



*Keeping  
a Holy Lent*

*Lenten Daily Devotions*

*from*

*Grace Church Brooklyn Heights*

2021

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**To the Reader:**

Welcome to Grace Church's annual Lenten Devotional Booklet. The reflections contained in this booklet are meant to help guide you through the season of Lent so that it can be for you, as our prayer book calls it, a Holy Lent.

This booklet contains the reflections of parishioners of Grace Church on scripture passages assigned in Year One of the Daily Office from Monday through Saturday, and passages from the Revised Common Lectionary in Holy Week. This year, as many of you have requested in the past, the actual scripture passages on which the reflections are based have been included. You are invited to make these readings and attendant reflections part of your Lenten discipline. Also, this year the booklet includes three psalms from the Lenten lectionary, interspersed among the reflections, specifically for your own reflection on your life, your experience, your hopes in prayer.

As part of our Lenten call to deepen our life in Christ, not only as individuals but as a church community, we also commit to the discipline of outreach giving in this penitential and holy season. This year, Grace Church Brooklyn Heights will collect monetary donations for the Red Hook Initiative, an organization that provides critical support for schools, a community farm, and youth leadership development in neighboring Red Hook. In this year of great need, we hope that your Lenten discipline will include not only the meditations in the booklet, but also your generosity toward sustaining this important effort.

The forty days of Lent have their origin in the preparation of the catechumens ("those being instructed") for Baptism in the early church. Women and men touched by God's grace found themselves deeply involved in, and committed to, a new way of life leading towards the waters of Baptism and from there to be nourished for life at the Lord's Supper. For those of us who have already been to the fountain of Baptism, these forty days can provide a kind of annual retreat, a recollection of the meaning of our lives in the light of Christ.

The past year has been one of particular physical and spiritual challenge. May this booklet, in company with other Lenten resources you find in prayer, scripture, conversation, and the variety of disciplines, guide you through a holy Lent and into a joyful Easter.

## Wednesday, February 17, 2021 (Ash Wednesday)

Matthew 6:1-6, 6:16-21

*"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

\* \* \*

How can we walk humbly in this world? Two of today's readings (Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 6:1-6 and 6:16-21) clearly deliver a common message—in plain language: don't be a show-off before God. "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day" (Isaiah). "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them" (Matthew). Rather, they exhort us to fight injustice, feed the hungry, and house the homeless (Isaiah), and when doing these good works, or when praying or fasting, to do so quietly or in private (Matthew).

It's reassuring to know that all our recently articulated Core Values are aligned with Isaiah's admonitions. And we dearly want to welcome, serve, and fight for justice, through which we hope to grow in faith. But how do we welcome, serve and fight humbly, as Matthew warns? In today's world, ruled by social media and enslaved by perpetual quests for perfect Instagram photos, how do we do what we must, but make it about those we serve, and not about ourselves? Is it possible to live out our mission, and still keep out of the spotlight?

Or, paradoxically, should we do the opposite? Today is Ash Wednesday. Having received ashes, once we're out on the sidewalk or back in the workplace, we proclaim our faith in a very outward way, far less subtly than many of us might ordinarily do by wearing a discreet cross around our neck, or a lapel pin on our jacket. Stretching things a bit, does this violate Matthew's edict to do things "quietly," by saying "Look at me!"? Or are we actually walking humbly with our God, as Micah 6:8 instructs us, doing our best because we aren't afraid to go public, even in an increasingly secularized world? Being a Christian is hard! But I think the answer to that latter question is not.

*Barbara Becker*

**Thursday, February 18, 2021**

Psalm 37: Part I

- 1 *Do not fret yourself because of evildoers; \*  
do not be jealous of those who do wrong.*
- 2 *For they shall soon wither like the grass, \*  
and like the green grass fade away.*
- 3 *Put your trust in the LORD and do good; \*  
dwell in the land and feed on its riches.*
- 4 *Take delight in the LORD, \*  
and he shall give you your heart's desire.*
- 5 *Commit your way to the LORD and put your trust in him, \*  
and he will bring it to pass.*
- 6 *He will make your righteousness as clear as the light \*  
and your just dealing as the noonday.*
- 7 *Be still before the LORD \*  
and wait patiently for him.*
- 8 *Do not fret yourself over the one who prospers, \*  
the one who succeeds in evil schemes.*
- 9 *Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; \*  
do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil.*
- 10 *For evildoers shall be cut off, \*  
but those who wait upon the LORD shall possess the land.*
- 11 *In a little while the wicked shall be no more; \*  
you shall search out their place, but they will not be there.*
- 12 *But the lowly shall possess the land; \*  
they will delight in abundance of peace.*
- 13 *The wicked plot against the righteous \*  
and gnash at them with their teeth.*
- 14 *The Lord laughs at the wicked, \*  
because he sees that their day will come.*
- 15 *The wicked draw their sword and bend their bow to strike down the poor and needy, \*  
to slaughter those who are upright in their ways.*
- 16 *Their sword shall go through their own heart, \*  
and their bow shall be broken.*
- 17 *The little that the righteous has \*  
is better than great riches of the wicked.*
- 18 *For the power of the wicked shall be broken, \*  
but the LORD upholds the righteous.*

\* \* \*

Considering the recent uprising at the U.S. Capitol, it is difficult not to read this scripture without a smug sense of self-righteousness. The past year has displayed abhorrent behavior from our former President and our fellow citizens and leaders, and abusive and excessive police practices. My initial response to select verses including, "For evildoers will be cut off" and "In a

little while the wicked shall be no more", was based on confidence that the evil others will be *seen to* in the end.

David, the psalmist, draws a sharp contrast between his readers and the evildoers. By comparing ourselves to the extremes of evil, it is easy to feel pretty good about ourselves, offering us a pass to be complacent in our own soul-searching. What the psalmist omits is any mention of the evil that we all carry in us. The gift we have as Christians is the knowledge that we can see to our own evil through Christ's sacrifice if we search our souls, and ask forgiveness for that which we work so hard to conceal.

In verses 4 and 5 the psalmist advises us to "Take delight in the LORD", and "Commit your way to the LORD and put your trust in him". Through acknowledging our own darkness, we can endeavor to defeat it, turning instead to our faith, and trusting and delighting in the LORD.

*Sarah Holbrook*

## Friday, February 19, 2021

### Psalm 32

- 1 Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, \*  
and whose sin is put away!
- 2 Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, \*  
and in whose spirit there is no guile!
- 3 While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, \*  
because of my groaning all day long.
- 4 For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; \*  
my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.
- 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you, \*  
and did not conceal my guilt.
- 6 I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." \*  
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.
- 7 Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble; \*  
when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.
- 8 You are my hiding-place; you preserve me from trouble; \*  
you surround me with shouts of deliverance.
- 9 I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; \*  
I will guide you with my eye.
- 10 Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; \*  
who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you."
- 11 Great are the tribulations of the wicked; \*  
but mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD.
- 12 Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the LORD; \*  
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

\* \* \*

Recently I was discussing the General Confession with a good friend. We share an interest in language and comparative religion, and we talked about the differences between saying this prayer in group worship and making individual confession to a priest. My friend felt the wording of the old (pre-1979) version was "disturbing:" too intense for weekly use and more appropriate for the once-a-year Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. She asked: "If you had committed a serious sin, something you couldn't tell anyone, even a priest—would you confess it to God?"

Her question jolted me. I do have something like that on my conscience, something I have never spoken of to anyone. The person I wronged is dead. My sin cannot be undone or changed or made better. And it is so painful for me to think about that I suppress my memory of it.

This psalm came to me like a direct message: "While I held my tongue, my bones withered away ... Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt ... you forgave me the guilt of my sin."

As I read these words and thought of the possibility of God's forgiveness, I had hope: "... mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD." If I can "heartily repent," as the General Confession requires, and follow "the way that you should go," then "Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away."

*Ann Herendeen*

**Saturday, February 20, 2021**

Titus 3:1-9

*Remind [your community] to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone. But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.*

\* \* \*

My family recently watched “The Social Dilemma,” a documentary-drama highlighting the all-too-human and addictive dangers of technology-enabled social networking. The third chapter of Titus reminds us that “stupid controversies” destroyed communities in the pre-modern era. Today we have social media and echo-chamber networks that amp up the velocity of destructive potential. Because malicious messages burn so hot, our attention turns easily toward them.

I see Paul’s command for those who have been reborn to “insist” not just on good works but also good messaging. My Lenten challenge is not just to resist the easy pleasure of petty dissensions, but also to aim to radiate the hopeful message of grace and vision for a world remade. Content with malice and envy may travel 500 miles in a second, but let my messages and conversations proclaim a positive vision of loving kindness, of real inclusion, of serving worthy goals.

*Dennis Gephardt*

**Monday, February 22, 2021**

John 2:1-12

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.*

\* \* \*

As a lifelong reader, and a student and teacher of literature, I love stories! All kinds of stories. This story, vivid, spare, moving right along, begins in the everyday world of Cana, a small town in Galilee. Folks are celebrating a wedding attended by Mary, Mother of Jesus, and later Jesus and his disciples—a lovely gathering in an everyday world until the wine runs out, usually a party ender. Mary, ever mindful, who likes successful gatherings, points this out to Jesus, but he is preoccupied with more important things.

The story progresses, but ends in an extraordinarily different world. God intervenes. Jesus turns the water which the servants have brought in, into wine, reinvigorating the festivities with his bounty. This, the first of His miracles, changing water into wine, is a sign to the disciples of Jesus' glory, that God's presence is in him. Then, his mother, his brothers and his disciples go down to Capernaum, a return to the ordinary world, changed.

*Wendy Chittenden*

**Tuesday, February 23, 2021**

Psalm 47

- 1 *Clap your hands, all you peoples; \*  
shout to God with a cry of joy.*
- 2 *For the LORD Most High is to be feared; \*  
he is the great King over all the earth.*
- 3 *He subdues the peoples under us, \*  
and the nations under our feet.*
- 4 *He chooses our inheritance for us, \*  
the pride of Jacob whom he loves.*
- 5 *God has gone up with a shout, \*  
the LORD with the sound of the ram's-horn.*
- 6 *Sing praises to God, sing praises; \*  
sing praises to our King, sing praises.*
- 7 *For God is King of all the earth; \*  
sing praises with all your skill.*
- 8 *God reigns over the nations; \*  
God sits upon his holy throne.*
- 9 *The nobles of the peoples have gathered together \*  
with the people of the God of Abraham.*
- 10 *The rulers of the earth belong to God, \*  
and he is highly exalted.*

\* \* \*

In the second verse of this Psalm it states that we should fear God. Some people would question and ask why would this great leader want us to fear him? Wouldn't he want us to work in harmony to execute his word and his teachings? But that is not how divine leadership works. Effective leadership needs power and a plan. The people following God must understand that if they don't follow the guidance, then there will be consequences. This is essentially what God is doing, having us fear him so we do the acts that God has taught us, and so we don't do the acts he has commanded us not to do.

Later in the psalm we hear that you should always be singing praises for God. People may ask, if someone wants to resemble a strong leader, doesn't it seem petty and selfish to always want praise? However, this is a weak argument because you can't compare any other person's actions to what God has done. We must show that we are always thankful to God because, if we aren't thankful to him, then how could we ever be thankful to others? God isn't asking for praise just to feel good. God guides us to praise so we can learn how to be thankful. This will allow us and encourage us to be thankful for others even if what they did for us is infinitely less than what God has done for us.

*Warner Gephardt (age 16)*

**Wednesday, February 24, 2021**

John 15:1, 6-16

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.*

\* \* \*

*"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last ..."*

I sometimes have a hard time choosing: red or white; pasta or fish; mountains or beach. In my choice of partner, or career, or volunteer work I have struggled over whether I have made the right choice. I have even sometimes decided I didn't, and made a new choice. Jesus tells me that there is one important, even central, choice that I don't have to puzzle over. God has chosen me! And his choice is with a purpose: that I will make a difference, a lasting difference, if I chose to accept God's will in my life. I am overjoyed to know this. But just as the tree bears fruit only after many days and seasons, some cold, some wet, some hot, some dry, I must discover God's plan for me in the daily struggles and opportunities of my life. I will try to listen with the ear of the heart each day to that call to action.

When my mother was close to her death, she was visited by the hospice chaplain. He held her hand, sang a Psalm to her in Hebrew, and then told her that she had fulfilled God's purpose for her. God was calling her to rest. What a comfort those words were to her! May God continue to choose me for his purposes and let me be fruitful in fulfilling them, and then grant me eternal rest in him.

*Linda Wexelblatt*

**Thursday, February 25, 2021**

John 3:16-21

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*

\* \* \*

The first verse in today's reading is so well known that John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world..." ) can be seen on handmade signs at sporting events and on the bottom of Forever 21 shopping bags, in an attempt at evangelism. Of course, I agree that the Incarnation is central to Christian belief, but it is the last verse of the reading that caught my attention: "*But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*" This verse reminds me of the final lines of Amanda Gorman's poem, "The Hill We Climb," that she read at the Biden/Harris inauguration:

*For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

So how do we come to the light, to see it, to be it? Having co-facilitated two consecutive dialogue circles for Sacred Ground, the Episcopal Church's racial justice initiative, one way comes to mind. We must bring the truth of systemic injustice into the light and work to fix it. We need to be the light that moves our country toward becoming God's Beloved Community, where everyone belongs. Amanda Gorman says it this way:

*It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit.  
It's the past we step into and how we repair it.*

Kathy Page

**Friday, February 26, 2021**

Psalm 40

- 1 *I waited patiently upon the LORD; \*  
he stooped to me and heard my cry.*
- 2 *He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the mire and clay; \*  
he set my feet upon a high cliff and made my footing sure.*
- 3 *He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; \*  
many shall see, and stand in awe, and put their trust in the LORD.*
- 4 *Happy are they who trust in the LORD! \*  
they do not resort to evil spirits or turn to false gods.*
- 5 *Great things are they that you have done, O LORD my God! how great your wonders and your plans  
for us! \*  
there is none who can be compared with you.*
- 6 *Oh, that I could make them known and tell them! \*  
but they are more than I can count.*
- 7 *In sacrifice and offering you take no pleasure \*  
(you have given me ears to hear you);*
- 8 *Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required, \*  
and so I said, "Behold, I come.*
- 9 *In the roll of the book it is written concerning me: \*  
'I love to do your will, O my God; your law is deep in my heart.'"*
- 10 *I proclaimed righteousness in the great congregation; \*  
behold, I did not restrain my lips; and that, O LORD, you know.*
- 11 *Your righteousness have I not hidden in my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your  
deliverance; \*  
I have not concealed your love and faithfulness from the great congregation.*
- 12 *You are the LORD; do not withhold your compassion from me; \*  
let your love and your faithfulness keep me safe for ever,*
- 13 *For innumerable troubles have crowded upon me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see; \*  
they are more in number than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me.*
- 14 *Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; \*  
O LORD, make haste to help me.*
- 15 *Let them be ashamed and altogether dismayed who seek after my life to destroy it; \*  
let them draw back and be disgraced who take pleasure in my misfortune.*
- 16 *Let those who say "Aha!" and gloat over me be confounded, \*  
because they are ashamed.*
- 17 *Let all who seek you rejoice in you and be glad; \*  
let those who love your salvation continually say, "Great is the LORD!"*
- 18 *Though I am poor and afflicted, \*  
the Lord will have regard for me.*
- 19 *You are my helper and my deliverer; \*  
do not tarry, O my God.*

\* \* \*

Psalm 40 has all the components of so many psalms:

Praise: Great things are they that you have done, O Lord my God!

Rescue: He stooped to me and heard my cry.

Petition: Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me; O Lord, make haste to help me.

Retribution: Let them be ashamed and altogether dismayed who seek after my life to destroy it;

Help: You are my helper and my deliverer; do not tarry, O my God.

Gratitude: He put a new song in my mouth.

I am surprised that, in examining this psalm, I also see the very same components in prayer. Why am I surprised? It has occurred to me that I have always seen psalms as a male construct filled with war imagery and physical danger. Not my type of prayer! I confess I didn't make a personal connection between psalm and prayer until now. Suddenly, I see I can use in my own prayers all the same words that are highlighted above, even "retribution". Although I do not know of any personal enemies who seek to destroy my life, I have felt there have been political policies that could destroy my life, along with the lives of others. Yes, on reflection, it's very relevant! Also, the psalmist (attributed to David) has the same desire as I do in answering prayer, "...do not tarry, O my God."

How delightful it is to think I can actually relate to someone who wrote Psalm 40 so many ages ago!

*Emily Horcher*

## Saturday, February 27, 2021

John 4:1-26

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" -- although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized-- he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband' for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

\* \* \*

The Book of John has always found a soft spot in my admittedly "mystical" heart. The Gospel passage chosen for this week (John 4:1-26) is a perfect case in point. In it, Jesus asks a strange Samaritan woman for a drink of water. The story basically contrasts ordinary physical water with the "living water" of the spirit. Jesus states, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The teaching contrasts the old tribal sensibility based on temporal lineage and bloodline with an entirely new way of experiencing reality through the lens of the eternal spirit. Surely, the View of the Spirit sees through the petty divisions of race, class, gender, nationality, political party, scientific theory etc.

I work in the healthcare industry and, even though I'm only 58 years old, I was fortunate to receive my second Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine in early January. Does the vaccine lessen my personal anxiety/stress level? Yes, absolutely ... but only on a relative level. On an absolute level, I have no idea how effective the vaccine will really be, or what new variants of COVID will come to fruition in the coming months and years. I really know nothing.

*Saturday, February 27, 2021 | John 4:1-26*

Although I definitely have some faith in modern science, my deeper faith is in learning to stoke, inspire, tune into, or relax into the Holy Spirit every morning through my contemplative practices. As the day unfolds, I try to live in interpersonal peace with friends and strangers alike. I try to practice good self-care and maintain hope for God's mercy and continued blessings.

*Matt Morse*

**Monday, March 1, 2021**

Psalm 57

- 1 *Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful, for I have taken refuge in you; \*  
in the shadow of your wings will I take refuge until this time of trouble has gone by.*
- 2 *I will call upon the Most High God, \*  
the God who maintains my cause.*
- 3 *He will send from heaven and save me; he will confound those who trample upon me; \*  
God will send forth his love and his faithfulness.*
- 4 *I lie in the midst of lions that devour the people; \*  
their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongue a sharp sword.*
- 5 *They have laid a net for my feet, and I am bowed low; \*  
they have dug a pit before me, but have fallen into it themselves.*
- 6 *Exalt yourself above the heavens, O God, \*  
and your glory over all the earth.*
- 7 *My heart is firmly fixed, O God, my heart is fixed; \*  
I will sing and make melody.*
- 8 *Wake up, my spirit; awake, lute and harp; \*  
I myself will waken the dawn.*
- 9 *I will confess you among the peoples, O LORD; \*  
I will sing praise to you among the nations.*
- 10 *For your loving-kindness is greater than the heavens, \*  
and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.*
- 11 *Exalt yourself above the heavens, O God, \*  
and your glory over all the earth.*

\* \* \*

This Psalm begins:

*Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful, for I have taken refuge in you;  
in the shadow of your wings will I take refuge until this time of trouble has gone by.*

The words were written so very long ago, yet they sound like they were written for us today. I can hear them. I can feel them. It would be easy to write pages on this opening line, piling on complaints that have been building up from living in the time of COVID for a full year.

Instead, let's go to verse 8:

*Wake up, my spirit; awake, lute and harp;  
I myself will waken the dawn.*

Rather than "take refuge," these words call us up and out of our sad and fearful selves. But again, how are we to have the courage while we are in "the time of trouble?" Our physical health has been compromised. Our mental health has been challenged. We make jokes about Blursday when we have lost track of time, and our usual daily schedules are no longer relevant.

Continue to verse 10:

*For your loving-kindness is greater than the heavens,  
and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.*

Now we have God's example to work with and inspire us.

This is our call to action—to choose to be happy—to show our loving-kindness! We have to put the positive before, during and after all of the negative. Think and pray about how you will hear, feel and see this day. God is faithful. Choose to be happy. Please, just try!

*Karen Loew*

**Tuesday, March 2, 2021**

Psalm 62

- 1 *For God alone my soul in silence waits; \*  
from him comes my salvation.*
- 2 *He alone is my rock and my salvation, \*  
my stronghold, so that I shall not be greatly shaken.*
- 3 *How long will you assail me to crush me, all of you together, \*  
as if you were a leaning fence, a toppling wall?*
- 4 *They seek only to bring me down from my place of honor; \*  
lies are their chief delight.*
- 5 *They bless with their lips, \*  
but in their hearts they curse.*
- 6 *For God alone my soul in silence waits; \*  
truly, my hope is in him.*
- 7 *He alone is my rock and my salvation, \*  
my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken.*
- 8 *In God is my safety and my honor; \*  
God is my strong rock and my refuge.*
- 9 *Put your trust in him always, O people, \*  
pour out your hearts before him, for God is our refuge.*
- 10 *Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath, \*  
even those of low estate cannot be trusted.*
- 11 *On the scales they are lighter than a breath, \*  
all of them together.*
- 12 *Put no trust in extortion; in robbery take no empty pride; \*  
though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it.*
- 13 *God has spoken once, twice have I heard it, \*  
that power belongs to God.*
- 14 *Steadfast love is yours, O Lord, \*  
for you repay everyone according to his deeds.*

\* \* \*

Perhaps the most haunting phrase in Psalm 62 is the repetitive line, “For God alone my soul in silence waits.” But what kind of silence was King David talking about? He could merely have meant that we have to clear our ears and minds of other sounds and thoughts so that we may listen for the voice of God. In the midst of busy lives, we forget the message, “Be still and know that I am God”. When we are still and allow our souls to wait for God, we can experience a peaceful silence, a comforting silence.

It feels, however, that David was talking about a different type of silence, a more despairing silence where we wait for the voice of God and cannot hear Him. He appears to have been deeply worried about such a silence—he tried to reassure himself that God was his refuge and his salvation, but he was experiencing a lonely silent period of waiting, and the voice of God did not come to him.

Jesus experienced at least two desolate moments of silence himself. He prayed through the nighttime hours in Gethsemane as he told the disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and stay awake with me." But they slept and he must have felt that God was also abandoning him. Again, on the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He waited in silence and, for some time, could not hear God.

We Christians believe, however, that before death finally arrived, Jesus's ordeal of silent waiting mercifully ended. Perhaps Jesus was comforted by another psalm of David: "He leadeth me beside still waters, He restoreth my soul" or "yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou are with me." We know that Jesus finally heard the voice of God, and was then carried into God's loving arms.

We, too, may experience some moments of a dark and lonely silence but we may also create moments of a peaceful welcoming silence in which we may hear God.

*Vivian Toan*

## Wednesday, March 3, 2021

Romans 1:28-2:11

*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die-- yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.*

\* \* \*

This passage from the Romans describes a humanity that has fallen into profound depravity. Paul does not mince words. Evil. Malice. God-haters. Heartless. Ruthless. The vividly harsh language brings to my mind the sharp divisions within America today, where hate, animosity and violent extremism continue to fester. By all accounts, Paul is describing a humanity much deserving of censure and judgment, a humanity, perhaps that is insufficiently distant from aspects of the America of 2021.

At the same time, however, the passage speaks powerfully about the perils of judging these wrong-doers. "Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?" The passage assumes that we are all complicit in some form of ungodly action, and calls out enormous evils ("murder") in the same sentence as relatively small transgressions ("rebellious towards parents"). If we are all sinners, then by extension, is any judgment of others a form of hypocrisy? At the same time, surely not all sins are equally repugnant to God; surely Paul is not saying that we—as a society and as individuals—should ignore rampant evils because we ourselves haven't eaten all our green beans?

To me, this tension between the confrontation of evil and the paradox of judgment speaks to what is perhaps the greatest challenge of this moment in America. In the wake of the inauguration of a new President, one who is calling us to healing and unity, we as a country are grappling with this ourselves. Can there be healing without judgment? Can there be unity without accountability? Can we as a country move past our sins, both those of our ancestors

and those of our contemporaries, without acknowledgment and reconciliation? What is God calling us to do?

If we follow the text of Romans 1:28-2:11, the answer is clear. “Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” Repentance, true remorse for one’s transgressions, is a critical part of God’s goal for humanity. It is not enough to move blindly towards the light without acknowledging, understanding and accounting for the darkness. If we want healing, peace and God’s love here on earth, we must confront humanity’s evils with penitent hearts. Paul is not telling us, simply, not to judge others. He is saying that, before we do, we must all render ourselves vulnerable to judgment. This passage reminds me that we must boldly and continually examine our own roles in upholding systems of injustice if we want to truly transform our nation and our world into God’s kingdom.

*Amy Rowland*

## Thursday, March 4, 2021

Romans 2:12-24

*All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*

\* \* \*

Paul's writing to the Romans challenges us to do so much more than to be a believer. It's not enough to just show up to church each week or to call ourselves Christian. Rather, Jesus requires us to understand His words and to follow through with actions.

This brings to mind Grace Church's work in social justice. For the last four months, I have participated in our Sacred Ground program. This work has been deep, painful and enlightening. It's a lot to process. Given everything that has happened in our country and our city this past year, it's also very timely. This program has given me a deeper understanding of my background of white privilege in this country and what I owe to others who sacrificed for my comfort and success. Throughout Sacred Ground, I have wondered—What do I do with this? How do I, as just one person, help effect the change that is so desperately needed?

Sometimes it's really hard to understand where God wants us to walk. So, I've been trying to be open to what has been happening around me. And then one Sunday, my answer showed up. I was thrilled to see how easy Grace Church is making my next step with the upcoming addition of a Social Justice position. With my newly acquired knowledge, humility and determination to help right past wrongs, Paul is compelling me to follow through and to be all in. Equality and social justice are now "written on my heart to which my conscience also bears witness".

*Theresa Seabaugh*

**Friday, March 5, 2021**

Psalm 69

- 1 Save me, O God, \*  
for the waters have risen up to my neck.
- 2 I am sinking in deep mire, \*  
and there is no firm ground for my feet.
- 3 I have come into deep waters, \*  
and the torrent washes over me.
- 4 I have grown weary with my crying; my throat is inflamed; \*  
my eyes have failed from looking for my God.
- 5 Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head; my lying foes who would  
destroy me are mighty. \*  
Must I then give back what I never stole?
- 6 O God, you know my foolishness, \*  
and my faults are not hidden from you.
- 7 Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, Lord GOD of hosts; \*  
let not those who seek you be disgraced because of me, O God of Israel.
- 8 Surely, for your sake have I suffered reproach, \*  
and shame has covered my face.
- 9 I have become a stranger to my own kindred, \*  
an alien to my mother's children.
- 10 Zeal for your house has eaten me up; \*  
the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me.
- 11 I humbled myself with fasting, \*  
but that was turned to my reproach.
- 12 I put on sack-cloth also, \*  
and became a byword among them.
- 13 Those who sit at the gate murmur against me, \*  
and the drunkards make songs about me.
- 14 But as for me, this is my prayer to you, \*  
at the time you have set, O LORD:
- 15 In your great mercy, O God, \*  
answer me with your unfailing help.
- 16 Save me from the mire; do not let me sink; \*  
let me be rescued from those who hate me and out of the deep waters.
- 17 Let not the torrent of waters wash over me, neither let the deep swallow me up; \*  
do not let the Pit shut its mouth upon me.
- 18 Answer me, O LORD, for your love is kind; \*  
in your great compassion, turn to me."
- 19 Hide not your face from your servant; \*  
be swift and answer me, for I am in distress.
- 20 Draw near to me and redeem me; \*  
because of my enemies deliver me.
- 21 You know my reproach, my shame, and my dishonor; \*  
my adversaries are all in your sight."
- 22 Reproach has broken my heart, and it cannot be healed; \*

I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I could find no one.

- 23 They gave me gall to eat, \*  
and when I was thirsty, they gave me vinegar to drink.
- 24 Let the table before them be a trap \*  
and their sacred feasts a snare.
- 25 Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, \*  
and give them continual trembling in their loins.
- 26 Pour out your indignation upon them, \*  
and let the fierceness of your anger overtake them.
- 27 Let their camp be desolate, \*  
and let there be none to dwell in their tents.
- 28 For they persecute him whom you have stricken \*  
and add to the pain of those whom you have pierced.
- 29 Lay to their charge guilt upon guilt, \*  
and let them not receive your vindication.
- 30 Let them be wiped out of the book of the living \*  
and not be written among the righteous.
- 31 As for me, I am afflicted and in pain; \*  
your help, O God, will lift me up on high.
- 32 I will praise the Name of God in song; \*  
I will proclaim his greatness with thanksgiving.
- 33 This will please the LORD more than an offering of oxen, \*  
more than bullocks with horns and hoofs.
- 34 The afflicted shall see and be glad; \*  
you who seek God, your heart shall live.
- 35 For the LORD listens to the needy, \*  
and his prisoners he does not despise.
- 36 Let the heavens and the earth praise him, \*  
the seas and all that moves in them;
- 37 For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah; \*  
they shall live there and have it in possession.
- 38 The children of his servants will inherit it, \*  
and those who love his Name will dwell therein.

\* \* \*

*But me? My prayer reaches you, Lord, at just the right time. God, in your great and faithful love, answer me with your certain salvation! Save me from the mud! Don't let me drown! Let me be saved from those who hate me and from these watery depths! ...*

*Answer me, Lord, for your faithful love is good! Turn to me in your compassion! Don't hide your face from me, your servant, because I am in deep trouble. Answer me quickly!*

*(Psalm 69:13-14; 16-17 Common English Bible)*

A Black man on the ground with a knee to his neck. A Capitol police officer as he's struck on the head by a fire extinguisher. A trans woman attacked by a stranger.

The reaction to such events and countless others that occur every day on this Earth leads us to angrily cry for swift justice, for immediate action to right a wrong, to “take an eye for an eye.” Truth be told, it’s an understandable human reaction: there are consequences for behavior that denigrates God’s creation. A price must be paid.

The seminal injustice, and a necessary one, was the betrayal, trial and crucifixion of Jesus, the Christ. In the very act of this essential sacrifice of the Lamb of God, the Victim revealed a love that always seems just beyond my full comprehension. The ability to pray for and love my enemy seems a bridge too far. I admit it’s tough work. Indeed, in his ministry and through this ultimate act of love, Jesus unequivocally authorizes us to be the love of God in the world. We are called to fight for justice and to right wrongs not to get even for the victimized. We are called to do so because of love of self and neighbor.

Dr. King said, “If we do an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will be a blind and toothless nation.” Of greater significance for me, in his sermon, *Loving Your Enemies*, Dr. King preached, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

To the psalmist’s prayer, “Answer me, Lord, for your faithful love is good,” I pray, “God, for goodness sake, make me an instrument of your love.” *Amen.*

*John Colón*

## Saturday, March 6, 2021

John 7:1-13

*After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." (For not even his brothers believed in him.) Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come." After saying this, he remained in Galilee. But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. The Jews were looking for him at the festival and saying, "Where is he?" And there was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying, "He is a good man," others were saying, "No, he is deceiving the crowd." Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews.*

\* \* \*

I'm going to be honest—in addition to a spiritual experience, when my family and I attend church in person, there also transpires a certain amount of shuffling of crayons and policing the temptation for little hands to make a giant tower out of hymnals on the pew. I miss that. I miss the crayons, I miss serving as bodyguard to the hymnals. But while nothing replaces worshiping together in the flesh, one unexpected bright spot for me during the era of family Zoom services has been the opportunity to more fully focus my attention and listen to our clergy.

There were so many things that resonated with me while reading this passage from John. The first was the mention of Jesus's brothers. I don't often think of Jesus as a member of an actual family, and yet here he is, eldest of a group of siblings. It made me think of a sermon Father Chris gave a few weeks ago about Mary as a living, breathing mother to Jesus. Of course, as Father Chris expounded, Mary was an advocate, a partner even, and here we see that Jesus' brothers are not exactly supportive. They seem to doubt him, but they are also hedging their bets—if he is actually meant to be famous, maybe they can benefit from his public stardom. How Jesus filled his place in a very real family is a sermon I would love to hear.

I'm also intrigued by the Festival of Booths. After some quick research, I learned that this was the same holiday as the Jewish harvest celebration of Sukkot: during that time, believers shelter in outdoor "booths" to remember how God protected them during the Exodus in the wilderness. This struck me as the type of thing I would hear explained in a Mother Erika sermon, just as she recently enlightened me about the young boy, Samuel—a detailed teaching of an event or person in the scripture, combining historical perspective with current relevance. There certainly seems to be current relevance to the tradition of sheltering in our own little booths (or apartments?) to remember when God kept us safe during a time of great danger.

And what of the fact that even though Jesus says he can't attend the festival because it's not yet his time, he still goes, if in secret. Rev. Allen gave a sermon on the Parable of the Ten

Bridesmaids and the importance of actively waiting for God. I think of this sermon often, including while reading this passage from John. Jesus must wait for God's go ahead, but while he waits, he doesn't sit idly by. He waits actively. He attends the Zoom service even if he keeps his camera off. He shows up.

But the thing that struck me most of all about John's words is the concept of timing. Isn't everything about timing these days? The timing of vaccines, the timing of resuming in-person services, the timing of sending bills to the Senate. God doesn't just have plans, he has timing, and even Jesus is subject to it. This, most of all, is the sermon I would love to hear. I am grateful to have spiritual leaders wiser than I to help guide me.

I don't know what God's timing means for me. I am waiting with the bridesmaids, with Jesus. But, while I wait, I can be a member of a very real family. I can engage with past lessons and how they inform the present, and the future. I can show up, and I can listen.

*Sarah Steele*

**For the Reader's Reflection**

Psalm 36:5-11

5 Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, \*  
and your faithfulness to the clouds.

6 Your righteousness is like the strong mountains, your justice like the great deep; \*  
you save both man and beast, O LORD.

7 How priceless is your love, O God! \*  
your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings.

8 They feast upon the abundance of your house; \*  
you give them drink from the river of your delights.

9 For with you is the well of life, \*  
and in your light we see light.

10 Continue your loving-kindness to those who know you, \*  
and your favor to those who are true of heart.

11 Let not the foot of the proud come near me, \*  
nor the hand of the wicked push me aside.

## Monday, March 8, 2021

Romans 4:1-12

*What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So, also, David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin." Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.*

\* \* \*

Lent is a struggle for me. It generally falls just long enough after New Year's Day to ensure I've screwed up one of my resolutions, and it is hard for me not to convert the discipline of fasting into another weight loss plan. It is easy to spend time mulling over all the ways that I've let God down, but I'm not sure that's the point. Self-deprecation is really just another form of self-absorption. It does little to share God's love or help realize His kingdom on earth. This passage in Romans helps me make some sense of this season.

Paul is clear that we do not earn our salvation—it is a gift of God's grace. "[T]o one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness." And as for faith, we are not left to our own devices in that regard either: "[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." (emphasis added).

This truth, that God's love is not contingent on our merit, is liberating. It reminds me that guilt and insecurity should not be the motivating reasons for me to read the Bible, pray, or attend church. It helps me focus on how I can extend God's grace to others: through kindness, through compassion, and through service. The gift of grace frees us to serve God wholeheartedly in this way. "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin." Amen.

Sarah Luke

## Tuesday, March 9, 2021

Romans 4:13-25

*For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")-- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.*

\* \* \*

*"For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith."*

Beginning what I expected to be a long slog through this selection from Paul's letter to the Romans, I was prepared to doze or wander away. Instead, Paul threw "Righteousness of faith" at me. What on Earth or in Heaven is this? Faith I know, or think I do. I have faith in the orderly progression of the seasons—Winter is followed by Spring (may it come soon). I have faith in the love of my daughters, faith that the Sun will rise on a new day, faith that the birds will return to build their nests in our trees and, up to this year, faith in the strength and longevity of our democracy—223 years and still counting!—(though I must confess this faith was recently tested).

But what in the world does Paul mean by the "righteousness of faith"? Righteousness is a word with negative connotations for me. I associate it with self-righteousness, with someone bludgeoning me with their faith. Smug self-satisfaction—that is righteousness to me. But doing a bit of research, I discover this is NOT what Paul means. Righteousness of faith is, for Paul, believing in something that cannot be proven—cannot be heard, seen, touched, tasted, or smelled. Yet we believe. This is righteousness of faith.

In Hebrews we understand that "faith is the essence of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." This is faith as I have lived with it in my heart for so many years. I believe in God, I have faith that God is here, there, in all our beings, with us in times of good and evil. Always here. I believe in the goodness of the Earth—because why? How do I know God is God and

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the Earth is good? How do I know? I don't know; I can't prove God is God and God is always present. I just know.

And this, my dear people, is the "righteousness" of faith" -- believing in something not accessible to our senses.

*Jane Parkerton*

## Wednesday, March 10, 2021

Jeremiah 8:18-9:6

*My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" ("Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?") "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! O that I had in the desert a traveler's lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a band of traitors. They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the LORD. Beware of your neighbors, and put no trust in any of your kin; for all your kin are supplanters, and every neighbor goes around like a slanderer. They all deceive their neighbors, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongues to speak lies; they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent. Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me, says the LORD.*

\* \* \*

As I read and reread the scriptures assigned for my reflection, of course my attention kept returning to this one from the book of Jeremiah. It is just so apropos of our own current political, social, and human situation. Recent years have created a climate of divisiveness, hatred, fear, and general "othering;" it boggles the mind to know where to begin reparation! Surely God must look at the current state of affairs with a heavy heart. The time of summer and harvest is past, and we are left with a mass of hurt to heal.

As I ask myself just what might God want of me, of us His people at this time, I am reminded that we are commanded to Love One Another. Some terrible things have happened and been perpetrated in recent days and months. Still, we are required to look deeper, to try to understand each other, to truly feel what dwells in that great divide that exists between us. What has made people so desperate and angry that they are driven to kill and destroy? Could I engage, if only in my heart, in such behavior? Self-righteous judgment—liberal or conservative, progressive or traditional—does not reflect God's way.

This answer comes to me: we are to listen, truly feel what it must feel like to stand in another's shoes (be hungry/lose a job/be so alone that the loneliness aches/feel that nobody is listening). We are to answer the call to help, to give, in whatever form we can. If one person helps another, we are one step closer to healing the divide.

I pray that I will have the grace to recognize and answer God's call to contribute to the healing.

*Dolly Moon*

**Thursday, March 11, 2021**

Romans 5:12-21

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

\* \* \*

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.*

In Romans 5:12, Paul speaks of initial sin introduced into Creation by Adam through blatant, willful disobedience towards God. In Genesis, God sternly warns Adam, under the penalty of death, to neither touch nor eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Nevertheless, in their quest to “be like God”, Adam and Eve, under the highly suggestive and misguided influence of a crafty serpent, disobey God’s directive, thereby allowing the nature of sin to fall into Creation.

From sin comes death, but through Christ comes life, grace, and salvation. The gift of grace in Jesus Christ supersedes the sin of Adam, and by extension, the sins of all humanity. Jesus, the perfect embodiment of the Law, through his death and resurrection conquers sin. When we decisively choose to live under the Law (the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament and the Golden Rule in the New Testament), we become beneficiaries of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

The Laws in Scripture exist to build and sustain a framework in which to keep communities healthy, loving, respectful of one another, and harmonious. Without this framework, there would be no Law, and sin would run rampant and unchecked, serving to undermine the very essence of a life lived in peace with God and others. So St. Paul is correct in his assessment of Adam being held accountable for original sin, an argument vigorously supported by St.

Augustine, the third century bishop of Hippo. There was no Law against sin because there wasn't any reason to presuppose acts of willful disobedience would ever enter the world. Therefore, we should see God's Law as a gift to maintain decency and order in society and not as a burden or punishment. A lawless society, in any context, is doomed to failure. However, God, in Christ Jesus, has given us a model for living a wholesome and healthy life that is organic and joy-filled.

*The Rev. Dr. Allen Robinson*

## Friday, March 12, 2021

John 8:33-47

*[The Pharisees] answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father." They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does." They said to him, "We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God."*

\* \* \*

These are not the words of the comforting, gentle Jesus we long for now. In this passage he is blunt and provocative. He and his opponents, the Pharisees, are not discussing sin and freedom in a philosophical or theoretical way. It is the developing fight to the death.

The words are so startling that I thought it must be the translation—maybe one of those passages where the translator has taken liberties. But these verses have had only the slightest grammatical adaptations since the King James Version.

Still confused—it was as if I had never read it before—I looked at the whole chapter. Aha! The preceding verse is “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” That saying is so powerful and so often repeated in our prayers and in the secular applications of Christian sayings that it has become disconnected from the hair-raising verbal battle that follows. What has angered the Pharisees is Jesus’ suggestion that they are not free. But, they say, we are sons of Abraham! Jesus does not let up. “You are from your father the devil,” he tells them. “You are trying to kill me” he says—twice.

How can this reading help us now, when we are weary, confused, and needing to, um, tone it down? It’s hard to resist seeing this dispute through the lens of our own certitudes. But I can try to put myself in the mind of the Pharisees, who were so enraged at Jesus’ attack on their parentage—the thing they held most dear—that they missed his point. I can look for the sin

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that enslaves me, and for the truth that will set me free. And I can listen to his words, which are sometimes gentle and sometimes harsh, but always teaching.

*Patricia Kavanagh*

## Saturday, March 13, 2021

Jeremiah 13:1-11

*Thus said the LORD to me, "Go and buy yourself a linen loincloth, and put it on your loins, but do not dip it in water." So I bought a loincloth according to the word of the LORD, and put it on my loins. And the word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, "Take the loincloth that you bought and are wearing, and go now to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock." So I went, and hid it by the Euphrates, as the LORD commanded me. And after many days the LORD said to me, "Go now to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there." Then I went to the Euphrates, and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where I had hidden it. But now the loincloth was ruined; it was good for nothing. Then the word of the LORD came to me: Thus says the LORD: Just so I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own will and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. For as the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the LORD, in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen.*

\* \* \*

You know that feeling when, after having been buried in the wilderness for many days, your loincloth just no longer clings to your loins the way it used to? Who among us hasn't bumped into a cute guy/girl at the grocery store and wished we were wearing something more than just a tattered, mud-soaked scrap of linen? Okay, okay, enough joking around, but it's hard to resist when the meaning of this passage has gotten buried beneath a metaphor that is 2,500 years behind the latest fashion trends.

Jeremiah's dirty loincloth reminded me of when I was five and my mother told me to always wear clean underpants. 30 years later, I've realized that her advice was never just about the underpants (well, okay, maybe some mornings it was). She was trying to teach me the importance of being the best version of myself every time I step out the front door and into the world, because we never know what each new day might bring.

I believe God is trying to teach Jeremiah that pride—particularly the type of pride that can lead us to believe that we can survive on our own, far from God's teachings—will only ruin us, as easily as Jeremiah's linen belt was ruined when it was far away from his waist where it belonged. We belong close to God. He wants us to cling to Him, and he wants us to live in a constant state of readiness to meet Him. And that means more than just clean underpants. It means burying hatchets and wiping slates clean. It means making sure our loved ones know they are loved. It means humbly asking God's forgiveness for our transgressions, and it means rejoicing in the truth that through Jesus we are forgiven.

*Evan Cook*

## Monday, March 15, 2021

John 6:1-15

*After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

\* \* \*

"Gather up the fragments left over so that nothing may be lost" is a line that speaks to me because it says that you should always be grateful for every piece of food you have and everything that God provides. This inspires me to try to be grateful for everything that I have.

In my life before COVID-19, my family would always say grace before we ate (we still do) and while I was happy for everything we had and did, I wasn't constantly thinking about it. Now, I think more of what we used to have—playdates with friends, soccer games without masks, in-person school, vacations, more money for things when my dad had a job, and time with Grandma and Grandpa. I don't think I was thankful enough for everything we had and did, and I don't think I was the only one in the world that wasn't thankful enough. Maybe COVID-19 included a message from God telling us all to be a little more thankful. And just like when the disciples gathered up fragments of bread and ended up filling twelve baskets, when you gather up what you think are just scraps, or the little everyday things, it actually ends up being quite a lot of good things.

*Will Tuminello (age 10)*

## Tuesday, March 16, 2021

John 6:16-27

*When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."*

\* \* \*

"It is I; do not be afraid," Jesus said as the disciples saw him walking on the sea and coming towards the boat where they sat. That was quite a sight! I would have been afraid—how about you? Would you not be afraid if someone approached you, levitating over water without strings or supports?

When we cannot make sense of, or rationalize, situations, many of us become afraid. Fear of the unknown is human nature.

There are many of us who are afraid because our new administration is more diverse than ever, and there are many of us who are happy for the exact same reason. And when I say "us," I mean Americans with all our shades, genders and beliefs.

The other night I saw a view of the earth from the space station, and that's when it really hit home that we are all on this "big blue marble" together. Aren't we all God's children?

*Marilyn Pryce Grant*

## Wednesday, March 17, 2021

John 6:27-40

*Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."*

\* \* \*

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). We’re accustomed to hearing this familiar verse in the context of our pledge and plate offerings at church. If it’s true of our money, isn’t it also true of our time? That’s the message I hear in this passage: where you spend your time, there your heart will be also. Am I spending my time working “for food that spoils” or “for food that endures to eternal life”? Jesus says, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” Am I making this work of God the place where my heart surely is? Not quite, if the measure of devotion is time.

Our communities have been battered by COVID deaths and loss, deep social hate and fear, isolation, hopelessness and psychological anguish, food insecurity, and more. This Lent I am fighting against the downward pull of feelings of powerlessness at the enormity of it all. This scripture passage reminds me that it’s important for me to dedicate less time to moaning and more time to belief in action. I sometimes feel too busy or weak in spirit to act, but this scripture reminds me of the uplifting power of Jesus the Bread of Life to nourish and change us “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:52), so that even nanoseconds of devotion can make a difference in turning ourselves and our communities out of this mess and toward unity with God.

How many hours can I spare for compassionate community volunteering or social justice work? How many minutes can I spare to gladden the hearts of family, co-workers, or strangers who are not like me? How many seconds can I spare for quick prayer at a stoplight, during a commercial break, or in the shower? This Lent I’ve resolved to remind myself every day that there is no time to waste.

Allison Scott

**For the Reader's Reflection**

Psalm 121

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills; \*  
from where is my help to come?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD, \*  
the maker of heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved \*  
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.
- 4 Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel \*  
shall neither slumber nor sleep;
- 5 The LORD himself watches over you; \*  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand,
- 6 So that the sun shall not strike you by day, \*  
nor the moon by night.
- 7 The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; \*  
it is he who shall keep you safe.
- 8 The LORD shall watch over your going out and your coming in, \*  
from this time forth for evermore.

## Thursday, March 18, 2021

Romans 8:12-27

*So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

\* \* \*

I was struck by the word “groaning,” used twice, and the similar uses of “eager longing” and “deep sighs”. The concept of creation waiting with eager longing for our revealing—set free from self-imposed bondage. That creation is groaning in expectation of our birth while we struggle for this same birth inside ourselves (inwardly groaning). Such a “birth” or “revealing” would be our own liberation. But how to do it? What to wish for? How do we pray in order to facilitate this liberation? Do we strive for the quotidian things that we can see, or do we aspire for what we cannot see, guided by the deep sighs from creation?

My son, David, is rigorous about the “law of attraction” and visualizing positive outcomes, while policing against negativity and self-doubts that can bring about the very outcomes we can worry about. I am a natural worrier raised to have a healthy dose of Calvinistic self-flagellation; he has repeatedly pounced on me good naturedly to police my defeatist vocalizations and to advise me to guard against negative self-talk. It would appear that Paul—in so many words—was pointing to certain elements of this New Age concept of manifesting.

There is much to be hopeful for during this Lenten season if we remain open to it. We can do well to follow Paul’s eudaemonic advice encouraging our self-discovery and the rigorous development of our best potentials towards self-actualization and greater happiness. Verse 27: “And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”

*Randall Thomas*

## Friday, March 19, 2021

Luke 2:41-52

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

\* \* \*

The part of this scripture that spoke most to me was the passage in which Jesus and his family visit Jerusalem. While Jesus' parents were anxiously searching for their son, Jesus was in the house of the Lord, conversing with teachers and asking questions. Everyone around him was surprised at Jesus' well-developed understanding and knowledge of God's ways. When his parents finally found him, Jesus was surprised that they did not realize where he was.

After reflecting on this, I found that it is evident that Jesus has two families. The first one is biological—his parents and relatives, and the second is his strong connection to God. While Jesus finds comfort in both of these relationships, he returns to the Lord because he longs to do God's will, and is eager to learn, pray, and repent for the sake of both of his families. Furthermore, Jesus finds a home and refuge in the house of the Lord, as well as with his parents and other loved ones. However, he often is propelled to the temple and its surroundings to seek answers from his true Father, and acquire more knowledge about his society and the world around him. Moreover, Jesus expects others around him to do the same, and to worship and praise God with alacrity. This is why Jesus was surprised that his parents didn't know that he would be in the house of the Lord.

I mainly connected with this passage because I came to the realization that I was similar to Jesus in this way: I love and thoroughly enjoy being with my family, but also find joy and serenity in other ways such as praying, playing music, and reflecting through writing and reading. When I am singing or performing on instruments, I often feel a strong similarity between these actions and the love and refuge I feel in other circumstances with my loved ones. Furthermore, I can find a "home" so to speak, in these different activities or hobbies that take larger meaning, just as Jesus demonstrated to his parents in the temple.

*Friday, March 19, 2021 | Luke 2:41-52*

These different “families,” such as my relationship to God and my love for music, can be all-consuming and heartfelt, even if they are not considered tangible things. In my daily life, I can connect more strongly with God and these different feelings, and I also ask questions, play music, reflect, read, teach the people around me, and do what makes me happy, in order to find a balance between all of my families and homes. This passage also showed me that if I spread my knowledge and heartfelt appreciation of these different things and acts, I will become wiser, more respectful, and will help others discover different families and homes of their own.

*Maggie Stuckey (age 12)*

**Saturday, March 20, 2021**

Psalm 107: Part I

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, \*  
and his mercy endures for ever.
- 2 Let all those whom the LORD has redeemed proclaim \*  
that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.
- 3 He gathered them out of the lands; \*  
from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
- 4 Some wandered in desert wastes; \*  
they found no way to a city where they might dwell.
- 5 They were hungry and thirsty; \*  
their spirits languished within them.
- 6 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, \*  
and he delivered them from their distress.
- 7 He put their feet on a straight path \*  
to go to a city where they might dwell.
- 8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy \*  
and the wonders he does for his children.
- 9 For he satisfies the thirsty \*  
and fills the hungry with good things.
- 10 Some sat in darkness and deep gloom, \*  
bound fast in misery and iron;
- 11 Because they rebelled against the words of God \*  
and despised the counsel of the Most High.
- 12 So he humbled their spirits with hard labor; \*  
they stumbled, and there was none to help.
- 13 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, \*  
and he delivered them from their distress.
- 14 He led them out of darkness and deep gloom \*  
and broke their bonds asunder.
- 15 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy \*  
and the wonders he does for his children.
- 16 For he shatters the doors of bronze \*  
and breaks in two the iron bars.
- 17 Some were fools and took to rebellious ways; \*  
they were afflicted because of their sins.
- 18 They abhorred all manner of food \*  
and drew near to death's door.
- 19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, \*  
and he delivered them from their distress.
- 20 He sent forth his word and healed them \*  
and saved them from the grave.
- 21 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy \*  
and the wonders he does for his children.
- 22 Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving \*  
and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.

23 Some went down to the sea in ships \*  
and plied their trade in deep waters;  
24 They beheld the works of the LORD \*  
and his wonders in the deep.  
25 Then he spoke, and a stormy wind arose, \*  
which tossed high the waves of the sea.  
26 They mounted up to the heavens and fell back to the depths; \*  
their hearts melted because of their peril.  
27 They reeled and staggered like drunkards \*  
and were at their wits' end.  
28 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, \*  
and he delivered them from their distress.  
29 He stilled the storm to a whisper \*  
and quieted the waves of the sea.  
30 Then were they glad because of the calm, \*  
and he brought them to the harbor they were bound for.  
31 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy \*  
and the wonders he does for his children.  
32 Let them exalt him in the congregation of the people \*  
and praise him in the council of the elders.

\* \* \*

*Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress.*

Really, God?

This refrain, repeated after each description of trouble in Psalm 107, gives me pause. All of us have been experiencing much difficulty and distress lately; where is God in these situations?

For me personally, the biggest challenge in 2020 had to do with my sister, Julie. Chronic disabilities had made it necessary for her to live in a skilled nursing facility for the last several years. But she'd been coping, even while slowly declining. During my visit last March, the nursing home suddenly closed to all visitors in an effort to protect residents from COVID. It turned out they protected her effectively from catching the virus, but the enforced isolation from everyone and everything outside of her room for months on end likely hastened her decline. In September we said our final goodbyes on a FaceTime screen held by a hospice nurse.

Where was God in this situation? I cried to the LORD in my trouble, but things didn't work out as I'd fervently prayed they would.

Recently I came across a quote from the poet Paul Claudel that said, "Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence." Somehow, that helps. I have felt the Divine presence through the Grace Church friends who gather daily on Zoom for

Evening Prayer. I have felt it in the belief that Julie is now in the loving hands of God and free from her suffering. I have felt it in many ways in my work and daily routine and the groups I interact with online. As I heal from this loss, it's starting to feel like one day I'll again be able to "give thanks to the LORD, for he is good."

*Anne Silver*

## Monday, March 22, 2021

John 9:1-17

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

\* \* \*

In this story, I think Jesus has revealed many things about how struggle can be beneficial. When his disciples saw a blind man, they thought that he had sinned and was punished with blindness. However, Jesus tells them that he did not sin, but was born blind so that God's works were revealed to him. The man was able to be more grateful for all of the small things that made him happy, like being alive and even people greeting him as he walked down the street. Then, Jesus went to this blind man and restored his vision. Jesus says that now that this man has struggled, he understands the work of God better, and is now more grateful that his eyesight has returned than if he had had it all along.

Clearly, we are in a time when a lot of people have been struggling. Because of COVID, we have had so much of our daily lives and the things we call normal taken away. However, as Jesus is demonstrating, it has given us room to be thankful for the small things. For example, although I miss spending time with my friends, I have been able to spend much more time with my family than I normally would. I think we have gotten a lot closer as a family over the course of this pandemic.

Additionally, Jesus indicates that, after we struggle through COVID, as the blind man struggles in the story, we can come out of the end of the tunnel as more appreciative and insightful people. Overall, God—by giving the man his sight back—shows us that believing in Him and His miracles, and trying to do what He says, will help us through difficulties in life, and even reward us for our faith.

*Dean Tuminello (age 14)*

## Tuesday, March 23, 2021

Romans 10:1-13

*Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

\* \* \*

When I first read Romans 10:1-13 in preparing for this writing, I was struck by Paul's description of how simply we can experience Christ's grace. The beginning of this passage reads: "I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." Romans 10: 2-4

I wondered if it can really be that straightforward. I'm an over-thinker, certainly on all important issues. Nuance and complications abound in my head and, yes, I like rules that seem to provide clarity and good order. Can belief alone bring me to God? I felt a certain sympathy for the rule-centric types whose zeal for God was clear but who strayed by trying to "figure it out" on their own.

My sense of this passage after reflection, however, is that, yes, it is that simple. And that simplicity does not mean that living in belief is easy. This passage encourages me to think about how actively to support my belief without letting my spiritual practices become another "to do" list. I need frequent spiritual contact through prayer, meditation and reading. I'm grateful for this reminder to keep those practices fresh and meaningful in order to accept Christ's simple invitation to grace.

*Debbie Buell*

**Wednesday, March 24, 2021**

Romans 10:14-21

*But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." Again I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, "I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry." Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, "I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me." But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."*

\* \* \*

I paused when I read this passage: How did I come to believe? What's my responsibility to share my faith; how do I proclaim Jesus? How do we proclaim to another nation? Can proclaiming and telling the truth of our faith affirm truth-telling in general in our own Nation, which is torn and polarized by lies? By engaging with Paul's letter, I can proclaim that as a child, I came to believe in Jesus through the witness and teachings of my parents and church community. They were engaged in their own imperfect faith journeys, proclaiming their faith, through church and activism.

Over the years since, the witness of other Christians has been the life blood of my journey. I would not have been able to face my doubts without ministers, study groups, spiritual directors, and congregants, who have shared their knowledge, faith, or struggles with me. Participating in ministries has been key, too, as they require me to be present with my "faith," even in the midst of doubts, and to engage with others on the same road. God's grace seems to have played a role as, without it, I would have ignored even more of God's calls. Paul tells us that people and nations cannot believe the Good News unless we proclaim it. That I have to proclaim it.

During the pandemic, my ministries have changed. I have been assisting elders, whom I love dearly. I have been terribly afraid for our country. Cable propaganda has made them afraid, too, like many other White folks, and led to divisions. One had to be hospitalized after watching cable. I might say of them, "How can they not hear the truth?" They would say the same of me.

Paul's letter exhorts us to proclaim our faith. Perhaps I can proclaim my faith with them, and others, much more than I have. Perhaps we can pray together and, by God's grace, the truth of God's Love will increase our love and discernment, and open the door to dialogue and healing between "nations."

Jane Ordway

## Thursday, March 25, 2021 (The Annunciation)

Luke 1:26-38

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

\* \* \*

*Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"; Then the angel departed from her. (Luke: 1:38)*

I love this sentence. I think about it a lot. On one hand, to me it's the summary of the entire Bible. God has created his creation, and given it free will. Actual, honest free will. So much so that when God comes and asks to involve his creation in His master plan, the servant has a real choice. And she says, "Yes". That's it – that's the whole Bible. God made us in his image, and gave us free will, in the hopes that one day we will say "Yes" to participating in his act of creation. And there's a lot to be said for just wrapping yourself in the beauty of those lines. They are well-written and comforting. They make me think everything will be okay at the end. They make me feel like we are empowered, that God is looking out for us, and that at the end we will all say yes.

But then I hit the snag. Mary got to see a literal archangel!! It's not a fair playing field to equate her position with ours! The rest of us slog on through the endless challenges of the day, being worn down by life, seeing death and despair and the endless vices of humanity and we're supposed to work through all our doubts and still say "yes" to God. And she got an angel! Someone once asked me if God truly wanted people to know and love him, why not make it a little easier? Why not send us an angel to show us the way to "Yes"? Just like he did with Mary?

This reflection seems about to veer into territory I'm sure theologians have discussed for centuries. And I don't like to answer this question so much as meditate on it. How do we know when to say "Yes"? And what does that saying "Yes" look like? And this Lent, with no angel posing the question directly, what is going to be my "Yes"?

*Jim Williamson*

## Friday, March 26, 2021

Psalm 143: 6-7

*I spread out my hands to you; \**

*my soul gasps to you like a thirsty land.*

*O LORD, make haste to answer me; my spirit fails me; \**

*do not hide your face from me or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.*

John 11:1-27

*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

\* \* \*

*... though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

I know that people usually focus on the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead when they discuss this particular passage. However, what stands out to me, particularly after this past year, is that sometimes it looks like Jesus is taking His own sweet time. Sometimes when you pray as David does in Psalm 143, "O LORD, make haste to answer me; my spirit fails me," it feels like you're being ghosted.

But we're not.

He says to His disciples, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” It seems that there are many reasons that our requests are not answered in the way or at the time we’d like them to be. In this way, our faith is tested and stretched in order to help it weather future storms and grow.

My youngest son is tested every week for COVID so that he can attend school in person. This past weekend, he was given a positive diagnosis. Not quite knowing what to do, we rearranged sleeping arrangements, had him eat separately, had bedtime stories via Zoom, and waited for our whole family’s tests to come back. We worried about the people he might have come into contact with (which, as luck would have it, was more than usual the week prior). And we worried about what would happen if any one of us became really sick. And I prayed. A lot.

Turns out it was a false positive. On one hand, I was thrilled that my prayers were answered. On the other, my ungrateful side thought, “Did we really need to live through that on top of everything else?” But we did. Because as the pandemic wore on, we were getting, well, unfaithful and ungrateful. I had been hardly praying much, because I didn’t think my prayers would be answered. We also had a good amount of “pandemic fatigue” and complained about what we didn’t have. This experience showed us the value of what we still have that we can’t take for granted -- hugs, family dinners, bedtime stories, and each other.

I’m writing this on the eve of the inauguration. After several years of unrest and hardship, it feels a little like Jesus has taken His own sweet time again. But maybe, just like the disciples and Lazarus’ family, it’s to test and stretch our faith. Maybe it’s to show us that we can’t take important things for granted—our democracy, our communities, our lives, and each other. And maybe it’s to show us that He has the power to raise us all up again, even when it doesn’t seem possible.

*Nicole Tuminello*

**Saturday, March 27, 2021**

Psalm 137

- 1 *By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, \**  
*when we remembered you, O Zion.*
- 2 *As for our harps, we hung them up \**  
*on the trees in the midst of that land.*
- 3 *For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called for mirth: \**  
*"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."*
- 4 *How shall we sing the LORD'S song \**  
*upon an alien soil?*
- 5 *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, \**  
*let my right hand forget its skill.*
- 6 *Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, \**  
*if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.*
- 7 *Remember the day of Jerusalem, O LORD, against the people of Edom, \**  
*who said, "Down with it! down with it! even to the ground!"*
- 8 *O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, \**  
*happy the one who pays you back for what you have done to us!*
- 9 *Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, \**  
*and dashes them against the rock!*

\* \* \*

*How shall we sing the LORD'S song / upon an alien soil?*

I've never been particularly fond of this psalm; the imagery is rather gruesome and it's just so full of woe! When I received my readings for the Lenten meditations, my first thought was that I would definitely not choose Psalm 137, but in a historical moment so full of unending surprises, here I am.

The fourth verse strikes me as particularly relevant in the midst of this plague. The word of the year, the word we'd all be perfectly happy to never hear again is "unprecedented." In many ways, I think, this unprecedented year is a kind of alien soil. Separated from our friends, our families, forced to adopt strange customs in order to save ourselves from peril—the pandemic in which we are mired is, indeed, an alien land, an ordeal for us all. In the midst of our own Babylonian captivity, like the speaker in this psalm, we too sit down by the waters to weep.

This verse, however, can also serve as a kind of rallying call, a point of origin for hope. As a member of the choir, I quite literally wonder how and when we will be able to sing again. But on a grander scale, how do we, as the people of Grace, sing our song—the Lord's song—in this alien land? Though Grace Church's digital services cannot compare with the thrill of worshipping together in the sanctuary, our parish and its leaders have kept the song going so that it may once again crescendo when we return from this exile. The Lord calls us to keep singing, and Grace answers that call.

**Monday, March 29, 2021**

John 12:1-11

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

\* \* \*

"You always have the poor with you ..." is so frequently quoted, in so many different ways, and I am never sure exactly what it means. I understand that Jesus is quoting a saying from the Old Testament, familiar to Jews of the time, in the hopes of pointing out Iscariot's focus on selfishness (he was a thief, after all). I have also heard that Jesus is focusing on taking care of all those who are in his sphere—not neglecting ANYONE.

For me, reading it on this day, surrounded by what is going on with the pandemic of these times, in all of our lives, I think that Jesus is responding to Iscariot that it's not the size of the gift that matters, but rather that you make it. We are all sacrificing valuable things in our lives for the collective good. We all know that our gifts of distancing, masking, taking health precautions, getting tested, spending time and anguish finding a vaccination appointment, are ultimately for others, not just ourselves. People who do not engage in these simple, valuable-beyond-counting, but difficult, behaviors fail to see beyond themselves, like Iscariot.

Mary treats Jesus with obvious, over-the-top kindness, not asking anything of him (something he must be growing tired of by this stage!), lavishing an extravagant gift upon him, to which Iscariot objects. For Jesus though, the denarii-value of the gift is secondary to the intent and the act itself. We, as Christians, have also received a lavish gift, far beyond value, in the form of God's grace. Are we to reject it simply because its worth is too great? Everyone gets this gift of grace—and to be open to it, not rejecting it, is the goal.

Tom Hill

**Tuesday, March 30, 2021**

John 12:20-36

*Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.*

\* \* \*

Reading Jesus's directive to "Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you," I found myself thinking of an almost comically literal image: flying west across the sky, ahead of the sun, eluding nightfall. While it is unlikely that this passage bears much connection to the thrill of a sunlit dinner on a Los Angeles terrace after departing New York at 3pm Eastern, I do think that considering darkness and light here, not as metaphors, but as physical realities of our lives—as things we "have"—is worthwhile.

Day and night are among the steadfast conditions of our wakings and wanderings, elements that endure and exist regardless of what we may do or not do; elements that endure and exist regardless of our own existence. If I do not wake up tomorrow, I am certain that the sun will still rise. I am certain that flowers will open and that benches will be wet with dew. I am certain that without me, February will still give way to March. Bodies will age and the moon will wax and wane, and next year the church will again move from Christmas into Lent and into Easter.

But in Jesus's phrase is an enigmatic suggestion that we can in fact have some real interaction with these seemingly immutable facets of life on Earth: "Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you." He does not say that we may destroy darkness, or even change it. But he does say that in our reaction to the light, we might change ourselves. It is tempting to detach from things larger than our own stories, things that would seem to be

wholly independent of an individual life. It is easier to stand back from the world. But I think what Jesus is saying is that we can and must engage.

Jesus goes on to say, “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” The moon may rise, the flowers may close, and the calendar pages may turn. But through our belief—through our values, and through our actions—we may outrun the darkness, even as the night falls.

*Jane Renaud Nelson*

**Wednesday, March 31, 2021**

Hebrews 12:1-3

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.*

\* \* \*

I love the picture painted by this passage. My life is pictured as a long-distance run; I imagine myself running the Brooklyn Half marathon. The streets are filled with the saints and many others including my parents, grandparents and others who have already completed the race. They are watching me run the race, and cheering me on.

As a long-distance runner, I know the impact of the cheering crowds, encouraging you to continue, even when you feel like giving up. It is even better when those cheering and encouraging have already run the race themselves. They know what you are going through. Consider the crowd of saints who have finished their race, and are now cheering you on. Be encouraged by that when the course seems long, your legs are hurting, the hill seems to be never ending. Don't give up.

At the finish line I can see Jesus, whose race was so much more challenging than mine. He never gave up, grew discouraged, or became distracted. Instead he continued to the end; he finished his race and is now enjoying the victor's spoils. If he didn't give up, grow weary or become distracted, then it fills me with encouragement that the race is doable, and that the reward for crossing the finish line makes the race itself worthwhile.

Hang in there, run your race to the end, and then take your seat with the other finishers, and begin to cheer on the current runners.

*Jenny Fay*

**Thursday, April 1, 2021 (Maundy Thursday)**

Exodus 12:1-14

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

\* \* \*

In this passage, God kills the Egyptians who had been killing and enslaving all the male Israelites. God had gotten so mad at the Egyptians' evil that he brought forth upon them the nine plagues. This passage makes me think of a reading from the New Testament that my family and I read at the children's Christmas Eve service this year when Herod orders that all first born sons be killed because Herod doesn't want Jesus, the newborn king, to usurp him.

These stories make me wonder why so many bad things happen in the Old and New Testament like floods and plagues and Jesus' crucifixion. Though Jesus' crucifixion was good in terms of it opening up heaven. Also, Noah's ark was good because the Flood got rid of bad guys. It is scary to think of all this violence. This makes me think right now of this time with COVID. How did these Israelites and Jesus' disciples keep faith? I think it's because they saw the power of God and how he helped people. When it was hard, they remembered God.

*Hugh MacRae-Ruml (age 9)*

\* \* \* \* \*

John 13:1-17, 13:31-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord-- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

\* \* \*

**Jenny: Why did Jesus wash the disciples' feet?**

*Hugh:* "He was showing his love for them before he died because he was going to die soon so he just wanted to give something to them before he died. He gave them love so they would live and have love. Jesus wanted them to know he was not more important than any of his disciples."

**Jenny: His message to them was love each other as I love you, right?**

*Hugh:* "Yeah, do nice things for each other."

**Jenny: Why do you think Peter didn't want Jesus to wash his feet?**

*Hugh:* "He didn't understand why Jesus was doing that. Peter told Jesus to wash his hands and face too. But Jesus said he only needed to wash his feet because that is all that he needed to be clean."

*A dialogue between Jenny Fay and Patrick Fay (age 7)  
in response to a children's video, "Jesus Washes His Disciples Feet."*

**For the Reader's Reflection**

Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16

- 1 In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; \*  
deliver me in your righteousness.
- 2 Incline your ear to me; \*  
make haste to deliver me.
- 3 Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe, for you are my crag and my stronghold; \*  
for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.
- 4 Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me, \*  
for you are my tower of strength.
- 15 My times are in your hand; \*  
rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.
- 16 Make your face to shine upon your servant, \*  
and in your loving-kindness save me."

## Friday, April 2, 2021 (Good Friday)

John 18:1-19:42 The Passion

*After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. ... (John 18:1-12)*

*When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. ... After these (things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:30, 38-42)*

\* \* \*

The Passion narrative in John's Gospel is at once so familiar and so complex that it's almost too big for me to absorb as a whole—the only way I can approach John's telling of Jesus' last days is from the edges.

And so, in reading John's version of the Passion for this mediation, I'm struck by a detail that I've missed before ... that this story begins and ends in a garden, starting in a refuge where Jesus meets with his disciples and concluding in a sanctuary where there is a tomb that awaits his body. Places to retreat and retire. And in this story of John's, each is a liminal space ... a threshold between before and after.

These COVID days have been liminal for me (though, I hasten to add, in a completely different way!) A time of transition—both intentional and not. And even the intentional has had unexpected discoveries. One of my aspirations for this time has been to develop a meditation practice. This was something I had talked about doing for years, but had postponed for all the predictable reasons ... not enough time, not enough space, too many distractions, too little

focus. But with so many of those barriers removed this year, I lost all my excuses. I had to confront that my real barrier was that, despite all my talk, I lacked serious commitment. And so I finally committed. And what I discovered was truly the hardest thing I have ever tried.

Even after months now of daily practice, I struggle to stop trying to corral my pinball thoughts. To stop pursuing the emotions that arise. To stop analyzing the past and anticipating the future. To just be. To be in the liminal space.

I liken this experience of discovering how to meditate to the early days when I first started attending Grace. When I would sit in the pew and my pinball mind was overcome by distractions, I'd think about dinner, write my to-do list, chastise myself for important tasks left undone. Sometimes the only thing going for me in my faith "practice" was simply going to church. And yet it happened.

Despite all the obstacles I set for myself, my faith deepens. The practice makes perfect. Well, not perfect, but better. And for those of us trying to learn how to be comfortable at the threshold between "now" and "better" is "good enough". Better may be as good as it gets.

*Kate Rock*

## Saturday, April 3, 2021 (Holy Saturday)

Job 14:1-14

*"A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last. Do you fix your eyes on such a one? Do you bring me into judgment with you? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one can. Since their days are determined, and the number of their months is known to you, and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass, look away from them, and desist, that they may enjoy, like laborers, their days. "For there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grows old in the earth, and its stump dies in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant. But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they? As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep. Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If mortals die, will they live again? All the days of my service I would wait until my release should come.*

\* \* \*

If there is a particularly sympathetic character in the Bible, as we suffer(ed) through 2020 and 2020 part 2 (aka 2021), it's Job. When I read Job 14:1-14, I did a quick refresher of his Old Testament book: Job was a generally good guy, blessed with much. God boasts to Satan of Job's goodness, and Satan bets that if he could mess with all Job's blessings, Job would curse God. God says, "You're on." One thing leads to another, and Job's livelihood is gone, his ten children are all dead, and Job has terrible skin sores. Ultimately, the dominant theme of Job is the difficulty of understanding why an all-powerful God allows good people to suffer—and it's really hard not to draw at least some parallels between our lives now and Job's life when we're in the thick of one "unprecedented" event after another.

As I read Job's reflections, Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence came to mind. The flat circle, the absurdity of life and its endless repetition, that one must relive it all an infinite number of times. Nietzsche didn't necessarily say that this idea is true but we are truly revealed by how we'd react if it were true. Do we react with utter despair? Or do we embrace this idea as something to be desired?

The last year, in many ways, felt like that flat circle. I remember one morning in early Summer 2020 waking up and bursting into real tears. Because that day, I knew I would get out of bed, get my children dressed and fed, toil through the day, clean, work on my computer, administer school, referee fights, walk the dog, get my children fed and undressed, go to bed. Just like I did the day before and just like I would the day after and on and on in endless, absurd repetition. My own personal flat circle hell. And, yes, I reacted with utter despair.

Job says in his reflections, "Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!" Job would endure all this suffering if only he knew there was something else coming at the end of it all; he

would take the suffering as long as it is finite. As long as there exists renewed life after being released from the land of darkness. And, as I write this in January, 2021, I'll admit that I never had a great revelation releasing me from my own land of darkness. I have not yet found a way to embrace my flat circle. Even so, I certainly don't wake in the morning with utter despair. I'm trying but I'm not there yet. Like Job, I plea for the finite-ness of it all.

Maybe there's some harmony to be had? As you read this, we'll be between the land of darkness that is Good Friday and the renewal resurrection, Jesus's appointed time.

And, as I contemplate the transition from flat circle and land of darkness to the appointed time and renewal, I think of Maya Angelou's poem that says:

Some prophets say the world is gonna end tomorrow,  
But others say we've got a week or two,  
The paper is full of every kind of blooming horror,  
And you sit wondering  
What you're gonna do.  
I got it.  
Come. And be my baby.

Job didn't have Jesus's resurrection to reflect on as he faced the end of his world, so he asks, "If mortals die, will they live again?" But we do have Jesus. And in Angelou's poem, I hear the call of the divine, calling us away from the endless repetition allowing us to live again. And it helps. A bit.

*Brianna McCarty*

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