reach out, encounter and convince Thomas, the Doubter; eight days for Thomas to open himself to belief and healing.

In contrast, according to the book of Acts, Jesus needed 40 DAYS with his apostles:

- ...40 days to prepare them to imagine life without him;
- ...40 days to strengthen them sufficiently to move beyond their grief;
- ...40 days to enable them to live without his daily, physical presence;
- ...40 days to encourage them
 - to move from a state of paralysis and despair to belief, hope, action...
 - to stop living in the past...
 - to move forward, seizing the future with faith...
 - to become courageous witnesses of the risen Christ!
- ...40 days to leave them --with a promise.

Whatever transformation occurred between Easter Day and Pentecost, one thing is for sure – it was not an instant change! Jesus needed time! The disciples needed time! And sometimes when we feel overcome by circumstances beyond our control, when we are honest with ourselves, we admit we also need time – perhaps even more time than those early followers required. Then, we can acknowledge our personal times of loss-- our times of pain too deep for words – times that require not one but at least 40 days before we can shed the past:

- At least 40 days ...to proceed past darkness into light.
- At least 40 days... to plow through despair to hope.
- At least 40 days ...to transform sadness into joy.
- At least 40 days ...to transcend absence with belief in eternal presence.
- At least 40 days ...to grow from death to life.

Like those first disciples, I thank God daily that Easter is a Season ... and not just a day!

Libbie Geiger

Sunday, March 31

Why Do You Look for the Living among the Dead?

Luke 24:1-12

How strange it must have felt to enter a tomb, a resting place, only to find that the body you came there to pay homage to, cleanse, and anoint is no longer there. Can

you imagine the shock and disbelief these followers felt over the disappearance of the body of their Lord? Combined with the angelic words asking, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” it is no wonder that the disciples found it hard to grasp. All too often we act just as the women and the disciples in Luke’s account did; we are guilty of searching for the living among the dead.

We cling tightly to what we know and/or what is comfortable. Whether in ourselves or in our churches, we tend to refuse any change for new life that might threaten the “way it has always been done.” As Nancy C. Pittman states in the commentary *Feasting on the Word*: “The words of the unworldly messengers are a challenge to stop hanging on to the dead and to move into new life. They are reminders that the Holy One dwells wherever new life is born.” As we remember the resurrection today and every day, let us look for evidence of Christ anew around us in our lives, in our church, and in our community.

Prayer:

Living God, help me to let go of that which hinders me from recognizing Christ anew. Guide me to realize your transformative presence in my life. Amen

Blake Traynham



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