



Lenten Devotions 2019

March 6 - April 21

**ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6***Psalm 51: 1-17***REFLECTION**

Traditionally, Psalm 51 is categorized as one of the penitential psalms, or Psalms of Confession—a term that was first used by a Christian scholar (Cassiodorus) in the 6th century. These psalms express deep, personal sorrow for sins. They have been employed by individual Christians as well as Christian communities (think of monasteries and congregations) from the earliest days of the Christian era. The 51st Psalm was recited at the close of the daily morning service in the primitive church. Translations of the penitential psalms were undertaken by some of the greatest poets of the Renaissance. Many of the church's most talented musicians have set these psalms to music for use by the church.

It is appropriate for us to begin our Lenten journey with Psalm 51. Pay particular attention to verse 10:

Create in me a clean heart, O God
And renew a right spirit within me (ESV)

The forty days of Lent provide an opportunity for us to carefully examine the state of our hearts and our spirits. The penitential psalms give expression to a deep sense of sorrow and sadness for having strayed from God's path, seeking an inner "*cleansing*" of sinful motivations and a restoration to a proper (right) relationship with God. In the coming days and weeks, we will be looking more closely at the manner God uses to cleanse our hearts and renew our spirits.

Sometime during Lent, make an effort to read one of more of the remaining Penitential Psalms (*Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, 143*).

Dr. Steve Dodson, Senior Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What images are employed by the psalmist to express sorrow for sin?

Which of these images resonates with you during this season?

PRAYER

Gracious God, in this season of Lent, enable me to closely examine my heart and spirit. Empower me to confess, repent, believe and receive all that you have for me. In Jesus' name. AMEN



THURSDAY, MARCH 7

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17

REFLECTION

The Latin word, *prophētēs*, means literally “to speak for; to speak on behalf of.” So, a prophet, in Biblical terminology, speaks on behalf of God. Joel, in several ways, is a prime example of the many Old Testament prophets. Joel 2 provides a succinct summary of the core message of every Old Testament prophet.

A Day of Judgment—As a “*spokesperson for God*,” nearly every prophet speaks words to the people of God that are intended to evoke fear and dread. The prophets proclaim that God is angry about the injustices and oppression present among the people. God intends to do something to correct the situation. God means business! Some prophets describe God’s willingness to use the armies of neighboring countries to invade Israel as punishment for Israel’s departure from God’s will. Joel uses the vivid imagery of an invading army of locusts who will destroy and devour everything in its path.

A Call to Repentance—the prophets seek to raise alarm among the people. The disasters they describe are the result of their nation’s unfaithfulness to God. The prophets urgently plead with their people to turn from their wicked ways and return to lives of faithfulness to God. Joel 2:13 is an excellent summary of the essence of every prophet’s message. While God may be planning extreme punishment or judgment, God’s desire is not destruction, but forgiveness, redemption and restoration of a right relationship with God’s people. That can only happen when the people repent: turn from their evil ways and return to God’s ways.

A Future of Hope—Every prophet in the Bible, regardless of how dire his social situation, always gets around to expressing hope. The future promise is based on God’s dependability and fidelity to His covenant with Israel. The message of the prophets describes a time when God will “right all the wrongs” in the world. In spite of our current miserable state of affairs, we have the hope of God’s renewing influence that is surely coming.

Dr. Steve Dodson, Senior Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Where do you see evidence of God’s judgment being allowed to converge in the world today?

If you are to be a ‘prophet’, or spokesperson for God, about which issues will you speak out?

How will you proclaim hope?

PRAYER

Almighty Creator, your goodness and mercy surround us at every turn. However, our hard heads and hard hearts continue to rebel against your influence. Forgive us. Heal us. Restore us to the joy of your salvation and we will proclaim your hope in Jesus Christ. AMEN



FRIDAY, MARCH 8

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

REFLECTION

After a few days of Old Testament “*gloom and doom*,” we turn our attention to the New Testament’s continuation of the Biblical theme of sin and the need to definitively conquer sin’s powerful influence in human life. The Apostle Paul was intimately acquainted with the Jewish Law and the religion of Israel. His early life was engaged in Hebrew education and rabbinical training. Several references among his writings detail his religious credentials—he was a “*Jew extraordinaire*.”

Despite his religious education and his Jewish training, Saul of Tarsus fell prey to a common human trap: belief that ‘doing the right things,’ even passionate pursuit of ‘right behavior,’ can make one right with God. For Saul, that path led to a life-changing encounter with the risen Lord Jesus (Acts 9:1-20). Saul’s thinking was challenged. He was converted from an older way of living. In biblical terms, he repented. He turned from thinking that his own proper behavior would assure a right relationship with God. Because of his encounter with the risen lord Jesus, Paul understood that only god’s activity in Jesus Christ could provide the right relationship God desired.

In his letters to the young Christians in Corinth, Paul pleads with them to “be reconciled to God.” The idea is that a proper relationship has been damaged or breached. Where there was once beautiful fellowship and shared joy, there now exists tension, discomfort and enmity. Simply trying harder to “do the right things” will not heal the broken relationship.

The good news is that what we cannot do for ourselves, God does for us in Jesus Christ. “God make him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

If we desire to reflect the character (righteousness) of God, we must admit (confess) that we cannot do it on our own. The moment we surrender (give up control of that struggle), God provides the very thing we need—a definitive defeat of the power of sin, through His Son, Jesus Christ. This is the heart of the Gospel. This is the message of salvation. Thanks be to God.

Dr. Steve Dodson, Senior Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In what ways have you fallen prey to the attempt to ‘do all the right things’ to prove your worth —to God, to others, to yourself?

In addition to your relationship with God through Jesus, are there other relationships in which you need to be reconciled? How can you extend forgiveness to others in the same way God extends forgiveness to you through Jesus Christ?

PRAYER

Loving Father, thank you for restoring my broken life and reconciling me to You through Jesus. Enable me to restore and reconcile the brokenness within my circle of relationships. In Jesus’ name.

**SATURAY, MARCH 9***Psalm 51:10 and 2 Corinthians 6:3-4***REFLECTION**

The author of Psalm 51 wrote: “cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean” (verse 7). Hyssop, an herb in the mint family, was prolific in the Middle East and used in a variety of ways for cleaning, medicinal uses and flavoring.

The Bible mentions hyssop several times.

- God commanded His people to use hyssop in rituals of ceremonial cleansing (Leviticus 14).
- When the Israelites marked their doorposts with lamb’s blood so the angel of death would “pass over” them, God instructed them to use a bunch of hyssop as a ‘paintbrush’ (Exodus 12:22).
- Hyssop also appears at Jesus’ crucifixion, when the Roman soldiers offered Jesus a drink of wine vinegar on a sponge at the end of a stalk of hyssop (John 19:28-30).

Some scholars note that the use of hyssop was not accidental—that God provided the plant from His physical creation to provide a symbol of the inner cleansing He would offer to His spiritual creatures.

The depth and depravity of sin within us requires a cleansing agent beyond ourselves. As God’s children, we are beloved and God desires to have close relationships with us. But sin stands in the way. Somehow, God must deal with our sin (cleanse it from us) so that He can renew our hearts and spirits. But, God does not force this cleansing upon us. He patiently waits for us to ask for His help. That process begins with our confession of sin, being penitent, expressing sorrow and a desire for inner change.

The Apostle Paul recognized that personal transformation enables a platform for Gospel sharing. In 2 Corinthians 6:3-4 he states: *“We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way.”* (NIV)

Often, our own sinful attitudes and actions can become *“a stumbling block in someone’s path.”* We need to be cleansed. We need to know the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ. We need the renewing power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds.

Dr. Steve Dodson, Senior Pastor

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

Where has sin in your life become *“a stumbling block in someone’s path”*?

Ask for God’s cleansing and forgiveness

PRAYER

Creative Master, the beauty and power of your creation amazes me. You know how my life has become “unruly.” Forgive my sin and self-centeredness. Allow me to feel clean and not be a stumbling block to another person’s pursuit of your Will and way. In Christ’s name. AMEN

**MONDAY, MARCH 11***Luke 4:1-13***REFLECTION**

It often seems like in the Christian life, that after a blessing comes the battle. After the mountain top comes the valley. After feeling so close to God, there comes a time when you feel so very far away from God. Often the greatest temptations follow the greatest victories. The greatest trials follow the biggest triumphs. And we see this happen with Jesus in Luke 4.

Jesus’ baptism was the mountaintop. He came up out of the water after being baptized by John, and God thundered out of heaven, *“You are my beloved Son; in whom I am well pleased.”* How is that for a mountain top experience? But Luke 4 immediately begins with the valley. Jesus goes from the heights to the depths. From the blessing to the battle. Jesus goes into the wilderness.

The wilderness referred to was part of Judea about 35 miles long by 15 miles wide. It was called Jeshimon, which means *“The Devastation.”* The hills are like dust heaps; the limestone looked blistered and peeling; the rocks were bare and jagged. It was in this terrible devastation that Jesus was tempted.

I think all of us have experienced such periods of devastation, of times in the wilderness in our own lives. Times when the spiritual and ministry landscape around us is hot, barren, and dry. Sometimes, it lasts a day or two, sometimes it lasts a month or more. Sometimes it lasts years.

I have seen so many Christians over the years who want to be used by God, but who are stuck in the wilderness. They keep circling around, and around, and around because they keep making the same mistakes over and over and over.

Lent offers us a time to look deeply into our souls and to be spiritually stronger. To create renewed spirits so we are able to move on to the next thing God has for us. Let’s take this time seriously and embrace this invitation to turn towards God.

Laurie Hintz, Director of Evangelism and Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you had a mountaintop/valley experience in your life?

What in your life is a barrier to renewing your spirit?

PRAYER

God of mountaintops and valleys, breathe your Holy Spirit upon us. Help us remember our baptism as we face the challenges of every day living. Create clean hearts and renewed spirits in us so we are able to do your work for the kingdom. In the name of Jesus, Amen.



TUESDAY, MARCH 12

Psalm 91:1-2 and 9-16

REFLECTION

This psalm speaks to the heart of what we're all searching for. It reminds us about how the life of faith works. The Lord as our personal refuge is a decision. It's a decision to place ourselves, our lives, in a place that cannot be broken by the stresses and strains happening around us and to us. Easier said than done though, isn't it? Experience teaches us that people of faith do get cancer, heart disease, heart attacks, and die from any number of diseases. We all know that bad things have and will continue to happen...what are we to do?

I have regularly encountered people who claimed that if you had enough faith then no harm would befall you. But they too experienced all of the maladies and brokenness known to humankind. The theological ideology didn't preserve them from harm. So, what is the psalmist's claim about?

If we look at the text from the vantage point of poetics, then perhaps the murky water becomes a bit clearer. Maybe the declaration isn't as much about a personal "you" and "him" but is a reference to a plural "you." Calling people to commitment is a common refrain in the Psalms. The people of Israel had a propensity -- like people in all ages -- to become sidetracked, distracted, and distorted in their faithful following of God.

When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble...

We must remember that God's love is found in relationship. God's protection is discovered in relationship. We need both God AND each other. The refuge of God can cover more than one. It can cover everyone. Thanks be to God!

Laurie Hintz, Director of Evangelism and Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

When have you felt the need for God's shelter of protection?

How would you answer someone struggling to see God within a difficult challenge in their life?

PRAYER

Holy God, we are grateful that You are our refuge and shelter in times of struggle. Empower us to share the strength of that gift with all of your people. In the name of Christ, Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

REFLECTION

Change is constant. Life proves it. The Israelites were a people who endured constant change their entire lives. With our fast-paced and ever-changing world, this is something we can relate to! Deuteronomy is such a gift to us. It is thought to be a series of sermons, delivered by the great Moses to an Israel poised at the river Jordan just before their entry into the Promised Land. Another transition...change is constant.

These scriptures talk of thanking God. The Israelites give the first of all their harvests and fruits as a reminder for this community of where they have come from and all that God has done to help them on their journey. This is such a wonderful practice for all of us. Who, or whose are we? Where do we come from? What has God given us that we are thankful for? This is a perfect model action for us as a community of believers during our Lenten journey! Not from any sort of obligatory action, but out of pure gratitude!

"And you shall make a response before the Lord your God..."

What is our response to God amidst our constantly changing lives? How do we live our lives as an outward example of honoring our maker? And...are we bringing our best to God? Our first fruits...our best talents...our...everything...

God is calling us to make our very lives a sacrifice...to make our lives a gift. Paul writes to the Christians of Rome: *I urge you to offer yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship (Romans 12:1).*

So, let us be present in worship. Let us make our lives an act of worship...because of what God has done for us.

Laurie Hintz, Director of Evangelism and Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

When you think about your spiritual journey, where do you see God directing your path?

How do you share your first fruits to honor and thank God?

PRAYER

Gracious God, when we look back on our lives we are so humbled by the many ways You have walked with us through different places, tears and joys. Thank you for your spirit and life sustaining presence in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 14

Romans 10:8b-13

REFLECTION

I have family in New York. I don't get to see them often. I miss them (obviously), but technology has made it possible to stay connected in small but meaningful ways. We text or call during the holidays or family dinners. I also love seeing pictures of my brother's and cousins' families. While I am thankful for the ability to see their faces from the other side of the country, even if it is on a tiny screen, I would never sit across from them at dinner and FaceTime them. There is nothing wrong with the ways we communicate when we are apart, but there is a new reality when we see each other in person. It's so much better. This sentiment is the thrust of this passage in Romans (also a major theme in the entire book of Romans).

Paul is grieved that most of his fellow Jews who have not yet realized that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have ushered in a brand-new reality. The Christ has come and completed the work of God to bring His people near to Him in a relationship characterized by grace. Paul is imploring the reader to view this new context for salvation accurately. *"The word is near to you, in your mouth and in your heart,"* he quotes. God is fulfilling His promise that *"everyone who calls the name of the Lord will be saved."*

What does this mean? It is easy to reduce the words *"if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"* to a *"how-to"* for salvation. This is far more than an alter call. Now, turning to Jesus outwardly (your mouth) because you believe He is who He says He is (your heart) wakes you up to the new reality that is God's kingdom. Every obstacle has been removed. There is nothing keeping us from a gracious God, our part is simply to acknowledge Him. This is what we will celebrate on Easter Sunday and what we are anticipating now.

It breaks my heart to think that this message has been used as exclusionary. As if the message is *"this is who is in and who is out."* This is a gross misrepresentation of God's character as Paul is describing it. The message is that God is so close that acknowledging Him is the only requirement to enter into a *"life that is truly life."* Paul goes out of his way to remind the reader just how inclusionary this message is. *"There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him."* God is generous and if we are stingy with His riches (which aren't ours to give), we are misrepresenting Him. If the good news is truly good news, let it be far from us to tell it like it is bad news.

Laurie Hintz, Director of Evangelism and Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In what ways do you "confess Jesus is Lord?"

How is this passage inclusionary?

PRAYER

Precious Lord, we are grateful that your word is near in our mouths and in our hearts. Empower us to share this holy gift with our families, friends, and the world. Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 15

Luke 4:1-13

REFLECTION

The *Cotton Patch Gospel*, by Koinonia Farm founder Clarence Jordan, recasts the stories of Jesus and the letters of the New Testament into the language and culture of the mid-twentieth century south. They were born out of the civil rights struggle in an effort to bring scripture closer to home. Home included here...the Atlanta area in an era of deep south segregation. In these homespun translations of the New Testament, Rome became Washington, D. C., Judea was Georgia, Jerusalem-Atlanta and so on. Here is Jordan's account of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness:

So, on fire for God, Jesus returned from his baptism. Then in this spirit he was moved to go into the back woods for forty days, where the Confuser took some cracks at him. During that time he didn't eat anything, so he was hungry when the time was up. Then the Confuser said to him, *"So you're God's man, huh? Well, then, tell this rock to become a pone of bread."* Jesus answered back, *"A man can't live on bread alone."* Then the Confuser took him up and showed him, in the twinkling of an eye, all the countries of the civilized world. And he said, *"Look here, all this power and glory has been turned over to me, and to anybody I want to share it with. Now if you'll just let me be boss, I'll put you in charge and turn everything over to you."*

Jesus shot back, *"The scripture says, 'You shall let the Lord your God be your boss, and you shall give your loyalty to him alone.'" The Confuser then brought him into Atlanta, and put him on the steeple of First Church, and said, "Okay, you're God's man. Now jump down from here, because you know the scripture says, 'He will give orders to his angels to keep close watch on you,' and also, 'They'll carry you along on their hands to keep you from stumping your toe on a rock.'" Jesus told him straight, "It also says, 'Don't make a fool out of the Lord your God.'" So when the Confuser got through giving him the works, he left him for a while.*

I love that Jordan's refers to the devil as The Confuser. To me, that makes the story of Jesus' temptation so much more relatable because temptation is often cloaked in confusion or rationalization. And that's where we fall down. Can't you hear the Confuser saying to Jesus *"It's just some bread. They're only rocks—there's a desert full of them. Nobody'll miss 'em, and you're so hungry."*

The Confuser's lies feed into the lies we've told ourselves time and again—lies we've been told time and again: that we are so insignificant that we aren't worth anyone's best—that no one will notice how we treat ourselves or each other. And so, who cares if we fall prey to temptation. The problem is this; The Confuser will do anything to separate us from God. Are we going to stop it?

Laurie Hintz, Director of Evangelism and Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

When have you been tempted to turn away from God? Why does avoiding temptation matter?

PRAYER

Almighty God lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil...Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 16

REFLECTION

Our Lenten scriptures this past week have focused on finding refuge in God, giving our first fruits to God, Christ is Lord of ALL people and Christ's forty days in the wilderness. Each of these scriptures gives us a window into the significance of Lent and why we should actively participate in the journey to the cross. This isn't always easy because of the world we live in.

In our culture, Lent is seen as a way of giving up bad eating habits, like chocolate. In reality, it's so much more than that. Lent is a point of resistance, a pivot point where we see the lives of others as having value over ours. It is going against the flow. It's also a way to develop purpose. Purpose for preparing the followers of Christ through prayer, giving back to the community, repentance of wrongs, giving back to God, reconciling with God and self-denial. Lent offers a beautiful opportunity for us. When we embark on this journey, Lent becomes a guiding light to our faith that culminates with our hearts focused on Easter. If we're truly living in love, perfect love, we should strive to live in the grace, love, resistance, and forgiveness that Lent offers us. If we seek only self, and giving up eating chocolate, we miss the point of Christ's forty days in the wilderness. We miss the point of Lent.

Here are a few examples of things we could give up for Lent: racism, rejecting others, marginalization of others, control, unreasonable expectations (On self, and others), superiority, hating your enemies, ignoring the poor, insulting those who don't think like you, violence, being an unkind Christian and... so many other ways of being in the world.

Lent is, or should be, a time when we reflect on how we empty ourselves to grow closer to God. It should be a time where we resist the culture, and we resist those who seek to move us away from our relationship with the Almighty.

It's easy to live a life in "least resistance" – to simply go with the flow, to simply allow other voices to control our faith journeys, but we shouldn't take that path. Our path should be a path of resistance, a path that says, "We care about others, and we stand with those who are marginalized." A path that says, "I empty myself to make room for you Lord!" When we are able to do that, we will be able to embrace our wilderness times and see them as opportunities for renewal. Opportunities to be the hands, feet, voice, and witness to the everlasting gift of love given to us on Easter morning.

Laurie Hintz, Director of Evangelism and Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What are you giving up for Lent?

How do you participate in Lent?

PRAYER

Holy God, thank you for your presence during our times in the wilderness. Help us to not simply go with the flow. Help us to embrace our time in the wilderness. In the name of your son, Amen!



MONDAY, MARCH 18

Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. (Psalm 62:5 NIV)

Psalm 62

REFLECTION

Rest – four simple letters. Yet, such broad and deep meanings are ascribed to those letters. It is both a noun and a verb, and its origin traces back to Old English and German. We have armrests, headrests and restrooms. We can be restless, well-rested, or full of unrest. Rest can mean "the remainder" as in "I ate the rest of the peanuts." The idea of a final rest is a euphemism for death. And of course a Sunday afternoon nap is the ultimate notion of rest – "ceasing from motion or action" the Oxford Dictionary says.

Augustine of Hippo gives us the biblical sense of rest, Thou hast made us for Thyself O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee. In this sense it means to cease striving, to become restored and refreshed. There is nothing on earth that can satisfy the longing for rest in God – and I most often find Godly rest in times of prayer. And I take the instruction found in Psalm 46:10 seriously, Be still and know that I am God. It is there, in my practice of Centering Prayer, that my heart finds rest in God.

Some times, it seems we need that rest more than others. Crises happen. God may call us to do something unwanted, unexpected or for which we feel unqualified. We all face people who criticize, misrepresent or harm us. We have unexpected financial challenges. We see people unjustly suffer crises of poverty, violence, exclusion, discrimination or oppression.

Amidst any crisis, the psalmist claims a "silence" of soul-comforting deep peace beyond understanding and unshakable hope. We are to trust in God alone—not in status, not in other people, not in finances or resources, all of which can vanish in an instance. How is absolute trust in God possible? It is possible because trust's foundation is the honest, unfailing promise that power belongs to God who steadfastly loves all people. That trust which undergirds us and that we reaffirm in prayer.

Rev. Kathie Stasko, Pastoral Care/Older Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What things of this world keep you from finding time for prayer?

In what other ways might you find rest in God?

PRAYER

Loving God, you call me to lay down the frantic pace of my life that I might find YOUR rest. Help me to trust in you with and for all things. Show me today those things that prevent me from fully resting in you so my heart might be still and I will hear your gentle voice. In your son's holy name, AMEN



TUESDAY, MARCH 19

The Lord is my light, and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1-2 NIV)
Psalm 27

REFLECTION

There are times in our lives when it feels like we live in a world full of darkness. Although much of the world seems to be lost and away from God, there is a light. David claimed that God was his light, his salvation, and his strength for the journey along the path of life. Notice how personal David made it: *“my light . . . my salvation . . . the strength of my life.”* There are times when we think we don’t have the strength to make it or to go on. David was pointing to the fact that in those times God strengthened him, but even more importantly he was pointing out that God was the constant, main source for everything he did in life. As Paul wrote to the Philippians: *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:13).*

When John Patton was translating the bible for one south-seas island tribe, he discovered that they had no word for trust or faith. One day a native who had been running hard, came into the missionary’s house, flopped down in a large chair, and said a word Patton did not recognize. He asked the native what it meant, and the man said, *“It’s good to rest my whole weight on this chair.”* *“That’s it,”* said Patton. He then used that native word to translate the word faith: resting one’s whole weight on God. What a blessing it is to live each day knowing that not only can we rest our whole weight on God, God wants us do just that!

Rev. Kathie Stasko, Pastoral Care/Older Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What situation has driven you to God to find shelter and refuge?

What words describe your sense of his presence at these times?

Is there something you need to “rest your whole weight on God” with today?

PRAYER

Loving, holy God, I want to rest my full weight on you today and not look to anyone else, most especially myself. Guide me to your light and the light of Jesus Christ your son. In Christ’s precious name, AMEN



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” (Genesis 15:1 NIV)
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

REFLECTION

In Genesis chapter 15, verse 6 we come to one of the most important Old Testament revelations, *“Then he [Abram] believed in the Lord; and he [God] reckoned it to him as righteousness.”*

Paul refers to this mighty act of faith in Romans 4. He reminds us that Abraham believed God before he was circumcised, that is before he had any guarantee that God would do what he said. Paul infers from this that acceptance before God has nothing to do with circumcision, as the Jews were insisting. Paul says that when Abram heard God say, *“So shall your descendants be,”* that he looked up into the stars and saw their vastness and their multitude and relaxed—resting in faith upon the power of God.

What was it that made Abram’s faith so strong? The answer is that he did not look at the difficulties in front of him; rather he looked at the one who had promised to be his shield. His eyes were not resting on the problem, but upon the Promiser. When he saw the greatness of God, the might and majesty displayed before him on that summer’s night, I imagine him saying to himself, *“It makes no difference how I feel or what difficulties may be involved. The creator of that multitude of stars is quite capable of giving me an equal number of descendants.”*

Rev. Kathie Stasko, Pastoral Care/Older Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Where in your life do you need God to say, “Do not be afraid. I am your shield, your very great reward”?

What has kept you from asking for God’s protection?

Can you find rest in knowing that God has been, is, and will always be your shield, even if the results seem to be unreachable?

PRAYER

Today, O God, let me carry you as my shield, so that I might rest in You and your Son Jesus Christ. May I be counted righteous by my faith. AMEN



THURSDAY, MARCH 21

*But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.
(Phillipians 3:20 NIV)
Phillipians 3:17 – 4:1*

REFLECTION

We are blessed to be justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. Everyone who claims Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is called to demonstrate their faith to the world through acts of service to God and to the world around them. (See James 2:14-26) Our works do not save us, but they are a sign to the world that our faith rests in God and his son Jesus Christ.

Our treatment of others is also a reflection of our faith. Have you ever longed to take back hurtful words? I have looked back across a day's activities and wished I responded differently to a situation; I have regretted not reacting to a plea for help in someone's eyes; I have considered my actions to be less than Christ-like. But there is no retrieving of the day in order to "set it right." I can, however, rest in the assurance that ...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17) In the middle of our everyday messiness Jesus is offering me forgiveness and the promise of my future citizenship in heaven.

We are cared for, welcomed and protected – God's beloved children. As we eagerly wait for Christ's return, remember our citizenship in that new Kingdom and come to find rest.

Rev. Kathie Stasko, Pastoral Care/Older Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Are you living and reliving past mistakes, rather than trusting Christ with your future?

Do your actions reflect your citizenship in heaven – a place where all persons will be united in glorifying God?

PRAYER

Oh God of all Creation, help me to live each day as you would. Let me be your hands and feet in this life so that I might enjoy eternal life with you and your son Jesus Christ in the next life. AMEN



FRIDAY, MARCH 22

*...how often I [Jesus] have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. (Luke 13:34b NIV)
Luke 13:31-35*

REFLECTION

In Luke 9:51, Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem where he knew that he would face opposition from religious leaders and eventually death (9:22). Along the way, he demonstrates the presence of God's kingdom through repeated casting out of demons and healings from sickness. Crowds of people from Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem follow Jesus along his journey. Today, Jesus would have a host of social media followers tracking his journey on foot from Galilee to Jerusalem and turning out to see him in person as he passed near their town. Wherever Jesus goes, he brings signs of God's kingdom.

Throughout Lent we are preparing ourselves to experience Jesus' cross. Our lives lead to the cross as we seek rest and solace under Jesus' wings. So often we try to be in charge of our lives or we allow the "stuff" of the world to keep us from gathering there. Jesus' longing for us must be met by our own longing for salvation, deliverance, and healing.

Rev. Kathie Stasko, Pastoral Care/Older Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is preventing you from seeking Christ's shelter?

How can we make sense of our lives as a part of the establishment of God's kingdom in our world?

Who needs to see your seeking, that they might reach for Jesus' shelter as well?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, I long for your salvation, deliverance and healing. Let me in all things turn to only you to be the shelter of my life that I might find perfect rest in you. May my life serve as an example of your Kingdom to all who do not know you that they too might find rest and shelter. AMEN



SATURDAY, MARCH 23

Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done.

(Psalm 105:1)

Psalm 105:1-11

REFLECTION

David tells us to do three things as we approach God. First, give thanks -- tell God that we are grateful for all that he has done for us. I think I do a good job of this, but often I need to hear this reminder from Thomas à Kempis, an early 1400s German devotional writer:

“Be thankful for the smallest blessing, and you will deserve to receive greater. Value the least gifts no less than the greatest, and simple graces as especial favors. If you remember the dignity of the Giver, no gift will seem small or mean, for nothing can be valueless that is given by the most high God.”

Second, we are to pray to God by calling on his name or character. God is our provider, our healer, our righteousness, our peace, and many other things, all of which are reflected in his name. We as believers carry his name whenever someone sees us as a Christian.

Third, we must talk about God’s good deeds to others around you. Jesus gave this same command to his disciples: *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”* (Mark 16:15). We need to respond by sharing the truth of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We are surrounded every day by people caught up in the struggles of life. God has called us to be rescuers to the poor, the marginalized, those that Jesus called *“the least of these.”* We bring the cross of Christ to these as we attend to their needs here on earth.

As we turn our faces toward Jerusalem this Lenten Season, Christ’s death on the cross calls us to *“always leave people better than we found them – hug the hurt, kiss the broken, befriend the lost, and love the lonely.”*

Rev. Kathie Stasko, Pastoral Care/Older Adults

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Who in your world needs to see the cross of Christ demonstrated through a hug, a kiss, a hand of friendship or a gift of love?

What is preventing you from sharing God’s love and Christ’s salvation with others?

PRAYER

“LORD, we thank you for your gift of salvation, won for us at the cross by Jesus Christ. We call upon you to use us to share your love this day with those around us.” Amen



MONDAY, MARCH 25

Psalm 39

REFLECTION

“If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” This is a quote most of us have heard at some point in our lives. Probably from a well-meaning teacher or grandparent. While this is a good helpful tool, and a filter that I often discuss with my clients, it can also become a handicap to the work God has for us.

Often, things happen in our lives that cause us to experience anger, frustration, pain, disappointment, grief, guilt, and shame. Sometimes, this is because of things we have done. Sometimes this is because of the actions of others. At all times, our human temptation is to deny these feelings. Maybe we are worried that we’ll hurt other people’s feelings. Maybe we want to keep up an appearance that everything is ok. Whatever the cause, the psalmist writes that holding this in leads to anguish (*Psalm 39:2*).

God created us with emotional systems. God created us with emotions, and abilities to express emotions. This includes pain, pride, and joy. Jesus entered into this world to communicate love to us, and to experience pain with us. Jesus wept. And, Jesus celebrated. Jesus expressed his emotions. We should do the same. During Lent, what have you been afraid to discuss, struggle with, heal with? May the power and acceptance of God give you the strength to be real and authentic.

Rev. Stephen Walters, Contemporary Lead Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What struggle have you been hiding so that you look strong, competent, perfect, etc.?

What emotion have you denied before God?

What would it look like to be authentic and let it all out?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, you created us for a real relationship with you. Too often, we hide ourselves from You and others. In this Lenten season, give me the strength to be weak and the comfort to be authentic. Open doors for healing and hope and may my anguish lead to passion for You and Your calling. Amen



TUESDAY, MARCH 26

Ezekiel 17:1-10

REFLECTION

“Will it thrive?” This is a powerful question. Ezekiel is a great book of the Bible if you enjoy reading about visions. Most of us have heard about the dry bones vision that Ezekiel experiences showing us that God breathes life into a graveyard (happened on Easter too). Less talked about is this image of a planted shoot. When given abundant water and good soil, the plant can thrive. When away from water, shallow depth, or bad soil, the plant is so weak that it is easily pulled (*Ezekiel 17:9*).

Often, we do not feel that we are thriving. We feel that we are surviving life (sort of) and just trying to make it through the day. Maybe work is stressful, the kids have another practice, and I’m tired of dealing with my extended family. Maybe, I’ve overcommitted on my finances, and every day is just dread for the unexpected that will torpedo everything. Maybe I had a great plan 10 years ago and now it’s a totally different picture. In these scenarios, it does not take much to uproot our lives.

But, when we can thrive, we can be strong in the face of the uncertainty, unexpected, and demanding. So, how do we thrive? We need water. Water can be found in daily spending time in the Word of God. We can gain water by spending time, daily, talking to God. Maybe we haven’t heard from God in a while because we have not read or spoken to Him. Deep rooted in good soil can be surrounding ourselves with people that speak hope into our lives, not the hopelessness of what hasn’t happened or isn’t happening.

No matter what thriving looks like for you, it will be rooted in God, a community of God, and the will of God. Do not settle for thriving but embrace a greater plan. This is God’s vision to Ezekiel and God’s vision for you.

Rev. Stephen Walters, Contemporary Lead Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What causes me to get stuck in survival mode and what would it look like to thrive?

When was the last time I spent time asking God what a thriving life looks like?

What kind of soil have I surrounded myself with?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father refresh me today with the water of promise and the soil of hope. I do not want to simply exist in this world. I want to help shape this world for You. Give me the strength to see how I can thrive for You, and the discernment to see how I can gain the soil and water I need. I trust you and I know I can thrive in Your grace. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27

Luke 13:18-21

REFLECTION

“If only I was more like...” Have you ever had this thought? Maybe you grew up hearing a voice that says you should be more like a sibling. Maybe the voice was comparing you to a parent. Maybe the voice is your own that assures you that you’ll never be enough. Whatever voice you hear, our human nature causes us to compare ourselves to others.

The problem with comparing ourselves to others is that we are made in the image of God. I was not made to be as good as anyone else. I was made to reflect God’s image. So, when I read about the mustard seed, I think about how small the seed is. For some reason, maybe because I’ve always lived in Georgia, I think of a peach seed. Man, those seeds are so big. Imagine what would happen if a mustard seed looked at the peach seed and said, “No point in trying.” We could lose something that is strong enough to provide homes and shelters to birds (we would also lose mustard, but I don’t think the disciples had hotdogs!).

What happens in our lives when we get focused on our size, ability, strength, gifts, resources, opportunities, etc. compared to others? We will often neglect to try, and succeed, in living into our God-designed difference. What happens when we look to how we can reflect our God-image? We start to promote the justice that God desires. We spread Good News and hope. We make a God-designed difference. So, during this Lenten season, give yourself the grace to stop comparing yourself to others. Listen to the voice of God that values you and calls you. Have faith to take the little you can offer and see how great God can use it.

Rev. Stephen Walters, Contemporary Lead Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Who do I compare myself to?

What image do I struggle to promote?

If I could only reflect God, what freedom would I experience?

PRAYER

Gracious God remind me of Your calling in my life. Remind me that I am made for Your purpose. Quiet the voice that tells me I am not enough. Remind me that if you can create a beautiful and useful bush from a small seed, you can create something beautiful and useful in me. Amen.



THURSDAY, MARCH 28

Psalm 32

REFLECTION

I was at a leadership conference once. The keynote speaker said, *“Some of you have a sin you’re struggling with right now. You better deal with it, or it’ll get dealt with.”* That phrase frightened me. We all sin, right? God knows we sin, right? I mean, I can’t hide anything from God, right? So, why should I be so worried.

I worry because I think that there is something I can do to *“out sin”* God’s grace. While God forgives me for my doubt, my disbelief, the times I fail to care for the widow or orphan, or the time I said a bad word when I banged my foot into the couch, there is something in my life that God probably will not forgive. There is the thought of anger towards my wife. There is the joke I told. There is the thought I lingered on. There is something that is beyond God’s grace, right?

No, there isn’t. No, God does not want me to sin. God abhors sin. God desires that I live a life that reflects His perfection. However, God knows my shortcomings. Instead of hiding my sin, if I can do what the psalmist says by confessing them, God can heal me and empower me to overcome my sin (*Psalm 32:5*). If I can let go of the burden of sin by confession and reliance on God’s grace, I am free to do His work. During this Lenten season, receive from God the observance of hidden or embedded sin in your life. Then, receive from God the grace to confess that sin. Then, you’ll receive the freedom to operate in His love and purpose.

Rev. Stephen Walters, Contemporary Lead Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What am I struggling with that I don’t think God will forgive?

How is this preventing me from walking with God?

What will it look like to be free in God’s grace?

PRAYER

Creator and Redeemer, you made me for purpose and meaning. You know my faults. You know when I fail. You know when I should do better. However, you continue to love me. Give me the confidence to approach Your throne with confession and hope, knowing that in Your forgiveness there is strength, and in Your strength, there is peace. Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 29

2 Corinthians 5:6-15

REFLECTION

“What’s the worst that can happen?” This is often a phrase that comes up in my counseling sessions. One thing many of us do is forecast what will happen in events. When working with anxiety disorders, this forecasting often becomes catastrophizing. So, whatever is the worst thing that could happen feels like a certainty. If I ask a person on a date, they will absolutely reject me. If I seek the job promotion, I will probably get fired. If I seek to live for Christ, I will end up disappointing God.

I think about this in the work of making disciples. In our society, the worst I have experienced when sharing the Good News with someone is being told no. I’ve been told I’m wrong or believing in a fantasy before. But, that’s the extent of the bad. Yet, so often, I’ve hesitated to talk about Christ to people for fear of this *“rejection.”* Now, look at Paul. What was the worst that could happen to him? He could be stoned, beaten, thrown in jail, or killed for his faith. Do you think I’m embellishing? Well, read the Bible because all of that happened to him. However, he still told people about faith. His forecasting included a realistic view of the consequences he would face. And what did he do? He told people about Jesus anyway. Paul lived to persuade others into the faith (*2 Corinthians 5:11*). He knew that to live is Christ and to die is gain. Thus, even worst case scenario, God was with him.

So, during Lent, let me ask you, *“What’s the worst that can happen?”* If you try to share the Good News, what are you forecasting the end to look like? Maybe you get told no. Maybe you get laughed at. Or maybe, just maybe, you allow the power of the Holy Spirit to move in someone’s heart and their eternity is changed. We serve a God of powerful stories. Let’s live in faith to be a part of a powerful story with others.

Rev. Stephen Walters, Contemporary Lead Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What challenge or step am I avoiding because of fear?

What could God do with my life if it was guided by His strength and not my fear?

Whose eternity do I want to see changed?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father give me strength to trust in you. Give me guidance to communicate Your grace to others. Give me the wisdom to see Your hand in my life. Lead me on your path and let my life be a persuasion to others that following you is the best choice for now and forever. Amen.



SATURDAY, MARCH 30

Exodus 32:7-14

REFLECTION

I remember the first time Rebekah was frustrated with our kids. When I got home, she said, *“Your children are driving me crazy!”* Now, she was not disclaiming them, but there was frustration in what she was saying. All parents can relate to this at some point, right? We love our kids, but they do things that infuriate us.

Now, read Exodus 32. God has delivered His people from slavery in Egypt. He parted a sea for them. He gives them bread and quail every day. And yet, when He takes Moses away for a season of leadership development, the people get scared and create a god idol like the other cultures! I mean, if other cultures created idols to be objects of worship, wouldn't it make sense for the Hebrews to do it? What a lack of patience! So, God does what we often do with our spouses, and tells Moses, *“Your people are driving me crazy!”*

In that moment, God could have decided, *“I'm done with you all.”* However, Moses interceded on our behalf and sought grace from God to cover His anger. Later, Jesus came to do something similar. After continued rebellion, forgetting God's provision, and distrust by people, Jesus stepped into the gap between God's desire for our lives and our response to Him. His sacrifice on the cross is the ultimate expression of saying, *“These are My people, and I love them.”*

So, no matter what you think of God at times, know that His sacrifice means He thinks you are worth everything. Know that even when we make bad choices, even when we act as people who don't remember the work of God, even when we seek idols to feel comfortable with, God's anger relented through the work of grace that we prepare for during Lent.

Rev. Stephen Walters, Contemporary Lead Pastor

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do I believe that I am a part of God's family?

What idol do I chase instead of God?

Do I think God is angry with me or that God is accepting of me?

PRAYER

Patient and loving God show me that You are enough. Show me that you have made promises and You fulfill Your promises. Give me the strength to resist idols that make me feel comfortable, that make me feel in control, or that make me fit in with others. Give me the wisdom to seek You and the patience to hope in You.

Amen.



MONDAY, APRIL 1

Psalm 32

REFLECTION

I can tell when my dog Lewis is happy. Though he can't tell me through words his feelings, his whole countenance announces it. His tail wags constantly, there is a hint of a smile on his face, and he is right by my side. I believe it is the same for God with humans. Psalm 32 let us know when we have achieved the state of happiness; when our transgressions are forgiven, and when we are no longer suffering from the guilt or shame caused by sin. The word *“happy”* (some translations have use the word *“blessed”*) here can be characterized as:

- Constant openness to God's instruction
- Trusting God
- Living in dependence upon God

Psalm 2:12 tells us that happiness belongs to those who *“take refuge in God”*. In today's reading, the psalmist acknowledges God is a *“hiding place for me”* (Psalm 32:7). The phrase *“hiding place”* is defined as a location where God is the protector. Being protected gives us peace, hope, and comfort.

On the other hand, I can equally tell when my dog has done something wrong by his countenance. He hides himself away from me. When I do find him, his head is lowered, his eyes are turned away, and his tail is turned in. When we have sinned against God, our countenance changes. I think of Genesis 3:10, where Adam hides from God when He calls out to him. Adam knows that he has disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. Hiding because of shame, fear and guilt is not happiness.

For Psalm 32, the state of happiness is being forgiven. Allowing the grace of God (unmerited love, mercy and forgiveness) to act in your life. When we achieve happiness, our whole countenance just radiates our sense of relief and abounding joy. Being in the state of the happiness reminds of the lyrics from the song

“Can't Stop the Feeling”:

“I got this feelin' inside my bones

It goes electric, wavy when I turn it on

All through my city, all through my home

We're flyin' up, no ceilin', when we are in our zone”

Let us get into our happiness zone. Let God see our delight in him. Let us experience his love through forgiveness.

Pistol Robinson, Facility Manager/Minister Intern

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you examine your relationship with God, how do you see your condition or posture? Are you open to divine instruction or are you following your own instincts and desires?

Do you see you sins forgiven and covered through God's grace or do you feel you must earn your forgiveness through trying harder to be righteous?

PRAYER

Eternal Father, I praise You for your acts of forgiveness in my life. Through your grace, may my life help others find a hiding place in you. Through your Holy Spirit, allow me to both see my transgressions and turn to you for instruction and the way to go. Amen



TUESDAY, APRIL 2

Psalm 32

REFLECTION

Again, we see that *“happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is forgiven... to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity” (Psalm 32:1-2)*. In Hebrew, the word *“sin”* basically means *“to miss the mark.”* *“Transgression”* is understood as meaning willful rebellion, and the word *“iniquity”* is used to describe the destructive effects of disobedience. How are our actions that miss the mark, that are done through willful rebellion, and represent destructive behavior forgiven? The psalmist tells us that it occurs when we confess, acknowledge, and reveal those pursuits and actions to God (Psalm 32:5). As Christians, this is us acknowledging to God that we are broken.

Scripture tells us that the remedy for our brokenness is repentance. In Ezekiel 14:6, we are told *“Thus says the Lord God: Repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away from your faces away from all your abominations.”* The psalmist in Psalm 7:12 instructs *“If one does not repent, God will whet his sword.”* Jesus tells in Mark 1:15 *“repent and believe in the good news.”* The word repent, in Hebrew, means returning to God. In Greek, repent means changing one’s mind.

However, sometimes when we reflect on our lives, we do not see our daily actions as missing the mark or being done in willful disobedience. We see ourselves as basically good. Scholars have described this type of self-examination as only looking at the *“surface level”* of our lives. We fail to take a deeper look into ourselves to see what really is our *“ultimate concern”* or to understand that what drives us is *“what we love.”* During this Lenten time, take the time to do this deeper evaluation. Happiness is achieved when we are God centered and we trust God’s instruction for our lives.

As we confess to God, we are returning to God from our straying and we are asking for him to change our hearts and minds so that we do not continue that behavior which separates us from Him. Psalm 32:3-5 absolutely captures this moment! We suffer when we are silent, and we rejoice in our forgiveness when we have confessed. Let us be more thoughtful about lives and our relationship with God when we make the following prayers acknowledging we have missed the mark:

UMC Liturgy Communion Confession and Pardon prayer - *“We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.”* Lord’s prayer - *“forgive us our trespasses.”*

Pistol Robinson, Facility Manager/Minister Intern

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What drives your daily actions (family, work, relaxation, God, success, prosperity, health, etc.)?
When considering your actions, do you look at what sin is caused when you do nothing
– sin of omission?

PRAYER

Lord, I ask you to give me a new heart and put a new spirit in me. That you remove my stony heart and replace it with a living one. Amen



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3

Luke 15:11-32

REFLECTION

This parable is very familiar to many of us reading it today, and it is often titled as *“The Prodigal Son,” “The Waiting Father,”* or the *“The Elder Brother.”* The term parable is translated as *“metaphor”* because it employs language meant to represent something else. The story being told is not provided to entertain, but is meant to instruct. This requires us as the readers or hearers to interpret from the story the intended messages. Sometimes when I read parables in the Bible, I feel like the disciples when they approached Jesus *“questioning Him as to what this parable meant”* (Luke 8:9). I can imagine the disciples looking at Jesus and saying *“huh.”* Let us work through this parable together.

Let us start with identifying who are the various characters in the parable. From Luke 15:1-2, we know that tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to Jesus and that He told this parable to them. This parable is one of three shared in chapter 15 (the other two being the story of the lost sheep 15:3-7, and the story of the woman with ten coins 15:4-10). All three of these parables focus on a character responsible for safeguarding items, and then losing something precious.

The character of the father in our parable, who represents God, has lost his son. The son represents the lost, the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus’ message to them is God has lost these tax collectors and the sinners, and He desperately wants them back. Often times we focus on the rebellious activity involved and not the impact of the loss. I can remember an incident when my daughter Lauren was about two years old that illustrates this impact.

We were clothes shopping for my wife in a department store, and while we were looking at various clothes racks Lauren disappeared. We called out to her and she did not respond. We asked people around if they had seen her, and they hadn’t. One of us ran out into the mall entrance to see if she had wandered out there. We were frantic. Just as we were about to alert security, Lauren popped out of one of the clothes racks. The whole time she had been hiding in the center of a clothes rack. The sense of relief in finding her was overwhelming. All we wanted to do was hold her. God grieves when we are separated from him, and he rejoices when we return.

The tax collectors and the sinners should have been relieved to hear how the father received the son when he returned. The father showed his forgiveness with a loving embrace. The father clothed his younger son, welcomed him into the home, and gave a lavish party to celebrate the occasion of his return. These were people who were not valued by Jewish society or by the religious community. Yet, the Lord was yearning to be in relationship to be with them. He wanted them to return to him. Like the tax collectors and the sinners, we should find comfort in that God is waiting for us to return. He is waiting with forgiveness, with renewal of our relationship with him, with restoration in the Triune God image, and warm love.

Pistol Robinson, Facility Manager/Minister Intern

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How does God’s loving welcome help people return to Him?

Parables provide a different way of conveying revelations of God. How do you use parables to help you in getting closer and sharing Him with others?

PRAYER

Lord, Thank you for loving me. Thank you for running to me and clothing me with the Holy Spirit. Thank you for adopting me into your family. I raise the following people from my heart that they may experience the triumphant return to You.

Amen



THURSDAY, APRIL 4

Luke 15:1-3, 15:11-32

REFLECTION

The father in our parable freely receives the son back into the family. The father does not require his younger son to repay him or perform certain actions in or order to gain entrance. The father's actions toward his younger son in the parable represent God's grace. The term grace has the following meanings – (1) that which brings delight, joy, happiness, or good fortune, (2) receiving favor, and (3) rescuing. The New Testament emphasizes that God's grace is a gift from God. Our reading today focuses on how people react to God's grace.

After realizing his horrible condition, the younger son returns to his father asking for rescuing. The younger son does not expect to be reinstated into the family. The son knows that he is not worthy and cannot earn back his father's love and respect. The son is seeking from the father the basic needs to survive. He recognizes that life comes through his father. In this humble state, the young son receives his father's grace.

Though the father freely receives the younger son back, the elder son does not. The elder son has been faithful all along to his father. On his own accord, the elder son has taken on the role of deciding who receives grace. The elder son will not greet his brother back because he does not think the brother merits their father's grace. The elder brother does not forgive the sins of the younger brother. He feels the grace he has received from his father has been cheapened because the father also extends it to his wayward brother. It is not that his younger brother cannot receive the father's grace, he just has to earn it back.

Similarly, the Pharisees and the scribes in Luke 15:1-3 take it upon themselves to determine who is eligible to receive God's grace. Like the elder son, their displeasure is with the one meting out the grace. However, they grumble about Jesus socializing with tax collectors and sinners. Doesn't Jesus know they these people are not holy and should be avoided? Because of their attitude, the Pharisees and scribes are unwilling to be vessels for God's grace to the sinners. They do not think the sinners should be rescued.

Like the son, when seeing our condition, we should long for God's care and forgiveness. As we saw in Psalm 32, when we have returned to God, we are in the state of happiness. By understanding that we did not earn God's grace, then we can become exhorters for others who are lost to return to God.

Pistol Robinson, Facility Manager/Minister Intern

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Are there people in the world that you believe that are unreachable by God's grace?

How does God's grace play a role in your life? How would you describe it someone else?

PRAYER:

Lord, May I have your eyes to see me. May I have your heart to love others. May I have your patience for others rebellion. May I have your courage to seek your lost. Let me be a vessel for your invitation to others. In Christ Jesus' name I pray, the one who came for me. Amen



FRIDAY, APRIL 5

Luke 15:19-32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-19

REFLECTION

I wonder how the younger son viewed his father after he received such a warm reception from him. Unfortunately, the parable of the Prodigal Son does not share this point of view. The younger son confesses that he deliberately revolted against and defied his father. He now understands his life condition because of these actions, and returns to his father asking for forgiveness. Now that he has received that forgiveness, how does the son view the father? How does the younger brother view his elder brother? How does he view the surrounding community in terms of how they are treated and surviving? Paul tells us in the Corinthian passage that we are changed as the result of what has been done for us by Jesus Christ.

I wonder how the elder brother viewed the younger brother after the father explains his actions. The father tells the elder son "we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Unfortunately, the parable does not elaborate on how the elder brother's view point changes because of this explanation. Does the elder brother see the brother as a new person because of the father's forgiveness? Does the elder brother realize that his anger toward the father was because he was not seeing the younger brother the way his father was seeing him? Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:15 "*and he died for all, so that those who might live no longer for themselves.*"

Paul explains we first knew Jesus from a human viewpoint. The Greek term for this human viewpoint is kata sarka – "*according to the flesh.*" Before the resurrection, people judged and understood Jesus by his outside appearance. That understanding include their own "*according to the flesh*" perceptions, assumptions, desires, and fear. After Jesus' resurrection, their understanding changed to recognizing him as the Son of God (Romans 1:3). Jesus was something greater than what they had seen. Jesus' death and resurrection ends the old ways of seeing, understanding, and assessing others.

Paul says "*from now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.*" We are transformed if we are in Christ. Giving up our old ways of seeing others is part of our radical change into the new creation through Christ. We should consider and embrace the way Jesus' death and resurrection has changed us. Do we see things differently because of our Father's love and grace?

Pistol Robinson, Facility Manager/Minister Intern

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Can you see how being in Christ has changed your viewpoint of others?

Why do you think that sometimes you slip back into old patterns of seeing others "*according to the flesh*"?

PRAYER:

O God, I praise you for new eyesight as a new creation. Strengthen in me the ability to see others past their appearances and to see instead their inner selves. Help me to see their hearts and to better my heart with them. Amen



SATURDAY, APRIL 6
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

As Christians, we are reconciled to God through Christ. Paul is sharing the ministry of reconciliation with the Corinthians. The Greek term for reconciliation is katallage which conveys that a corrective change for the better that has occurred in a relationship between persons or groups who had hatred between them. Reconciliation is saving a relationship that has been severely endangered.

We saw that broken relationship in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son had turned away from the father and went off to a distant land. A land with different gods, values, and goals. The younger son engaged in their behaviors, practicing their dissolute ways (lacking moral restraint). As a result, the younger son was a broken human being and was dying.

The Corinthians had been in that condition and Paul was coming to entreat them, to implore them to be reconciled to God. Paul had described their condition as Gentiles as they *“were at that time without Christ... having no hope and without God in the world”* (Ephesian 2:12). That is a bleak condition. Unlike the younger son in the Prodigal Son parable where no one came to his aid while he was in the distant land, Paul came to the Corinthians as an ambassador to offer the message of reconciliation.

We are in a world where there is a lot of rage and hatred. It is easy to get caught up in the worldly rhetoric and lifestyle. It is a world that needs to be reconciled to God. Christ’s death and resurrection has made it possible to be right with God, to have hope and be at peace. Imagine the world if everyone accepted the message of reconciliation. Imagine a world that after hearing the gospel acted like they did in Acts 2:37, *“now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’”* Contemplate what is preventing the world from acting that way, and what things in your life may be preventing you from bringing the message of reconciliation to them.

Pistol Robinson, Facility Manager/Minister Intern

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Who can you think of that needs Christ in their life?

What various means do you think can be employed to entreat them on behalf of Christ?

PRAYER:

Lord, I praise you for our reconciliation. I am comforted by the offer of loving relationship is steadfastly available to all. May the Holy Spirit prepare me as a vessel for your invitation of relationship with others. Though I am saddened that there are people separated for you, I pray that reconciliation is achieved. Amen



MONDAY, APRIL 8
Jeremiah 33:6-9

REFLECTION

If you went to your TV right now and flipped through the channels you would likely find at least one home renovation show. It may be HGTV’s Fixer Upper, Property Brothers, or the old staple This Old House. There are dozens of different shows on TV right now that depict a house in desperate need of repair transformed into a showcase with the magic of a TV hour. We seem to be obsessed with shows that take the neglected and transform them into the extravagant. The shows range from homeowners wishing to create a home they can love again to Real Estate Investors who are looking to make money out of a trash pile. But one thing all these shows have in common is before the renovation can start, they first must have demolition. On demo day everyone comes in with sledgehammers and protective eye wear ready to knock down cabinets, counter tops and walls. I always like watching this part of the show because I love to imagine having permission to take a sledgehammer to something and just tear it down. Once demolition is done they can start to strip away everything that is left from the old to create the new. The floor plan of what will soon become starts to develop, and paint colors, counter tops and cabinets are chosen. All these steps are important to the final result but demo must come first. The new creation cannot come through without the old being taken away first.

In our Lenten journey we must also strip away the old in order to be restored. It is a time of self-examination, repentance and reflection. Starting on Ash Wednesday we are reminded, as the ashes from the palm branches are imposed on our foreheads, that from ash we have come and to ash we shall return; repent and believe in the Gospel. But Lent is more than a time of self-reflection, it is a preparation for Easter, the ultimate restoration. When we let go of all of our past baggage, and allow God to work in our lives stripping layers upon layers of pain, self-doubt, worry, questioning, and lack of faith, we find an extravagant new creation in our lives through Christ. Lent is a preparation for restoration.

Rev. Allison Collins, Minister of Children’s Education

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do you need to “demo” or strip away in your life?

What new creation in your life are you longing for?

PRAYER

Holy God, open us that we may see the areas in our lives that we need to strip away. As we prepare for Easter through the Lenten season help us to put our pain, worries and doubt aside focusing more on you. Restore us oh Lord as a new creation in Christ. AMEN



TUESDAY, APRIL 9

Psalm 126

REFLECTION

“The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” Psalms 126:3-5
Psalm 126 is a confusing yet thought provoking chapter. It seems the passage begins praising God for restoring Zion yet in only a few verses asking God for restoration again. This Psalm is the perfect example of what the commentator Stan Mast calls living in the *“in between.”* Living between hell and heaven; deep sorrow and great joy. Moving from pain and hardship to joy and restoration; living in the tension between, the writer is describing a painful time in the history of the Israelites. They have experienced the destruction of God’s temple in Jerusalem and have been forced into captivity in Babylon for seventy years. Then they hear that they will be returning home after the defeat of the Babylonians. Laughter and joy are heard among the people, rejoicing in the great things God has done.

But longing quickly follows the joy. What they prayed for seems to fall short of what they once had. The writer longs for Jerusalem to be restored, longs for what once was a reality. Though they have their freedom, everything they once had is gone. The Psalmist cries out *“Restore our fortunes, O Lord.”* The work must now begin to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. They pray that restoration will come again as they sow with tears and sorrow. Through God, shouts of joy will be heard again. The Israelites are out of the captivity in a foreign land but have yet to see a restored promise land.

During our Lenten journey we too are living in the *“in between.”* We know great joy is coming, but first we must experience extreme sorrow. This is not a feeling limited to Lent. We have many times in our lives that we are living in the *“in between.”* We are thankful yet longing for something more. How do we connect with God in the *“in between”*? The Psalmist described the Israelites shouting for joy and giving thanks while crying out to God for continued restoration. God heard their cries as God hears ours.

Rev. Allison Collins, Minister of Children’s Education

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Where in your life are you living in the *“in between”*?

How can you better rely on God during this time crying out like the Israelites?

PRAYER

Oh Lord, give us assurance as we struggle with the tension between what was, what is, and what will be. Help us to rely on you as we give thanks and long for more. In Jesus name. AMEN



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10

Isaiah 43:16-21

REFLECTION

“Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”
Isaiah 43:18-19

In this passage from Isaiah the prophet is writing to the Israelites after the defeat of the Babylonians. When the Israelites were released, their captors didn’t return them nicely to their home land. Instead they had to journey on foot through the desert for nearly 900 miles. I am sure there were lots of complaining, sore feet and dry throats. That may be why the prophet was writing to them. The section of scripture begins with the prophet reminding God’s chosen people what was done generations before during the escape from Egypt. God provided a way out by parting the Red Sea, giving them dry land to walk on; then drowning the ones chasing them. God provided for them then and will provide for us now.

They are then told to forget the past. This is an odd statement to make directly after reminding them of the past. Why would such a statement be made? Because God is about to do a new thing. By dwelling on the past, the Israelites may miss what God is doing. Their focus is not fully on God when they are looking back. How often have we missed what God is doing in the present because we are too busy focusing on the past. God is always working in and through our lives but often we put God in a box based on past experience.

The Israelites were made to remember the God who once parted the sea, but immediately were to witness God fill the dry desert with water. Again, God did the unthinkable and the opposite to provide for God’s people. God is not limited by past acts of salvation. God continues to deliver the Israelites as God does for us. As we look towards the ultimate act of salvation in the death and resurrection of Christ, we need to remember that the God who did this for us can do anything. If we open our eyes and hearts to the many ways God is working in our lives, we would see that we are constantly being restored by God. God remains relevant.

Rev. Allison Collins, Minister of Children’s Education

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How has God worked in your life in the past and how is God working in your life now?

Are there things in your life that are preventing you from seeing God’s current acts of deliverance in your life?

How can you focus more on God in the present?

PRAYER

God of salvation, Thank you for the many ways you have worked, are working and will work in our lives. Open our hearts to focus on you and to see your acts in our lives more clearly each day. In your Son’s and our Savior’s name. AMEN



THURSDAY, APRIL 11

Philippians 3:4b-14

REFLECTION

“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 3:13-14

When Paul was Saul he had all the boxes checked. He was born into the right family. He said and did all the right things. He became entrenched in Jewish tradition even so much that he was persecuting Christians. He had a sense of righteousness, but he realized on the road to Damascus he never really knew what it was and where it came from. God revealed himself to Paul that fateful day and showed Paul what it meant to have value through a relationship with Christ.

Paul was willing and desired to lose all in his past in order to gain from Christ. Because of the relationship with Christ, Paul shed the skin of his prior life becoming a new creation dedicated to sharing the power of the resurrection with others.

When Paul was writing the letter to the church in Philippi, he was imprisoned. He was in the midst of hardship, and he drew upon his experience, his setbacks, his epiphany and provided them to the Philippians as encouragement. He advised them that no matter what disappointments occur to stay focused on God, stay focused on the prize in the calling and to move ever towards it. Paul encouraged the church to forget the past and stay focused, pressing on to the heavenly call from God through Christ.

Paul’s words are still very much relevant to us today. The world puts so much value on our possessions, job and status in life just to name a few. For Paul none of the worldly values matter. What matters is our relationship with Christ shedding the old to gain the new. We cannot fully gain the new until we let go of the past. Once you let go of the past the new to come is so much better than anything we had before.

Rev. Allison Collins, Minister of Children’s Education

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Have you had a time when you realized you were only checking the boxes?

What thing in the past is holding you back?

Have you ever had a life-changing moment where you felt God work in your life?

Reflect on this moment.

PRAYER

Loving God, Letting go of our past is so difficult, yet the past is what holds us back. Direct us to realize what in our past is holding us back and keeping us from fully engaging. Guide us as we let go in order to move forward with you. In Jesus’ name we pray. AMEN



FRIDAY, APRIL 12

John 12:1-8

REFLECTION

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem six days before the Passover and has just brought Lazarus back from the grave. In chapter 12 Jesus is eating dinner with Martha, Mary, a risen Lazarus and others. The depiction of this narrative shows a contrast between two of Jesus’ disciples and their actions. Mary’s willingness to pour out perfumed oil, costing more than a year’s worth of hard labor wages, on Jesus’ feet was a true act of devotion. She was willing to give Jesus all she had, including breaking social norms of the day. It was taboo for a woman to touch a man, and even more taboo for a woman to loosen her hair in front of a man, not her husband, much less touch him with it. Mary’s action shows a level of affection only a true disciple could render.

In contrast to Mary’s actions Judas was upset. He sees her actions as a waste. Judas’ greed blinded him from being able to see and show true affection for his savior. The contrast between the two is of something ugly with something beautiful and loving. Mary’s choice to use her hair expounds upon her affection for Jesus, and her example also foretells and is confirmed by what Jesus is going to do with the disciples’ feet in days to come. All these things were probably too much for Judas. Jesus responds to Judas by telling him that the oil was intended to be used for his burial and foretells that his days with them are numbered and his death will soon come.

Jesus affirms Mary’s extravagant outpouring of love. What a contrast between the two and encouragement to us as we experience the story. Can you put yourself in the story? Can you imagine the sweet smell from the perfume that filled the house as a result of her devotion to Christ? How would you have reacted to her actions? Mary was willing to give all she had to Jesus. Are we prepared to give all we have as well or are we still holding back something of ourselves? I know for me I am often too cautious. Sometimes I am slow to jump in with both feet, but Mary’s willingness to do so without question is an example to all of us.

Rev. Allison Collins, Minister of Children’s Education

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Are you giving your all to God? If not, what parts are you holding back and why are you keeping those parts of you from God?

How can you focus more on God to completely surrender to Christ?

PRAYER

Mighty God, Mary’s actions show extravagant love. We are often like Judas holding ourselves back from giving all of our devotion to you. Help us today to recognize the areas in our lives that we need to surrender in love giving our all to you. We pray in Jesus’ name. AMEN

**SATURDAY, APRIL 13***Burying the Alleluias***REFLECTION**

Our Lenten journey is almost complete. There is a tradition in the church that you may not have noticed during this season. During Lent we do not say the word alleluia in worship. The word is absent as a reminder of the solemnness of the season. In the Catholic and Episcopal churches the children have a tradition of burying the alleluias. On the Sunday before Ash Wednesday they create banners depicting the word or write the word on small pieces of paper. These banners and papers are then buried in the churchyard or at home not to be touched again until Easter.

Their tradition of burying the alleluias is a reminder of what Lent is about. Lent is not a joyous time nor is it a time for celebration. Lent is a time of self-reflection, preparation, and repentance. What I love most about this tradition is that the alleluias are not buried forever. They do not go away indefinitely. They come back with a great Triumph on Easter morning when we sing together the Hallelujah Chorus.

One of my favorite sayings during Lent is *“Sunday is coming.”* There is always a sunrise behind a sunset. Lent is at times sorrowful and painful but Sunday is always coming. Each week in Lent we have a reminder that Easter is coming. When you count the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter this year, there are 46 days because Sundays are not included in the forty days of Lent. Sundays are “mini Easters” as we look towards the promise of the resurrection. It is a reminder that even in the darkness of the cross there is hope and joyful anticipation in the resurrection.

As we enter the last week of Lent, reflect on your journey. Do you feel that you have allowed restoration to happen in your life and stripped away layers to make room for Christ? Lent is about preparation and focusing on the amazing gift God has given us through the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ. Are you ready because Sunday is coming?

Rev. Allison Collins, Minister of Children’s Education

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you reflect on the Lenten Season, how have you seen restoration in your life and your faith journey?

What have you removed from your daily life to make room for preparation?

PRAYER

God of Hope, be with us as we continue on the journey of Lent. Self-reflection is often painful and difficult, but we know that you are always near. Help us prepare ourselves for the days ahead and focus on the truth that even in the darkness Sunday is coming. In your Son’s name we pray. AMEN

**MONDAY, APRIL 15**

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

REFLECTION

In life and in death, Jesus associated with sinners. This fact caused great consternation among the religious people of His day. Luke reports that *“the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”* (Luke 15:2)

Jesus allowed a prostitute to wash His feet with her tears. He called tax collectors and everyday sinners to be His disciples. He touched lepers and ate with unclean people.

At one point, after dining in the house of a disreputable tax collector, Jesus declared His life’s purpose: *“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* (Luke 19:10). Jesus spent His life among sinners.

Jesus also died in the same manner that He lived—among sinners, or as we see in this scene, between two criminals. Even as He was being crucified, Jesus was fulfilling His purpose and seeking to save sinners. Jesus, the only fully righteous and sinless human being had His final conversation with a thug who was grasping for hope in a hopeless situation; and Jesus said, *“Today, you will be with me in paradise.”*

Reaching those who are lost was the driving mission of Jesus, and it is meant to be our driving mission as His followers. Jesus died for those who are sinners, and even in His dying He was reaching out to people whom others considered hopeless causes.

Another thing we can see in this scene is two possible responses we might make to Jesus. Both criminals saw the same thing that day: a man who claimed to be the Messiah—the revolutionary king—abused and crucified. They saw all the cruelty and hate heaped upon Jesus by the crowd. But they had very different responses to Him.

One man’s heart was hard. Even as he hung on a cross naked and dying, he attempted to validate himself by joining the crowd in making Jesus feel small. He looked at Jesus and saw a failed Messiah; a strange leader who called people to love their enemies and to turn the other cheek; a man, who though he claimed to be the Messiah, refused to take up arms and fight the Romans. This criminal was angry when he heard Jesus pray, *“Father, forgive them.”*

But, something was happening to the heart of the other criminal as he watched and listened to Jesus on the cross. At some point he stopped hurling insults and spoke up, rebuking the other criminal...then, he spoke to Jesus and said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

In this world, there are some who, when they consider Jesus on the cross, see nothing more than a disillusioned man dying—a naïve, sad, weak man; and they reject Him.

But others see in Jesus love embodied—God incarnate giving His life to get through to the human race; God freely laying down His life to take upon Himself the poison of the world’s sin; revealing to the world the depth of God’s love. Such individuals see in the Cross hope for salvation and a second chance.

Two criminals. Two responses. The question we must ask ourselves is this: *“Which thief will I be?”*

--taken from Final Words From the Cross by Adam Hamilton (Abingdon Press, 2011)



TUESDAY, APRIL 16

REFLECTION

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, *"Woman, here is your son,"* and to the disciple, *"Here is your mother."* From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25-27)

Throughout the New Testament, one can sense the challenges Jesus had with His family. Consider the following:

"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37)

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, *"Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."* *"Who are my mother and my brothers?"* he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, *"Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."* (Mark 3:31-35)

Perhaps the most common understanding of this passage is that even as He hung on the cross dying in pain, Jesus was concerned for His mother. While Mary stood there, seeking to comfort and console her son, Jesus, even as His life ebbed from Him, sought to ensure His mother would be taken care of after He was gone. So, He asked John to care for His mother, and He asked His mother to accept John's protection and care. By so doing, both John and Mary would model for us the call of Christ to see those in need as our mother or father or son or daughter.

In this scene and in these final words, we are reminded once more of the profound role that Mary played in God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ.

We recall Jesus' witness and call to care for our parents.

We see a picture of what it means to be the church—Christians caring for those who are younger and those who are older, as though those in need were our children or our parents.

And we see in Mary one who, though favored by God, walked through this dark valley; but—as Jesus Himself expected her to do—carried on Christ's mission after He was gone.

Jesus' words to *"Behold your son"* and *"Behold your mother"* remind us that this mission is ours as well—caring for those Jesus cares for as if they are our own family.



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17

Mark 15

REFLECTION

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, *"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"* (which means *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*). Mark 15:33-34

Jan and Ben are loving, admirable, devoted disciples of Jesus and close friends from a previous parish. She was the realtor who helped us locate and purchase our first home. He is an attorney who provided wise counsel and measured action to an often enthusiastic pastor. We shared meals and fellowship in one another's homes, watched our children mature and grow, celebrated many special moments together.

I was privileged to baptize their future daughter-in-law into the faith after she met Jesus through our church's student ministry. Raised in a culturally Jewish home, she saw the love of Christ exhibited in the lives of the folks she knew at the Methodist Church. She wanted to be baptized in order to be wed in Christian marriage.

A few years later I was thrilled to officiate at their wedding. They were a most attractive couple—in every way. Their deep devotion to Christ was obvious in every aspect of their young lives. Two years later, when we learned of her pregnancy, we were all ecstatic for them.

As the months progressed and they learned the baby was a girl, we all smiled at the pink bows, the frilly lace and all the *"girly things"* that mother and grandmother were using to prepare for her. The day of her birth arrived and brought all the anticipated joy we had imagined.

On the day before her dismissal from the hospital, the physician on call noticed a serious irregularity in her heartbeat. He ordered an echo-cardiogram before her discharge. It confirmed the worst; she had an incompletely formed chamber of her heart.

Airlifted to the regional children's hospital, she only lived about ten days. Her condition deteriorated rapidly and this beautiful, faithful young couple had to make the gut-wrenching decision to turn off the life supporting machines and *"surrender their daughter into God's hands."* Having stood by them in baptism and marriage, I was with them in that grief-filled moment of death. There are no words to describe the anguish.

A few days later, the same pink bows and frilly lace that adorned her nursery were used to cover her tiny casket. As we were gathering prior to the service, the grandmother and my close friend hugged me and said, *"I guess God needed another little angel in heaven."*

I recoiled in horror and immediately walked with her into an adjoining room. I looked at her eyes and



**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17**

Mark 15

REFLECTION

as lovingly as I could said, *“Jan, I know you don’t really believe that. God is all sufficient. He does not need anything from us. And God does NOT NEED for a precious baby to die prematurely. I know you are hurting deeply and words are hard to find, but let’s allow the words of lament that God has given us in Scripture to express our grief.”*

We gathered ourselves and proceeded with the funeral...one of the hardest I have officiated. Several days later, my friend stopped by to say “Thanks for reminding me of the truth. I guess I just went there because of the pain of my grief. I know God did NOT NEED her...I just needed to have something to say.

Who among us has not felt forsaken at some point? Life in this world continually throws us body punches; some truly stagger us, taking our breath away. The doctor wants to run a test, something doesn’t look right; the company is relocating, and you won’t be making the move; a spouse of many years decided he/she is no longer *“in love”* and decides to walk out; a trusted friend breaks a confidence and twists the truth to others; a co-worker shirks responsibility for a mistake and ‘throws you under the bus.’ As one commentator noted, *“life’s tough, then you die.”*

Sometimes, only an expression of lament can express the physical exhaustion and spiritual desperation of having been kicked in the teeth by life’s trials. Such was the case for Jesus on that Friday.

The cry *“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”* is sometimes called the *“cry of dereliction”* or *“abandonment”*. In that moment, as He prayed these words, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Savior of the world, felt abandoned--forsaken by God. As He hung on the cross, Jesus no longer felt the presence of His Father. He felt alone. He knew what it was like to feel hopelessness and despair.

I shared this passage with my friends in the days following their daughter’s (and granddaughter’s) funeral. The pain and darkness were overwhelming. They felt God had abandoned them. It was to this story that we turned in Scripture to see that at the center of our faith was a man who was cruelly tortured and put to death at the age of 33, and who, as He was dying, felt abandoned by God. I invited them to pray to Jesus, the one who Himself had experienced despair and darkness and who understood.

It is also important to note the source of His words: In the moment when He felt abandoned and forsaken by God, Jesus chose to pray. What a contrast that is to the typical human response. When we experience tough times, we tend to become disappointed with God. Often we turn away from God, refusing to pray and pretending God doesn’t exist. We decide we don’t want anything to do with God because God didn’t help us in the way we wanted. But Jesus didn’t do that. Even though

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17**

Mark 15

REFLECTION

he was questioning God...he was still praying.

When we feel abandoned by God, we, too, must choose to trust that God has not really forsaken us. We must trust that God will not hide His face from us, and that God hears us when we pray. And that leads to confidence in a future yet unseen.

Our King freely chose this path so that He might know what we experience in our times of pain.

Jesus Himself cried out to the heavens, **“Why?”** Yet as He made this cry, He was using words of a psalm that point toward God’s ultimate deliverance.

These are not Jesus’ final words. The feelings of abandonment and God-forsakenness and even death itself, would not be the end of Jesus’ story. Neither will suffering and death be God’s final word for us.

**MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 18***John 19:28 (NIV)**Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I thirst."***REFLECTION**

A couple of years ago, Susan and I were in South Carolina to witness an event in the life of our then three year old grandson. Karson's school was having a "Fun Run." The teachers had been teaching the little children the importance of physical exercise in maintaining good health.

We were a bit surprised at the manner in which they "organized" the Fun Run. Of course, if you know anything about the nature of 2-4 year olds, you know the word "organize" is applied very loosely.

All the classes were introduced and led through an inflatable 'tunnel' like athletes entering a major competition. Then, they were staged at a Start/Finish line. But first, the leader explained HOW the fun run would proceed and gave a long list of rules. Remember—these are 2-4 year olds! About one hundred of them! Expecting them to control and contain all that excitement and build up while going over detailed rules seemed a bit unreasonable to us.

What I found to be very instructive was the direction given that all the little students MUST run by the water station after two three laps; because staying hydrated, especially in a warm climate, is very important.

Once they dropped the flag and sounded the horn, those preschoolers scrambled like freed butterflies, fluttering in every direction imaginable. Oh, the beauty of organized chaos! Several kids made a bee-line for the water station, gulped down the cup and asked for "snack time." It was precious.

On the opposite end of the life spectrum from preschool, anyone who has been with a dying loved one knows that if the person is still conscious while approaching death, he or she becomes thirsty. In extreme weakness, a dying person will say, "I'm thirsty." Typically a nurse, hospice worker or loved one will bring a cup of ice chips and a spoon to place a chip or two on the person's tongue. Sometimes a cup of water and a straw is used...sometimes, the nurse or hospice worker will bring a little sponge on a stick and soak it in water so that the dying person can draw water into his or her mouth through the sponge.

A similar kind of instrument was used with those who were dying on a Cross in ancient times. The stick was much longer, but the approach was the same. The intent was to satisfy the thirst of the dying individual. This is the scene we see in John's Gospel.

John 4 is the only other time in John's Gospel when Jesus expresses that He is thirsty.

Near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, He came to the town of Sychar, which is modern-day Nablus. There He sat at Jacob's Well, while His disciples went into town. A Samaritan woman came to draw

**MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 18***John 19:28 (NIV)**Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I thirst."***REFLECTION**

water; He asked for a drink, and she gave Him one. Then He said to her, "If you knew who you were talking to, you would ask of me and I would give you living water and you would never thirst again" (John 4:10).

For many years she had been thirsty for love, but none of her five husbands had satisfied this thirsting in her soul. She was thirsty for more than water on the day she arrived at Jacob's well.

Water is essential for life. We can survive for weeks without eating but typically only three to five days without drinking. When Jesus uses this metaphor of thirst and Living Water, He speaks of that which is essential for life.

I think of the "bore holes" and wells many churches and Christian relief organizations are drilling...and how providing clean, safe, life-giving water is a metaphor for the Gospel we hope the people in the community will receive. We need both physical water and living water—spiritual water. This spiritual water is what our hearts yearn for; it is joy and hope, meaning and purpose, companionship and love, forgiveness and mercy. Jesus was saying to this woman, who had been trying her entire life to find something that would satisfy, that she had been looking in the wrong places. He was the source of this Living Water.

What does it mean that the One who offers Living Water was now Himself thirsty? Can you feel the despair in this scene and these words? The Fount of Living Water is drying up. The Source of life is dying. God-in-flesh had come to Earth to offer Living Water, and Humanity had chosen to destroy the Spring.

What are you thirsting for first and foremost in your life? What do you hope will satisfy you?
The next bigger house? Or a promotion? Or what if you were married to someone else?
Do you think your thirst would be satisfied?

That's not the way it works...Jesus' death on the cross for me and for you beckons us to thirst only for Him.

As Jesus expressed His thirst in His final hours on the Cross, may we all, like Jesus express our deep thirst to be satisfied by Him.



GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 19

John 19:30 (NIV)

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

REFLECTION

In a previous parish, we produced a weekly email called *"The Friday Update."* It was brief and more 'newsy' than devotional in nature. We tried to connect people to the many activities, studies and service opportunities in a busy congregation. We also tried to provide a 'sneak peek' into the worship services of the upcoming weekend—you know, a little 'teaser' that just might stir enough curiosity to cause folks to think about actually making it to worship that week—or, at least consider returning a bit early from the lake.

On most weeks, I had the responsibility of crafting the message for the Friday Update. Our communications coordinator was also my executive assistant. She was thoroughly organized and was rather insistent that the Friday Update be written, edited and prepared for delivery first thing Friday morning. She had these metrics about 'open rates' and 'read-delivered' status that had her convinced that our 'readers' preferred to have the Friday Update in their email Inbox early in the day Friday. If we didn't get it to them first thing, they were likely to get distracted with work and family priorities and not open it (making moot the entire exercise of writing the thing in the first place).

So, on Wednesday each week, I would stir up the creative juices and get the thing done and delivered to her. I don't know about other pastors, but on Wednesday, I am just recovering from the previous Sunday and working feverishly to be ready to lead the mid-week study—not to mention, searching for the clincher to the sermon for the upcoming Sunday. Some Wednesdays, with all of the weight of congregational needs on my heart, the administrative details of various items swirling in my head, the homiletical and exegetical twists of sermon preparation in my spirit, and the deadline of the Friday Update looming over my shoulder...I've been known to mutter to myself, "I'm done."

That little self-pitying display doesn't come near the significance borne by Jesus in His final moment on Golgotha's hill.

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

Fleming Rutledge, has shared the following insights in *The Seven Last Words from the Cross*, Eerdmans, 2005:

The English is ambiguous, but the Greek is not. It does not mean, *"it's over; this is the end; I'm done for."* It means *"it is completed; it is perfected."* The Latin says it splendidly: *Consummatum est.* Jesus is announcing that, at the precise moment when He seems to be defeated, He is actually the conqueror. Christus Victor. He has done what He came into the world to do, the Word made flesh... now announces, *"It is accomplished."*



GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 19

John 19:30 (NIV)

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

REFLECTION

[Early in John's Gospel] the purpose of the Lord's sacrifice is laid out... twice in the first chapter he identifies the purpose of Jesus' life and death: *"Behold,"* says John the Baptist as he sees Jesus coming toward him for the first time. *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* (John 1: 29-36)

[The Christian Scriptures consistently affirm] the work of Christ as finished, perfected, accomplished. There is no aspect of Christian faith more difficult for us to believe. It is [human nature] to think that Christ's work could not possibly be finished, that we have to do more, we have to add to it, we have to earn it...

[The Old Testament] is filled with directions about what to do to gain forgiveness for unintentional sins. *"The Lord said to Moses, 'If any one sins unwittingly in any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done...then let him bring an animal without blemish for a sin offering...and the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering and...make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven'"*

The trouble with this procedure... is that it had to be done over and over every time there was an unintentional sin. The...sinner could never be free of a sense of unease...The animal sacrifices of the OT were an imperfect method. They were *"only a shadow of the good things to come..."* (Heb. 10:1) These rituals were ordained by God in order to prepare His people to understand the perfect and complete sacrifice for sin that was yet to come: *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."*

We cannot earn God's gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, resurrection and eternal life...It has already been done for us. It is freely accomplished through the self-giving of Jesus Christ. He is the perfect sin offering, *"once for all"*

That is the message...for every one of us. Only the death of the Son of God by crucifixion was sufficient to lift the terrible curse of sin from the world...the ugliness of His crucifixion corresponds to the ugliness of the sin of the world. He has passed through His ordeal *"out of bondage into freedom, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life."* It is finished. It is accomplished. It is enough. It is once—for all.

There's the Friday Update.

**PASSOVER, APRIL 20***Luke 23:46 (NIV)*

*Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."
When he had said this, he breathed his last.*

REFLECTION

At some point, every pastor stands with a family alongside a bed as a beloved family member slips from this world to the next. Occasionally, the scene involves the family gathered in a separate room awaiting word. When the news comes, it is often delivered quietly and simply: *"He's gone."*

The scene on Golgotha was not quiet, sterile and serene as we may often experience. There were no life-saving devices connected to His body. There were no alarms sounding that indicated a change in His physical state. There were no nurses or physicians gently adjusting pain medication to keep Him comfortable.

This was a grotesque and inhuman scene. His tortured body drooped from the agony and exhaustion of the previous hours. Torn flesh, exposed muscle and tissue hung like so much shredded fabric. Crimson rivulets of blood ran down, dripping and pooling in the dry, stony ground beneath His pierced feet.

In the case of one being crucified, the very act of speaking was painful and required great exertion. It is thought that death came to those being crucified due to some combination of exhaustion, shock, buildup of fluid around the heart and in the lungs, and asphyxiation. To speak while being crucified would require great effort as the victim would have to pull himself up by the nails in the wrists in order to expand the diaphragm to speak. For all of these reasons, words were sparse among the victims of crucifixion. (Hamilton, 16)

Fleming Rutledge tells of a particular seminary professor who had significant impact on her life and ministry. She recalls *"talking to him once about great questions of life and death, and the struggle to believe and make sense of things. [This professor's] only child had been born when he and his wife were in their forties, and then they lost him to a rare disease when he was 23. Out of his great grief, this bereaved father said, "The Christian life is lived in between [two prayers]—in between My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me? And Father into thy hands I commend my spirit."* (Rutledge, 77)

On the cross, Jesus again was teaching us how to pray. When we're facing darkness and despair, when we're facing the valley of the shadow of death, when we're facing the unknown, what should we pray? *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."* (Hamilton)

In days following the moments we pastors share with families around the passing of a loved one, we are later called upon to offer words of comfort in a funeral or memorial service. Near the end of such a service, we speak words like these:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech

**PASSOVER, APRIL 20***Luke 23:46 (NIV)*

*Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."
When he had said this, he breathed his last.*

REFLECTION

you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive Him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints of light.

Jesus called out with a loud voice, *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."* When he had said this, he breathed his last.





Holy Week Services

MARCH 6th ASH WEDNESDAY

Service time: **7am - 7pm** | **Location:** main sanctuary

A self-guided experience will take place from 7 a.m. - 7 p.m.

Service of imposition of ashes at Noon and a full choral service with imposition of ashes at 7 p.m.

Nursery available for ages 0-3 except the noon service

APRIL 14th PALM SUNDAY

Service time: **8:45 and 11am** | **Location:** main sanctuary

The annual service of Lenten Lessons and Carols featuring readings and music illuminating the Passion of Christ.

APRIL 18th MAUNDY THURSDAY

Service time: **7:30am** | **Location:** main sanctuary

A service remembering the Last Supper with choral music and Holy Communion.

Childcare available for ages 0-7

APRIL 19th GOOD FRIDAY

Service time: **7:30pm** | **Location:** main sanctuary

A self-guided experience.

APRIL 21st EASTER SUNDAY

Service time: **7am Sunrise** | **Location:** parking lot

With special guest musician, Brian Arner

Service times: **8:45 & 11am** traditional | **Location:** main sanctuary

Featuring choir, brass and organ

Service time: **9:51am** modern | **Location:** family life center

Nursery available for ages 0-3 except the 7am Sunrise service

Lenten Devotion Contributors:

**Dr. Steve Dodson, Rev. Kathie Stasko, Rev. Stephen Walters,
Rev. Allison Collins, Laurie Hintz, and Pistol Robinson**



770 Canton Hwy., Cumming, GA 30040
www.CFUMCGA.com