

ST PAULS MEMORIAL CHURCH
at the UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



Lenten Devotional
2019

March 6, Ash Wednesday: Psalm 51:1-17 • Joel 2:1-2,
12-17 • 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10 • Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

Stop.
Right where you are.
Just stop.
Look
into your heart.
What is it you seek?
Where is your treasure?
He is waiting to walk with you.
Hear
his
call.

— Anna Askounis

March 7, Thursday: Psalm 37:1-18 • Deuteronomy 7:6-11 • Titus 1:1-16 • John 1: 29-34

The people of ancient Israel wrestled with how to understand two conflicting realities: their faith and trust in God who would protect and reward them and punish the wicked on the one hand, and the reality of their daily life in a world distorted by hunger and poverty, by suffering, social and economic injustice, misuse of power and much more. Some lost faith and questioned God's intention to punish evil, vindicate goodness and restore Israel saying: "All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord. . . . Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 1:17)

Others counseled patience and trust for the day was coming when God would act in a catastrophic way to punish and destroy the wicked and reward the faithful. Psalm 37 urges the people, "Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass . . . the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. Yet a little while and the wicked will be no more . . . they will vanish like smoke . . . and the meek shall inherit the land." The righteous shall be kept safe forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

John the Baptist, a fiery charismatic, believed that the day of God's reckoning had arrived and that Jesus was the one sent by God to initiate this catastrophic day of judgement. John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Jesus, filled with God's spirit, followed an entirely different path. He walked into the middle of this broken world, not to destroy it but to bring God's healing love into it—not to destroy the broken world but to bring its darkest corners into the power of God's presence. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, confronted the unjust power system, ate with outcasts, not to destroy the broken creation but to heal and change it and to give to others the courage and wisdom to do the same.

We face daily that same troubling duality—confessing our trust in a God of compassion, justice and peace on the one hand, and daily confrontation with the reality of starving children, homeless immigrants, crippling poverty, violence, war and hatred, lack of affordable health care, racial and economic injustice, and the mindless destruction of our world on the other hand.

Do we wait, feeling overwhelmed, exhausted by the enormity of the brokenness, praying for God to fix it, or do we also walk into the midst of the brokenness following the path Jesus took, finding our own ways to bring God's healing love into our suffering world?

Something to ponder and pray about in this Lenten season.

— **The Reverend Paula Kettlewell**

March 8, Friday: Psalm 31 • Deuteronomy 7:12-16 • Titus 2:1-15 • John 1:35-42

The promise of God's steadfast love is offered to all people, if we can see it and choose to grasp it. That love is abundant and greater than all the ills of the world, greater than all the evil, tricks, snares, hatred, and sickness that life might bring. These passages bring God into our hearts safely and closely, even as we encounter racism, greed, corruption and inhumanity in our 21st-century lives.

God calls upon us to live godly lives, to trust in him, and to follow him. We hope we have the wisdom to really see Jesus, and to follow him. He is our "Rabbi," our teacher in a life-long quest.

Matt Argon

March 9, Saturday: Psalm 32 • Deuteronomy 7:17-26 • Titus 3:1-15 • John 1:43-51

Here, in this penitential psalm, God's radical grace is made known to us. It is a consoling message as we begin our journey into Lent, seeking in this season an ever-deeper experience of the cross(es) God has given each of us to bear. It seems that every moment of our lives is claimed by God: a demand is made of us. No moment is neutral. Pleasure and pain, loss and gain, joy and despair, all that we experience, can be salvific when we identify ourselves with the Cross. At the intersection described by those cross-hairs waits a risen life. God has made this promise. And together we enter this narrow path, a community in Christ, extolling and pointing the way in psalms and singing, in listening and hearing, in proclaiming and witnessing, and in sharing each other's burdens (which is everywhere evident to me at St. Paul's, a place where my friends and guides are quietly teaching me the mysteries of the Cross). Every Sunday we live this risen life together in Christ.

Christ asks that **we** willfully accept His death on the cross and so accept our own. To choose it, to see in it our freedom, is to begin to open the door onto heaven. And just as our Lord is preparing a room in his many-roomed mansion for us, so we, as God's living temple, are preparing a place in our hearts to receive his love.

Yoked to his Cross, he is yoked to ours, and so our yoke is made easy. Yoked to our cross, we are yoked to his, and so our pain, our loss, our disappointment, our shame, our sin, and our death are translated, transformed into new life, a risen life. The same is true of our good works, purified of pride's foul stench. Herein lies, perhaps, a fine line, a Christian middle way. By effort, by works (including the work of faith) we attach ourselves to his cross. But first, by the gratuitous offering of His Son, God mercifully makes our sufferings his own. Furthermore, I am not alone, but yoked through baptism with my sisters and brothers at St. Paul's, and the whole body of the faithful. In the holy confusion of love, whose cross is whose? And what burden is not a rung on the ladder to the kingdom of heaven?

The psalm begins: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." The ground of God's being is mercy, a mercy so fundamental that the very root of sin is cut! Salvation is a gift, an unmerited gift, pure grace. We are "reckoned righteous by faith" in this gift. Lord help us to acknowledge and accept this grace in faith. Basking in the light of a faith that seeks the knowledge of God's unilateral love, we can then, with the psalmist, acknowledge our sin and confess our transgressions, and together walk the line.

As I have meditated on my wrongdoings it seems there is not a friend, not a beloved, whom I have not harmed. I have not loved my neighbor as myself. No one has been left unscathed. Yet in faith, great hope, and the love born of this hope, we dare to live a risen life amidst the sorrow of this world. Together we cry out to God, week in and week out, bearing witness with David and our beloved St. Paul's community: "You will compass me about with songs of deliverance!" Selah

— Kevin Warren

March 10, First Sunday in Lent: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 •
Deuteronomy 26:1-11 • Romans 10:8b-13 • Luke 4:1-13

The Gospel lesson for today is known as the temptation of Jesus. Luke's version is the most detailed, but Matthew (4:1-11) and Mark (1:12-13) also mention Jesus' time of fasting and temptation in the desert, following close upon his baptism where the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove. Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, is led by the Spirit to the desert for 40 days of fasting and temptation.

The devil appeals to Jesus' human nature in the temptations he presents. Satan first urges Jesus to satisfy his hunger by magically changing stones to bread. Next, he offers Jesus worldly wealth in exchange for denying God. The final temptation seeks to divert Jesus from his God-given mission of suffering and sacrifice, challenging him to prove his divinity by testing God with a stunt at the Temple, the center of Jewish faith. The demonic suggestion being that Jesus would win converts without the suffering of the Cross.

We need not imagine supernatural tempters to recognize, in the temptations, appeals to our human nature and desires. Humans suffer from physical needs; we may crave riches, power and influence; we may long for success in our career calling. Jesus' identity as fully human is being tested. He, as do we, hears the small voice whispering the sweet call of the here and now. Jesus resists by calling on God and the promises of scripture. Our readings add emphasis: Deuteronomy 26 highlights the mutual covenant promises of God and his people, while Psalm 91 proclaims our trust in God as a shield from evil. Paul writes in Romans assuring us of the promise of salvation through faith.

The tempter, thwarted, leaves for "an opportune time." The tempter awaits, but through trust in God and faith in the promise of salvation we will not be led into temptation.

— Charles Lancaster

March 11, Monday: Psalm 41 • Deuteronomy 8:11-18 • Hebrews 2:11-18 • John 2:1-12

Deuteronomy 8:11-18 is an apt reading for a season during which we are called upon to repent of our failings. How easy it is to fall on our knees and call on God during the bad times, and how easy it is to forget God during times of abundance. Along the same lines, it can be easier to ask God why he allows our suffering than to credit him for the beautiful things about our lives.

This passage seems particularly apt for many (but not all) American Christians, Episcopalians in particular, and St. Paul's members even more in particular. Many of us live lives of abundance compared to Christians in other parts of the world or in other types of churches. In this passage we find a call to repent for exalting ourselves when it comes to our good fortune and forgetting the Lord our God.

Like many Episcopal liturgical readings, this reading conveniently cuts out some tough verses. The last two verses of the chapter promise condemnation and destruction for those who do forget the Lord in their abundance and turn to other gods. But during Lent, perhaps we should heed verses 19 and 20. There are other gods in abundance to which well-to-do American Christians can turn: wealth, comfort, and power, to name a few. And I do believe those of us who forget the Lord in our abundance and turn to these other gods risk a holy reckoning in this world or the world to come. Thankfully, our God is a merciful God. But don't get too comfortable.

— Daniel Wise

March 12, Tuesday: Psalm 45 • Deuteronomy 9:4-12 • Hebrews 3:1-11 • John 2:13-22

A friend recently introduced me to something called imaginative prayer. First, you think of the text like a movie and lose yourself in its action—images, sounds, smells. Then, prayerfully, you place yourself in the scene and see what happens. I’m still a novice at this, but it was especially useful for today’s readings, since Jesus cleansing the Temple always evokes memories of the “Jesus Christ, Superstar” summer theater production I saw as a kid. Today’s readings have rich dramatic texture: the joyful anticipation of a wedding; Moses rebuking Israel on the edge of the Promised Land; the writer of Hebrews repeating Moses’ warnings; and finally, Jesus driving out the money changers and enigmatically predicting his own death and resurrection.

I’ll confess I found Moses’ rebuke hard to read, thinking of times in my own life when, despite seeing things God has done in the past—prayers answered, gifts received—I’ve still later doubted if God *really* cared, when I’ve wondered if I might have to whip up some solution of my own in the desert. It’s hard for me to blame the Israelites—they had been in Egypt a long time, and were probably just doing what they’d learned there. Bad habits for sure, pagan habits learned in captivity, but if I’m honest, am I any different?

But Jesus cleansing the Temple struck me in a different, more hopeful way. Commentators say the practices that angered Jesus exploited the poor. But as I read, it occurred to me that these same practices—selling animals for sacrifice, money changing—were also probably just something that people took for granted about what it meant to worship God. If Moses’ ancient Israelites had “bad” habits, maybe these seemed like “good” habits, or at least religious ones. This made me wonder: what “good” or religious habits or ideas have I taken for granted, about what it means to worship God especially, that might need to be reconsidered? What tables of mine might Jesus be turning over? And how do I feel about that?

— Jessica Lowe

March 13, Wednesday: Psalm 49 • Deuteronomy 9:13-21 • Hebrews 3:12-19 • John 2:23–3:15

In Deuteronomy, Moses came down from the mountain after his encounter with God to find the people of Israel worshipping a molten calf rather than seeking the true God.

The psalmist cries that much of life is vanity; all those that care about power and worldly goods are worshipping the molten calf and enjoying their material lives but such a life will not lead to the spirit.

In John's story, Nicodemus questions Jesus about how a person can be born again when he is old. I ask a similar question: How can you be born again when you are discouraged by the ways of the world. Almost daily, I realize my need for the spiritual rebirth that Jesus speaks about to Nicodemus.

Finally, In Hebrews the line that stands out is "Today when you hear his voice *do not harden your heart*. . . ."

The key for me: "do not harden your heart . . ." against hearing God's voice.

Do not harden your heart against your fellow human beings even when they seem ignorant, or on a wrong path, or even doing harmful things.

Do not harden your heart against the many competing interests that call out for attention but that you can't always respond to.

Do not harden your heart against your own hurts and needs as well as the hurts, the needs, the longings of others.

Do not harden your heart against the pain, the conflicts, the wrongheadedness of much of our society.

As I meditate, I realize that the real challenge is to find a way to manifest my spirit in my humanness. I need to keep my heart open and my desire to find that spirit kindled within. And finally, I need to find daily ways to let that spirit shine through in my response to others.

— Kay Slaughter

March 14, Thursday: Psalm 50 • Deuteronomy 9:23–10:5
• Hebrews 4:1-10 • John 3:16-21

John 3:16 “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.”

Today’s readings focus mainly on God’s wrath and judgement of those who disobey. But the gospel reading is very different, verse 17 stating explicitly that Jesus was sent not to judge us, but to save us. And God has done this because God so loves the world—the cosmos in the original Greek. How can we understand this better?

The cosmos is the whole of creation, everyone and everything that exists. In brief, all means all; no exceptions. God loves us all, every one of us and everything. This is a huge concept to grasp. Try inserting the name of the person you find hardest to love or even to like: God so loves [] that he gives his only son—or the name of someone who is clearly despicable, even evil. This is not so easy.

Another substitution to try: God so loves *me* that he gives his only son. I’m worth *that*? God cares that much for individuals, for me? I find this raises all sorts of doubts and insecurities for me, and evokes the heartfelt plea to “help Thou my unbelief.” I focus on the knowledge that God is love: God so loves us that he sends his son, so that we can all live in God’s love. Eternally. Amen.

March 15, Friday: Psalm 40 • Deuteronomy 10:12-22 • Hebrews 4:11-16 • John 3:22-36

Today's readings seem to emphasize the generosity of God. In Psalm 40, the psalmist, encompassed by outside evils and burdened by his own iniquities ("more than the hairs of mine head") patiently waits for the rescue he is sure will come. The rescue is free-handed; "sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire."

In Deuteronomy 10:12-22 the narrator says the Lord "regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward." The incomprehensible power of God is accompanied by an equally stupendous generosity. We have no coin to pay God with. Instead we are urged to extend our generosity to the fatherless and the widow and the stranger, and "be no more stiffnecked."

In the third reading from Hebrews 4:11-16, "the word of God is quick, and powerful," also double-edged and accurate, dividing soul and spirit, discerning "the thoughts and intents of the heart," leaving us and everything else "naked and open unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." This potentially disturbing thought is not about guilt, but another example of astonishing generosity. As Paul or the Pauline author of Hebrews says, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace," *boldly*, certain of mercy.

The Gospel text for this day is John 3:22-36. The passage begins with Jesus in Judea and John the Baptist in Aenon, both baptizing many at the same time. Questioned about the equivalence of these baptisms, apparently on different banks of the same river, John replies, "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him by heaven." The Baptist's statements are radical: "He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true," and "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life." In these hopeful readings, the road to grace seems so broad, free and open that, as an anonymous 18th century cleric once said, "a man must work very hard to be damned."

— Gary Mawyer

March 16, Saturday: Psalm 55 • Deuteronomy 11:18-28
• Hebrews 5:1-10 • John 4:1-26

Jesus and the woman Samaritan: John 4:1-10

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹ 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.^[a]) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you ‘give me drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

I always liked this story. I think I liked it because Jesus talked to a member of the Samaritans, an outcast people as far as the Jews were concerned. Jesus did not reject this woman even though she was from a tribe outside of Jewish approval; rather, Jesus welcomed her. His disciples did not like that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan. The woman herself could have been outcast from her tribe but this is not clear to me. After all, the men of her tribe listened to her and came to talk to Jesus and invited him to stay. He stayed and taught the Samaritans for two days. What Jesus demonstrated to his disciples and all of us was all people are of value to God, not just the Jews and not just the pious.

When thousands of people from Honduras and El Salvador walked months to reach the American border and asked for asylum, we did not treat them the way Jesus treated the woman Samaritan. We treated them as outcasts. We even ripped their children from their arms. Over a thousand children, months later, have not been returned to their parents. This is who we are in the 21st century. We are part of it.

Once, one of my granddaughters asked me why I gave money to a homeless person. “After all,” she said, “he will probably waste it on booze.” And I said, “I don’t know what he will do with it. I can only control myself, not him. I can either give him money or buy him some food. Today, I didn’t have time to buy him a sandwich so I gave him money instead.”

I will not consider the homeless outcasts. They are children of God just like the Samaritan woman, and just like the asylum seekers from Central America.

— Lynne Weikart

March 17, Second Sunday of Lent: Psalm 27 • Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 • Philippians 3:17–4:1 • Luke 9:28-36

“And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”

What must Peter and the others have thought and felt at this moment? Before the appearance of Jesus, their lives had been severely circumscribed by tradition and the labor necessary to ensure survival. Christ appears, and the men begin throwing off the shackles of their lives, expanding their understanding of their place in God’s kingdom. But what a rapid expansion they endure, and it is not surprising that they falter. Peter’s desire to build dwellings for each personage is not just an example of hospitality run amok. He is trying to control what will not be controlled, that which is magnificent, overwhelming, and, let’s face it, terrifying.

Peter wants to domesticate what he has just seen. “We’ll make a nice little house for each holy being, and we can come visit as often as we are able, thus ensuring our spiritual welfare.” We may affect a gentle amusement at his efforts, but, truly, doesn’t that feel just a bit familiar? Is he guilty of anything more than the rest of us? Christ is revealed to be something far greater than Peter had ever thought possible. Even with our 2,000 years of theologizing about the meaning of this moment, what have we figured out? We, too, seek to tame, to define God. Part of this is only natural—God as a concept is expansive to such a degree that we puny humans are lost. We embrace the bits we think we understand, and then throw our hands up at much of the rest.

Fortunately, we have the same assist that Peter had. Christ is our bridge between the incomprehensible and the mundane. Even if we can’t see beyond Christ, his presence is a connection to that glorious other. As that voice said, this is the Son; we must listen to Him. And, as Peter and the others did, follow Him to something far bigger than we ever dreamed.

— Michelle Allen

March 18, Monday: Psalm 56 • Jeremiah 1:11-19 •
Romans 1:1-15 • John 4:27-42

“So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word.” John 4:40-41

After encountering Jesus at the well, a Samaritan woman, amazed by his insight into her own life, began telling everyone about her experience. Wanting to hear it for themselves, they invited Jesus to stay with them and he obliged.

Samaritans set themselves apart from other Jews, because they adhered only to the five core books of the Old Testament. They did not accept the other books and saw themselves as religiously pure. Women, especially unmarried women, like the one at the well, were generally looked down on. Once again, Jesus extended himself to the margins. And when invited, stayed there.

It seems that in every story, proximity to Jesus changes everything, and everyone. In this story we see how Jesus extends himself to create close proximity and then lingers awhile. The Savior of the world lingers at the margins, with people we are not supposed to talk to, and others who think they are too pure to hear what we might have to say.

God of all hope, invite me to linger awhile at the margins, with openness and compassion. Amen

— James Plews-Ogan

March 19, Tuesday: Psalm 61 • Jeremiah 2:1-13 •
Romans 1:16-25 • John 4:43-54

John 4:43-54

I walked 20 miles to ask this man, Jesus, to heal my son. It took more than a day, and every step I prayed.

I prayed for forgiveness for everything I had done that I knew in my heart was wrong. I prayed that God would listen. That I would meet this man, Jesus. That I would be able to ask him and that he would come with me to heal my son.

My son, racked with fever, vulnerable. I had already tried everything. Local healers, their herbs and incantations, their gods, their potions. I had no reason to hope that Jesus could heal him, but I walked anyway.

When I reached the crowds in the place where Jesus was, I had to push through to get close. I heard Jesus rebuking them for needing miracles to feed their faith. I wasn't thinking about my faith, I was only thinking about my son, and that I had nowhere else to turn.

When I got close enough, I cried out to Jesus, pleaded with him to come back with me to heal my son.

Instead, Jesus told me, "Go. Your son will live."

Somehow this Jesus knew that my son was O.K. and my job now was to simply return to him. Walking home at night, though there was no light to guide my steps, it was as if my feet met the ground along a path that fit my feet so surely that I didn't stumble once.

When I returned home, I learned that my son's fever had broken at the very hour that Jesus had proclaimed that he would live. And everyone in my household agreed, this was surely a sign that this man Jesus had extraordinary power. But I already knew this.

As the days went by, I told this story to anyone who would listen, and they thought it was a miracle. I didn't disagree, but I knew in my heart that this was the grace I had prayed for in every step towards Jesus.

— Leslie Middleton

March 20, Wednesday: Psalm 119:73-96 • Jeremiah 3:6-18 • Romans 1:28–2:11 • John 5:1-18

Jesus answered, “Rise to your feet, take up your bed and walk.”

John 5:8

The gospel passage—when Jesus heals at the pool in Jerusalem on the Sabbath—reminded me of another pool not so far away.

A few years ago on a cold March day, my family and I sampled the waters of the historic Jefferson Pools in Warm Springs, Virginia. For us, a dip in the spring-fed, mineral-rich waters was a tourist activity. I had envisioned floating quietly in the warm water enclosed in an elegant nineteenth-century bathhouse. Instead a dilapidated wood structure with peeling paint and rotting planks housed the pool. Fellow bathers packed the pool, and children splashed noisily. The pool was a raucous, somewhat dangerous place that afternoon.

I don’t pretend to identify with the paralytic who yearned to immerse himself in the healing waters. That pool in Jerusalem was filled with “sick people, blind, lame and paralyzed.” He was unable to enter the bath. Nevertheless, he was healed by Jesus. After thirty-eight years of paralysis, he could walk.

Thanks to this reading, I’ve been thinking about the ways all of us at one time or another are paralyzed or sick or blind—in body, mind, or spirit. Jesus’s response to the paralytic, “Rise to your feet,” suggests that we don’t have to be stuck indefinitely. A new life—fully mobile—awaits.

“Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring them the joy of your salvation” (From The Prayers of the People, St. Paul’s Memorial Church, Sunday, February 10, 2019).

— Kelli Olson

March 21, Thursday: Psalm 71 • Jeremiah 4:9-10, 19-28
• Romans 2:12-24 • John 5:19-29

As God is my witness: Those who hear my word and believe the one who sent me have real life -- John 5:24

“Real life” sounds very appealing, but what is real life? Uncentered early on, 70 years have followed that strike me as very real. They were lived within loving relationships and a strong hunger for deeper understandings nurtured by church and science.

Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. (John 5:23)

Each of us, as I see it, honors authority in keeping with our foundational values. Our choices, options, in responding to authority change as we change.

I’ve long questioned what evidence of God’s history beyond human history? If our God is worthy of worship, what attributes, Biblical or traditional, justify it? Surely not: “Ah, Lord God, how utterly you have deceived this people” (Jeremiah 4:10).

To believe the One who “sent” Jesus falls short. To me, living with a sure foundation in Jesus more deeply nurtures and guides a full and faithful life. Yet the core message of Jesus to love one another, kenotic love, is extraordinarily hard.

The faith community has been vital to finding my way, seeking to conform it to his ‘way.’ Small church groups, wise clergy, books—addressed to mind and spirit, a long stumbling journey. To what end?

My dream is a global commissioning of the wisest, deepest thinkers with the best of storytelling writers to create holy writ for the 21st CE, funded by \$5.6B to unwall the world.

God is love: that for me is the ground of my being in this world. My hope is to truly honor Jesus, to live his values as my values:

the way of unconditional love, of radical hospitality, of loving-kindness, of compassion, [of humility], of mercy, of prophetic speaking truth to power, the way of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and the pursuit of restorative [and distributive] justice. The Rev. Roger Wolsey

— Bill Sherman

March 22, Friday: Psalm 69 • Jeremiah 5:1-9 • Romans 2:25–3:18 • John 5:30-47

He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. John 5:35-36

The rushing power of the Holy Spirit
Glory so strong I felt it push against me
It took my breath away
Something was burning inside of me
My soul was afire.

Did I not leap for joy in my mother's womb?

I am not the light you seek
Only the reflection of the light
A burning and shining lamp
The radiance of one greater than I
Who is the glory of God the father.

“I heard the voice of Jesus say, ‘I am this dark world's light;
Look unto me, your morn shall rise; and all your day be bright.’
I looked to Jesus, and I found in Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk till traveling days are done.” *

* In 1846 Scottish hymnodist, the Rev. Dr. Horatius Bonar wrote, “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say.” In 1946 Ralph Vaughan Williams arranged a traditional English melody for Bonar's hymn.

— Betsy Daniel

March 23, Saturday: Psalm 75 • Jeremiah 5:20-31 •
Romans 3:19-31 • John 7:1-13

Today's passages challenge me. From Paul's exhortation that the law teaches about sin but faith saves us from sin, to Jeremiah's impassioned indictment of the ungodliness of his time, we are reminded that sin and evil have been with us in every century, every country, before Jesus, after Jesus. Then in John we read of Jesus' working in secret, biding his time speaking of the hatred toward him from some in the crowd. And when he speaks out in the following verses his knowledge and wisdom are questioned and he says, in effect, that God speaks through him, it is God's voice that they hear.

I read the news today with despair in my heart. And then took a walk.
Had they forgotten their covenant of love and forgiveness was it all talk?
Hadn't they seen the willows dance and heard the dove singing
Seen His breath riffle the water, felt the passion He was bringing?

Will we, today, ignore the cries of the children, the sick, and the old,
Our strident voices forgetting that the other is us, so Jesus told.
That Jesus moves among us as part of our being, the secret there
Always to find when we stop and we listen, receiving His prayer.

To believe and celebrate that He died for us all,
Though all sinners we're forgiven remembering His call.
To love one another as He has loved us,
To forgive as we are forgiven and live in His trust.

— Alice Meador

March 24, Third Sunday of Lent (Meditation 1): Psalm 63:1-8 •
Isaiah 55:1-9 • 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 • Luke 13:1-9

I cringed when first reading today's scriptures. The psalmist bewails the fall of his once mighty nation, now marred by strife, laughed at and cut down by neighbors and enemies. The voice of doom booms in Jeremiah's warnings against oppressing the stranger, cautioning against murder, swearing falsely, & walking after other gods. It all sounded too desperate and, though from the Old Testament, too close to home. I flipped to the Gospel reading; it too is full of dissension, but in its midst is the simple statement: "He who sent me, however, is *true*." (John 7:28) Per Merriam-Webster: Real, reliable, honest, steadfast, loyal, just, legitimate, rightful, logically necessary, authentic, genuine, not false.¹

I looked again. The positive hope of the Psalmist's refrain thrice rang out: "And we shall be saved." Within Jeremiah's tirade, I heard the repeated reminder: "The Lord saith . . . the Lord speaks even when we do not hear; even when we do not answer, the Lord continues to call."

Paul reaches back to Genesis, twice reminding us: Abraham *believed* God. Abraham considered God to be true and honest; he accepted God as true, genuine and real. He was in relationship with God and with that believing comes the gift of grace from a God whose face shines for the Psalmist and us with the Grace that envisions God's creation as good and those who believe as righteous.

Yes, Jeremiah warns of actions distressing to the Lord—a list of sins perhaps but not a divine checklist that preserves the past or controls the future. God's interests are in the present. We need only to live a life of faith, to walk in the steps of faith, knowing with each step that our lawless deeds are forgiven and our sins are covered because our God is, always has been, and always will be True.

I am reminded of the Thomas Merton prayer: *But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you, and I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. . . . I know . . . you will lead me by the right road. . . .*

¹See: "true," "truthful," "believe," "believed" at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/>

March 24, Third Sunday of Lent (Meditation 2): Psalm 63:1-8 • Isaiah 55:1-9 • 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 • Luke 13:1-9

I'd like to think of God as being like the gardener of verse 8, and myself as the fig tree. God cares for me and works to nourish me and keep me healthy, even when I'm not fruitful, or at least he gives me another chance. Not sure who the land owner is supposed to be in this interpretation. Sometimes the landowner is my own disappointment with myself.

In the first few verses, Jesus seem to be at pains to point out to his audience *both* that suffering is not evidence of sin, *and* that if they (the audience) don't repent, they will perish (i.e., suffer). (One commentator suggested that Christ's point was more that his listeners shouldn't be worrying about what was the cause of other folks' tragedies, but should focus on repenting of their own sins.)

But *then* ... he tells a parable about a gardener wanting to give a fig tree a break, even though it was wasting resources and was not fruitful.

So, suffering is the effect of failure to repent, yet is not evidence of other's sin, and God doesn't want his fruit tree/people done in even when they waste resources and fail to produce? Hmmm.

Surely at least part of the point is that God is merciful, and does not dole out catastrophe as punishment in a tit-for-tat kind of way. Yet, unlike the fig tree, we have the capacity to regret the harm we have done, and to make amends. Thus our job is to repent.

God's mercy is always available, but we cannot *avail ourselves of it* without doing the hard spiritual work of realizing our sins, acknowledging them, and working to set things back to rights—of doing penance for our sins.

— Patsy Goolsby

March 25, Monday: Psalm 80 • Jeremiah 7:1-15 •
Romans 4:1-12 • John 7:14-36

The readings for today all connect to one idea: love. In Psalm 80, the people understand that even in the midst of their despair, God's love for them will carry them through their struggles. In Jeremiah, they have lost God's favor and protection because they did not follow his commandments concerning justice and the worship of only one God: commandments that are all founded on the basis of love for one another. In John, Jesus breaks the law of the sabbath in order to heal people out of pity and compassion (feelings that only Jesus and God are described as having)—emotions that are only possible through love. Jesus was sent by God to proclaim and spread the message of the Kingdom of God, that of love; however, the people fail at understanding this. They are jaded by their prior conceptions of the Messiah and are so focused on the laws of the Torah that they miss the most important one: to love your neighbor and your God.

I do not claim to know the nature of the Trinity, but I do know that they make appearances in our own lives through love, specifically the bonds we share with others. I believe that Jesus' death was a political action, but that his presence on this Earth was a testament to God's love for us, and gave us the ability to tangibly feel that love. During this season, Jesus' seeming absence from our lives gives us a feeling that God's love is also missing. But instead, perhaps, it gives us a chance to spread and feel that love ourselves and provides the opportunity for us to be active participants instead of passive receivers.

— Elizabeth Eareckson

March 26, Tuesday: Psalm 78:1-39 • Jeremiah 7:21-34 •
Romans 4:13-25 • John 7:37-52

“Let all who thirst come to me and drink.” “. . . I will be your God and you will be my people.” Abraham, in hope, believed. It is, in such challenging times, difficult to have hope. We thirst—for justice, for deeper faith, for forgiveness, for peace, in the world and in our hearts .

“Whoever believes in me will have rivers of water flow from within them.” If we, like Abraham, with hope, can believe, perhaps we can quench the thirst; as we open our hearts to God, work for justice, move towards a deeper faith, ask forgiveness, pray for peace in the world, find peace in our hearts; trusting that as we journey, by ourselves or with others, the Holy Spirit is at work among us, bringing forth rivers of water from which all can drink.

They thirst
We thirst
Let all who thirst come to Jesus and drink

We come, we believe
We drink
We have rivers of water
Rivers of hope flowing
From within us

They come, they believe
They drink
They have rivers of water
Rivers of hope flowing
From within them

We share in our thirst
We share in coming to Jesus
We share in the rivers of water
Rivers of hope flowing
From within each and every one

— Anne Cressin

March 27, Wednesday: Psalm 82 • Jeremiah 8:18–9:6

• Romans 5:1-11 • John 8:12-20

We hung the feeder on a line between our back patio and a tree at the edge of the yard. In the beginning I watched anxiously, afraid they wouldn't come. But they did, with pointed beaks and wings that undulated so fast that the air blurred. That first summer we had two or three regular visitors. Delighted, we observed them through the kitchen window— pretty little birds flitting to and fro, made magical by their novelty and their spellbinding effect on small children.

The next summer, we again set up the feeder and waited hopefully. Before long, at least five birds regularly stopped by throughout the day. A couple weeks into the season, a new pattern emerged. With a flash of ruby throats, they dive-bombed each other, zooming back and forth over the roof of the house, battling for sole dominance over a cup of sugar water. With no evident fear of humans, the birds flew low and grazed our heads during their skirmishes.

There was one who stayed particularly close and chased off the other birds with a dedicated fervor. Guard Bird did not like to share and was not a peaceful yard companion. And although Guard Bird was our most loyal resident, in the interest of equal distribution, I silently began rooting for the other birds to stand up for themselves. At one point I thought they'd finally gotten their act together to orchestrate a tiered plan of attack. But, they couldn't sustain it and at the end of the day, there was Guard Bird sitting on the line, persistently and implacably at home.

Many years later, Guard Bird's descendants continue to return. We no longer worry that they won't show up. Often in mid to late spring, we spot a few early ones, hanging around the normal spot, before the feeder has even been hung. They are waiting for it, for us to do what they trust us to do. Just like we trust that they'll come back. They've chosen us, in our tiny spot in this world, for reasons we'll never know. And with every prepared cup of nectar, I suppose we've chosen them, too.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." (Romans 5:1-2)

— Rowena Zimmermann

March 28, Thursday: Psalm 42 • Jeremiah 10:11-24 • Romans 5:12-21 • John 8:21-32

“If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and truth will set you free.” *John 8:31-32*

“Lord, I know that people’s lives are not their own; it is not for them to direct their steps. Discipline me, Lord, but only in due measure—not in your anger, or you will reduce me to nothing.” *Jeremiah 10:23-24*

We are faced with choices every day, sometimes many times a day. Freedom is wonderful and it is also burdensome. What is the best thing to do in this circumstance? What is the right thing to do in this circumstance? What is the best thing to teach our children? What is the right thing to teach our children?

In the best of circumstances we govern our human organizations through guidelines and laws that all are expected to live up to. And in the very best of circumstances those guidelines and laws are congruent with God’s law. It is perhaps the greatest human challenge to identify the linkages, build the connections, establish communal discipline and live accordingly. It is also the best way to live well.

Lord, encourage me to seek your truth and discover how you want me to direct my steps throughout my life. Teach me and encourage me to learn. Bring me up short when I go off track. Discipline me to understand that becoming your disciple and holding fast to your teachings will truly set me free in my life. Give me the courage to take your direction with me out into the world as a reflection of your truth.

— Nancy Grable

March 29, Friday: Psalm 88 • Jeremiah 11:1-8, 14-20 • Romans 6:1-11 • John 8:33-47

In Jeremiah, God is demanding that people follow his law, as not doing so is the foundation for sin. He states that, as punishment, He won't listen when they call Him in their time of trouble. Is that because He is a spiteful God? Or can we assert that the sin that binds us is powerful enough to prevent us from hearing God, or vice versa?

In Psalm 88, we directly experience the thoughts of someone who is bound and enslaved by sin. They feel chained and bound and separated from God and blame him for His silence. The understanding that sin is binding creates a barrier between us and God. Since humans are flawed beings, we create flawed societies. To survive, we must participate in these societies, which leads us to sin and results in us being shut out from God. Jesus' presence and death, as described in Romans 6, allow us to break from this inevitable descent into sin and live for and with God as we were meant to.

In John 8, we see Jesus in his full humanity. He is frustrated with the Jews because they don't believe him that he is speaking the word of God. In this flash of anger where Jesus calls the Jews children of the devil, we see his imperfect nature, his humanity, which creates a tangible example for us to follow. Understanding this sheds light on Jesus' true purpose. Not to die for our sins, but to live for and with and in God, as we should as well.

The "sin" that separates us from God and has driven theological agendas for hundreds of years is binding us in our belief and understanding of Christ, not in our relationship with Him. I believe that instead of Jesus coming to cleanse the world from sin, he came to show us how to maintain a loving relationship with God and one another.

March 30, Saturday: Psalm 87 • Jeremiah 13:1-11 •
Romans 6:12-23 • John 8:47-59

Romans 6:17-19: ¹⁷But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, ¹⁸and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations.

Yes, I have those. Natural limitations in many facets of my life. One that often pesters me is the ‘slave of righteousness’ assumption described in this Romans passage. I don’t think I’m a very good ‘slave’ in this regard—at least not all the time. And that too often becomes a focus—the times that I am not ‘slavish’ about following all of God’s tenets, rather than appreciating the rest of the time that I do.

I consider myself a ‘glass half-full’ kind of person, rather than ‘half-empty.’ So why not have that same perspective in how I evaluate my daily spiritual life? Why do I have feelings of regret for the times when I haven’t done anything *against* God’s teachings, just not something *for*?

A recent article in the *New York Times* entitled “6 Steps to Turn Regret into Self-Improvement”¹ gave me renewed insight into how to approach a facet of life where there might be ‘regret.’ Turn it around! Use it as a source of inspiration; focus on what *was* accomplished; construct a better path; or as my bowling partner Nick often tells me: “Diane, quit thinking. Just throw the damn ball!”

“Have you ever felt like life would be better if you had taken a different path? If only you had pursued that job, ended that relationship sooner or moved to a new city, everything would be just perfect.

Nonsense, of course. But it’s human nature to linger on those feelings of regret. We tend to look back and think that missed opportunities—real or imagined—could have set us on a different, possibly more rewarding path. Left unchecked, these emotions can become overwhelming sources of stress and anxiety.

But even painful emotions like regret can be powerful sources of inspiration.”

¹“6 Steps to Turn Regret into Self-Improvement,” Jennifer Taitz, *NY Times*, Feb 7, 2019

— Diane Wakat

March 31, Fourth Sunday of Lent: Psalm 32 • Joshua 5:9-12 • 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 • Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I've recently been engaged in a practice of reflecting upon what Jungian psychology calls the "shadow," referring to the unconscious aspects of our personality; the parts we don't like and thus don't recognize as our own. . . . the traits we tend to judge and dislike in others.

In the past months, I've been composing a forgiveness letter to my father, with whom I've experienced years of a relationship characterized by a formality and sense of estrangement. For the longest time, I'd seen myself as the aggrieved one but turning towards my shadow allowed me to see my father with new eyes. Perhaps he was not so different from me. Perhaps he'd cut off from his family emotionally because he didn't have the capacity to handle the pain of loss after divorce.

I came to understand that my resentment towards my father was the only barrier to this different loving relationship I desired with him. I saw how I was the prodigal daughter . . . how I'd turned from him at a young age and set out to engage with my life adventure, still sure he was to blame, in part, for any way in which I failed to flourish. My relationship with God followed a similar trajectory. At times my dreams were dashed and while I was willing to discern the blessings that unfolded on the other side of loss, I was certain too, that I'd graduated and deserved no further trial.

What I discovered in shifting the story from one of injury to curiosity, was an overflowing source of love and the possibility for transformation . . . to love my father as a flawed human, like myself. I sensed I'd come home. The estrangement I'd felt was actually an estrangement from my own heart. Let us aim only to choose this fierce and extravagant Love . . . this courage of heart and mind to light up the shadows, wherever they are . . . to be Love's welcome, always.

— Jenny Gladding

April 1, Monday: Psalm 89:1-18 • Jeremiah 16:10-21 •
Romans 7:1-12 • John 6:1-15

In the secular world, this day on the calendar is often characterized by practical jokes, usually aimed at some unsuspecting friend or colleague. We have all likely been both the victim and the instigator of such silliness, or annoyance, as the case may be.

In the spiritual world, today's Lenten lessons offer a vastly different portrait, as is so often the case when comparing the secular with the spiritual.

The willingness of God to take care of the believers represents a central theme throughout all of today's lessons. From the Psalmist's powerful declaration (*Psalm 89:8*) that God's faithfulness surrounds us, to John's account of Christ feeding the 5,000, there is a collective refrain that God will provide if we are but willing to submit to the Divine power.

Even during times of distress—both personal and corporate—the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that the Lord is our strength and our fortress (*Jeremiah 16:19*). Paul's letter to the early church in Rome centers on God's plan of salvation and righteousness for all, with major emphasis on the word all, regardless of one's state or position in life.

It is important to remember that the apostle John's writing about Christ feeding the 5,000 was a personal account. He tells the story with knowledge and nuances that could only come from someone who was there and saw the miraculous and loving power of Christ.

John tells of us Christ's testing Philip by asking "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" (*John 6:5*). Philip sought a practical solution, and like many of us, did not think of God's solution and the willingness of a loving God to provide. Christ was not only testing Philip, but at the same time he was teaching.

When Christ took the five small barley loaves and the two small fish from the young boy, there was another lesson. Barley was considered the bread of the poor. The young boy offered all that he had and Christ took this small token and turned it into food for thousands.

Throughout these readings, I was reminded of the chorus of the old hymn, *Power in the Blood*. Perhaps these simple words are more appropriate than ever today in explaining the power and love of our God.

*There is power, power, wonder-working power
In the blood of the Lamb.
There is power, power, wonder-working power
In the precious blood of the Lamb.*

— Steve Bevis

April 2, Tuesday: Psalm 97 • Jeremiah 17:19-27 •
Romans 7:13-25 • John 6:16-27

“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom. 7:19). Familiar words about our stubborn wills. The troubling distinction between *knowing* the good (discerned by the intellect) and *doing* it (moved by the will)—or recognizing the bad and not doing it—is one we all live with daily.

Largely thanks to Augustine’s development of Paul’s complaint into a full-blown concept of the will, with important embellishments by later thinkers (like Aquinas and Kant), we carry an understanding of the will that threatens to trap us in a constant struggle to get our wills in line, to *make* ourselves do what we know we should and not do what we know we shouldn’t. But even Augustine recognized the bootstrap problem of trying so hard to will our wills to will well. There seems no other option than abject surrender of our wills to God, yet we also believe that God wishes us to have *free* will. What’s it to be, struggle or surrender?

The Gospel reading for this day offers another possibility. After Jesus tells the terrified disciples, “It is I; be not afraid,” John says, “Then they wanted to take him into the boat [in William Temple’s translation, “So they were willing to receive him into the ship”], and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going” (Jn. 6:20-21). Here is an idea of will that entails neither struggle nor surrender, but instead relies upon God’s assurance that God is God and we need not be afraid. In that graceful fearlessness, we can let go of our anxiety about the alleged choice between pushing ourselves into perfection or renegeing on God’s moral call. Our will can relax and open in welcome reception of the Christ—granting us an *immediate* experience of reaching the shore, the safe and peaceful place for which we have longed: the presence of God.

— Margaret Mohrmann

April 3, Wednesday: Psalm 101 • Jeremiah 18:1-11 •
Romans 8:1-11 •

Scripture Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry . . . ”
In the book, *The Book of Joy* by Douglas Abrams, a dialogue
between Bishop Desmond Tutu and His Holiness the Dalai Lama is
enshrined.

It is clear that these Holy Men, one Christian and one
Buddhist, are responding to a deep need of humankind —
to find spiritual meaning to life. Humans, be they believers
or non-believers, consciously or not consciously turn to a greater spirit
to nourish that

seeking—for a meaningful life. Why am I here?

Empty is the life that is not seeking.

Christ’s words, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to
me will never be hungry,” give nourishment to the soul, guidance to the
seekers,

welcome to those who feel lost, and a promise, “I will
raise you on the last day” to those, —

as the Bishop poetically phrased it, for whom, “our goal
is not just to create joy for ourselves, but to be a reservoir of joy, an
oasis of peace, a

pool of serenity that can ripple out to all those around
you”

“That’s right,” the Dalai Lama replied. “The only thing that
will bring happiness is affection and warmheartedness. This really
brings inner

strength and self confidence, reduces fear, develops trust
(and love said the Bishop). Cooperation is based entirely on trust (love).
When

there is trust, people are brought together—whole
nations are brought together”— and they will live in peace. Something
these two great

leaders have been seeking all of their lives.

— Lucy Byrd Pegau

April 4, Thursday: Psalm 73 • Jeremiah 22:13-23 •
Romans 8:12-27 • John 6:41-51

Each time I read through these passages another portion strikes me. The passage in Paul about “hoping for what we cannot see” is particularly evocative for me. It reminds me of a sermon from my childhood, that included a story about a message given to a young couple in dire straits. The message was simply “expect a miracle.” For some reason that phrase has stayed with me my whole life. It connects in my mind to Paul because you can’t know what the miracle is but you must live in expectation, or hope.

I have always loved walking in the woods especially on still, quiet winter days. Nothing is likely to happen, and usually nothing does but occasionally when a wild animal (maybe a bit more exotic than a squirrel) comes into sight, it feels like a small miracle. The random sudden nature of the appearance makes all the difference.

Psalm 73 begins Book 3 and has a particularly empowering arc. It starts with overwhelming obsession with what others have and do. “They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.” Then comes the freeing realization that compared to the psalmist’s relationship with “you” they have nothing, are mere phantoms as in a dream and “on waking you despise [them].” As someone who is easily intimidated and depressed by violence inflicted by persons and institutions in positions of power, this is a good psalm to imprint on my heart.

— Peggy Galloway

April 5, Friday: Psalm 107:1-32 • Jeremiah 23:1-8 •
Romans 8:28-39 • John 6:52-59

Everyone eating of my flesh and drinking of my blood remains in me, and I remain in them.

John 6:56

Is Jesus only talking about the eating of flesh and drinking of blood that occurs in the physical act of the Eucharist? The literal bread and wine that we share at the table? Could it be more? In the physical acts of the Eucharist, are we made physically aware of Christ's presence remaining with us?

In this season of Lent, and this time of contemplation, our minds may be drawn to our actions which we may think have separated us from God.

What can separate us from Christ's love? Sickness, or pain, or being attacked, or hunger, or poverty, or danger, or violence?

Romans 8:35

And our minds may come to the mistaken conclusion that our actions can drive God from our presence.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, not the present nor the future, not oppression, neither height nor depth, and not anything in all of creation, is able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39

The name of God, Emmanuel, is God with us; and that God remains with you now. God is with you both when you feel it, and when you don't. And wherever your spirit is, when you turn toward the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, you are encompassed. Encompassed and reminded that God remains in you, and you in God.

— Kelly Carney

April 6, Saturday: Psalm 102 • Jeremiah 23:9-15 •
Romans 9:1-18 • John 6:60-71

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.”

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

Crucially, we never get any indication that the Twelve *don't* find this teaching difficult. When asked if they wish to leave, Simon Peter responds, not with a denial, but with the rhetorical question, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” We see throughout the Gospels that the Twelve are often confused, distressed, and even offended by Jesus’ teachings (the famous “get behind me, Satan” incident comes to mind; even Simon Peter, for all his zeal and spirit of revelation, has a lot of trouble with Christ’s message). Yet through all that, they continue to follow him and listen to his teachings. Those who remain with him do so because, having recognized the incarnate Word, they’ve been changed forever, and can never fully return to the lives they knew before. This doesn’t make their lives easy, or painless, or free from doubt; it doesn’t render them instantly able to understand and accept everything God tells them about who they are and what they need to do in this world. Like Jacob, they keep wrestling with God throughout a long, confusing night. Like Jacob, they’re blessed, changed, and renamed by the experience. May it be so for us, and may the Spirit ever call us into greater struggle and a closer communion with God.

— Beth Molmen

April 7, Fifth Sunday of Lent: Psalm 126 • Isaiah 43:16-21 • Philippians 3:4-b-14 • John 12:1-8

At the beginning of Brahms' "Ein Deutsches Requiem," Brahms quotes Psalm 126.

In some translations, Psalm 126 is subtitled "A Harvest of Joy." In the RSV, the first verse reads, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." In other translations, the historical context becomes even more clear—"When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion. . . ." Some scholars believe that the psalm was written by Ezra, who led the nation of Israel during the time that the Jews were returning from the Babylonian captivity—"The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad."

Ezra ends Psalm 126 with a prayer to God that those who had suffered so much might see a new day—"May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him."

This passage appears in the first movement of Brahms' Requiem. For most composers who write a "Requiem," the most dramatic movement is the "Dies Irae," meaning "The Day of Wrath." Brahms' Requiem is very different; writing after the death of his mother, the God that he invokes is not angry, but comforting. The first movement, calling on his grief, begins with a verse from the Sermon on the Mount, but then quotes verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 126:

Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

They who sow in tears, shall reap in joy.

Go forth and cry, bearing precious seed, and come with joy
bearing their sheaves.

The center of the Requiem—physically and metaphorically—is the 4th movement—"How lovely is thy dwelling place," from Psalm 84. Brahms starts the Requiem with his grief, sowing in tears, moves to the hope of a lovely dwelling place, then to "reaping in joy," and finally to peace—"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." Go listen to Brahms' Requiem, and spend an hour in peace.

— Lloyd Snook

April 8, Monday: Psalm 35 • Jeremiah 24:1-10 •
Romans 9:19-33 • John 9:1-17

A colleague from my early years of teaching shared the story of the starfish. A boy was walking on the beach throwing washed-up starfish back into the sea. A passerby asked, “Why are you throwing them back? You can’t possibly save all of them.” As he threw another back, the boy replied, “I know, but I made a difference for that one.”

To paraphrase Romans 9:27, we are, in God’s grand scheme, starfish, or even grains of sand, in a vast sea. While we don’t merit His throwing us back, God has chosen us for this time, that we might encourage through Christ’s love and grace others who flounder in churning waters.

It can be difficult to make a positive impact on people whose flight from challenge and limiting habits of mind short-circuit their opportunities. Students come to school with all sorts of stories and, in some cases, a sense that school isn’t for them. We are called to consider all of them worthy starfish.

One must admire the childlike faith of the blind man in John 9:11 who followed Jesus’ direction to wash the clay from his eyes, that he might see. He discarded a lifelong limitation and accepted that sight was for him. His belief and follow-through let him become, as Azouz Begag has said, “the driver of his life,” with God steering him right.

Miracles can happen today. In school, they happen through hard work and opportunity as well as faith. Students may be blind to some of the possibilities before them. Jesus didn’t let the Sabbath or what others would think stop Him; He just did the work. We must follow His example in seizing teachable moments to help others to see and drive for themselves.

Some starfish must be thrown back many times. We don’t always see or learn about the payoff; some students don’t become adept swimmers or drivers until adulthood. We can pray that our efforts to make a difference in a small window of time will inspire them to share, like the once blind man did, good news and hope with future starfish.

— **Barry Keith**

April 9, Tuesday: Psalm 121 • Jeremiah 25:8-17 •
Romans 10:1-13 • John 9:18-41

I've written about Psalm 121 twice before for my Lenten reflection. Once because I sought out the passage after it was read at a funeral for a friend and her daughter who were killed in a fire, and I wanted to wrestle with what felt like a broken promise in V. 7: "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life." That didn't happen in their case and I was seeking to make peace with something that would never make sense.

The other time was the first time I signed up to do a reflection and I was anxiously searching for a passage that would be familiar. I found it unlikely I would have anything to say that would qualify to print in a church publication so I thought it best to start with what I knew—a passage that had been part of daily prayer that I grudgingly participated in with my parents growing up.

I was pleasantly surprised to find Psalm 121 in today's readings, the date selected because it is my baptism birthday. Once again, I was turning to a familiar marker (baptism) to help me orient to something that isn't easy—writing about God's word.

Recently at church, I was struck by the comfort and connection I feel to God in the familiar. We sang "Here I Am" and it literally brought me to tears. It is a song from my parochial school days and one I always loved. My daughter Margaret noticed the tears and started to comfort me assuming something was wrong. I explained it was a "good cry" and that "Here I Am" is one of my favorite church songs.

It made me realize how important touchpoints are that create connection and closeness to God. It can be in unexpected places—like grief and mundane routines, and in places we can anticipate—like baptism and music. As we move through Lent let us prepare our hearts to create space for something to feel familiar: the promise of God's love.

— Erika Viccellio

April 10, Wednesday: Psalm 129 • Jeremiah 25:30-38 •
Romans 10:14-21 • John 10:1-18

I am the gate

I am the gatekeeper

I am the voice

I am the leader

I am the guardian of all names

I am the knower of my own

I am the seeker of all

I am the shepherd of the one flock

I am the giver of life

I am life

I am love

I am.

Loving God, waves of gratitude flow from our hearts as we do our best to comprehend your never-failing love and care for us. Help us daily to live out this gratitude by extending your love to all those around us—known and unknown—in those times when it's easy and especially in those times when it isn't. Thank you for taking human form in the body of your precious son Jesus, and for living among us to show us the way back home to you. Amen.

— Christie Thomas

April 11, Thursday: Psalm 131 • Jeremiah 26:1-16 •
Romans 11:1-12 • John 10:19-42

It is very hard to change one's preconceived notions. When something is ingrained in us a certain way, it is not easy to reverse our way of being to accept something else. Even in our faith, we may be constantly waiting for what we think is a sign from God and be so concerned with it being how we anticipate it to be, that we miss the sign altogether.

Having a rigid and closed mind is a danger to an individual's beliefs and aspirations. When your mind is fixed you will almost definitely miss the little things. In this season of Lent I think that we should all try to challenge ourselves to have a more open and malleable mind. By opening our minds we are making ourselves vulnerable, vulnerable to faith, vulnerable to community and vulnerable to learning. However, I think that with this vulnerability will come great reward, especially the opportunity to view Christ in a reinvigorated light.

— Mary Stuart

April 12, Friday: Psalm 141 • Jeremiah 29:1, 4-13 •
Romans 11:13-24 • John 11:1-27

Be forewarned: I have no business sharing my uneducated musings on Bible verses in any kind of public forum—not even one populated with the friendly and forgiving souls of St. Paul’s. In the story of Lazarus’s death, I can identify with the disciples who mistakenly took Jesus literally when he said Lazarus had fallen asleep. Thinking some rest would do Lazarus well, they urged the Lord not to go and wake him. In response, a seemingly frustrated Jesus abandoned his riddle (and maybe rolled his eyes) and “told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’” (John 11:14) Count me among the densest disciples; Biblical interpretation is hard stuff. Here goes. . . .

The final lines of Psalm 141 say, “Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me, and from the snares of evildoers. Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I alone escape.”

At first read, that last sentence struck me as surprisingly vindictive for the Bible. We are taught to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek to their slights, to wish them no ill will for the injuries they would inflict on us. How, then, does that square with praying that they fall into their own traps and become ensnared by their own moral failings?

Maybe these words don’t have to mean that our enemies will be destroyed when they’re caught in their own nets. Indeed, becoming entangled in one’s own ill will may be the best—and perhaps the only—way to effectively dismantle it. Few of the most difficult and truly positive changes I’ve made in my life have been because someone else forced or even convinced me to change. Rather, the most meaningful and lasting improvements have come from within. And more often than not, they’ve occurred after an embarrassing realization that the resentment I harbored toward someone else was inflicting far more damage on me than on its target. Perhaps these lines from Psalm 141 are a prayer of redemption rather than vengeance.

— Morgan Butler

April 13, Saturday: Psalm 144 • Jeremiah 31:27-34 • Romans 11:25-36 • John 11:28-44

In the story of the raising of Lazarus, John gives us a vivid narrative, fleshed out with persons, voices, tears, smells, prayer and command.

Upon hearing that His friend is ill, Jesus takes two days to head to Bethany. His disciples accompany Him. By this time we are told that Lazarus has died and has been in the tomb for four days. Martha meets Jesus, then goes home to get Mary, telling her sister that Jesus is calling for her. Both Martha and Mary remonstrate with Jesus, saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mary’s friends and neighbors have accompanied her, and when Jesus sees Mary and her friends and neighbors weeping He begins to weep too. “See how he loved him!” they say. Some also wonder, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept [Lazarus] from dying?” When Jesus asks, “Where have you laid him?” they take him to the tomb, saying, “Lord, come and see.”

Jesus, still “greatly disturbed,” comes to the tomb, and enlists the help of the crowd. He says, “Take away the stone” lying against it. Martha reminds Jesus of the likely odor, but Jesus persists. He looks upward and prays to His Father, and then cries “Lazarus, come out!” Lazarus obeys, hands, feet and face still bound in burial cloths. Jesus again enlists the crowd’s help. “Unbind him, and let him go.”

I am struck by the many persons involved in this story. The raising of Lazarus was not just a one-on-one encounter between Jesus and His friend. From Jesus’ disciples to Lazarus’ sisters to their friends and neighbors, there were roles for everyone.

I wonder what roles may be waiting for us as Jesus seeks in our time to bring His beloved children from death to life.

— Karen Mawyer

April 14, Palm Sunday: Psalm 31:9-16 • Isaiah 50:4-9a •
Philippians 2:5-11 • Luke 23:1-49

As a child and teenager I tried several times to read a worn little antique-looking book that lived on my father's shelf, but it never held my attention beyond the first few pages. It was the memoir of a distant relative. I must have wished to be interested—otherwise I wouldn't have picked it up so many times—but I couldn't connect. I discovered the little book again as an adult, and before I could blink I had read it straight through. The author had lived and worked and traveled in places like Charlottesville, Richmond, and Staunton, places that had been unknown to my younger self but had since become familiar. The little book was completely different now. I recognized the landscape. I could feel the story.

Reading the Passion Gospel reminds me of that experience. Held at arm's length, read from the outside looking in, it's a strange story, and worse, it's macabre. But most of us don't make it too far into adulthood without living through some version of a story where every turn is a turn for the worse, where some worst-case scenario emerges from the realm of negligible likelihood, comes into focus as terrifying possibility, and finally looms as cruel inevitability. That's the Passion story. If we're willing to connect to the sickening relentlessness of the story's progression, the abandonment of Jesus—first by the crowds, then by his followers, then by his closest friends—we may find that we recognize that landscape of betrayal and abandonment, either in our own lives or those of our neighbors. It's tempting to turn away from the Passion. But connecting it to our own reality is a step toward connecting the reality of resurrection to our own strange dark stories.

— The Reverend Will Peyton

April 15, Monday in Holy Week: Psalm 36:5-11 • Isaiah 42:1-9 • Hebrews 9:11-15 • John 12:1-11

Compassion, the Heart of Humanity

Psalm 36:5-11, John 12:1-11

When Jesus came to Lazarus' home this second time, he was a marked man. The Jerusalem authorities were already plotting to kill him because of the stir he had caused with the signs he had performed, not the least of which was raising Lazarus from the dead. But that was not what Mary, Lazarus' sister, saw. She beheld instead a man who was in such trouble that he was likely to be killed in large part because of the compassion he had shown to so many, including her, her sister, and her brother. During the dinner that Lazarus and his sisters gave in honor of Jesus, Mary responded to Jesus' compassion with a compassionate act of her own: she anointed Jesus' feet with nard, a costly oil all the way from the Himalayas that relieves stress and helps people sleep. In the ancient world it was also used to prepare bodies for burial. Mary touched Jesus just as he had touched her, assuring her that she was loved. The psalmist says of God, "You are the fountain of life; in your light we see light." Mary most likely saw Jesus as the fountain of life that comes with compassion, and in his light saw the compassion in herself which she then offered back to him. It is God's compassion for us in Christ that gives us back our full humanity in all of its vulnerability, generosity, and beauty. Such compassion is difficult for the fearful, greedy, and power-grabbing to withstand, so they try to snuff it out just as Judas and the Jerusalem authorities tried to do. Thanks be to God that compassion is born of love, and that in the words of the Song of Songs, "love is strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave."

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.

— The Reverend Dr. Heather Warren

April 16, Tuesday in Holy Week: Psalm 71:1-14 • Isaiah 49:1-7 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 • John 12:20-36

Jesus' earthly ministry nears its terrifying triumphant end; this lectionary selection is a review of struggle and of salvation.

Again and again the psalmist pleads for deliverance, rescue, even defeat of an unnamed enemy; could that enemy be our very own ever-rising fear and doubt? There is despair, there is promise; there is injustice and cruelty and yet trust. Even at the end we hear an appeal not to be forsaken [signaling the cry from the cross, "my God, why have you forsaken me?"] but then confidence at the end: *"I will hope continually, and I will praise you yet more and more."*

That praise and hope are echoed by Isaiah. In the servant Israel [or is this the Christ?] God will be "*glorified*" beyond merely the inhabitants of the promised land, for *"I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."* This helps me understand what it is for which Israel has been chosen: to be the spring from which that light, that salvation flows.

For Paul the delivery of light and salvation can only be experienced in the medium of the cross. The world grasps for signs, for wisdom and seeks the illusion of control, the earthly glory of cathedrals, the status from wealth, acquisition and conquest, as evidence of God's power. For the church this is "*a stumbling block*" and "*foolishness*" but in Christ we are given true "*wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*"

In the Gospel this salvation is made real. John tells of Jesus' last public ministry and as in Psalms there is fear and foreshadowing of the agony of Gethsemane, the pain and insult of the cross. But *"for this reason I have come to this hour,"* to be glorified. Isaiah's metaphor of light is explained, owned, and importantly, imparted to those who will, who believe. Of note, this message is brought to *"some Greeks . . . the nation . . . the end of the earth . . . [w]hile you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light."*

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

April 17, Wednesday in Holy Week: Psalm 70 • Isaiah 5:4-9a • Hebrews 12:1-3 • John 13:21-32

In John, Chapter 13, Jesus foretells Judas' betrayal.

I've always found it surprising that the terms "bravery" and "courage" are rarely used when describing Jesus' attributes. In John, Jesus shows that he is aware of what is to come in the following weeks. Here is a young man making it clear that he knows the future events that will/must occur to fulfill his purpose on earth. He is willing to pay the ultimate price for our salvation. If this isn't the highest form of courage, I don't know what is; not only is he going to be killed but he is travelling that path for humans alive and not yet born. I believe that it is his total faith in the Father and love for us that sustains him.

We can look to his example—a faith and love so strong—to help us to be brave and courageous in our daily lives.

— David Litherland

April 18, Maundy Thursday: Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 •
Exodus 12:1-4, 5-10, 11-14 • 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 •
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Rituals can be glossed over very easily in modern life, especially the strange and ancient ones that seem difficult to justify logically. Yet ritual has an important place in the life of Christians. We run around with our smartphones and our errands and our schedules like everybody else, but every so often we do things that might appear bizarre to the purely pragmatic onlooker. We cross ourselves. We drip water on our children. We smear our foreheads with ash. We reverently eat and drink flesh and blood. On Maundy Thursday, we wash one another's feet.

Today's readings come from all across the centuries of God's people, but each contains instructions for *physical rituals*. Sacrifices. Blood on the doorframe. Eating and drinking the bread and wine. Washing the feet of friends. The Bible, being a hodgepodge construction of historical records, ancient law, and poetry, is not always easy to interpret. But in these verses, we are blessed in that the Word of God describes both the ritual and the deep *why* behind it.

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.

The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are.

Do this in remembrance of me.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

The final series of verses describes the final evening Jesus spent with his followers—his friends. Overcome with love for them, he teaches them one last paramount lesson, by washing their feet. *As I have loved you, so you should love one another.*

I can almost imagine Peter's horror. Realizing that his Lord is about to do something so low and demeaning, he tries to put up a fight (missing the point, in typical Peter fashion). But Jesus knew this lesson would go beyond the clean feet that evening, and even beyond fellowship between his followers. He knew that this would be a sign to that pragmatic onlooker today. He spoke not just to them, but to us.

In these rituals, we acknowledge our humanity. We joyfully turn to one another and offer ourselves, without thought of social status or potential benefit. It is by our rituals that we remember the ultimate goodness of God, and by our rituals of love, of humility, of mercy, that we are known.

— Virginia Greene

April 19, Good Friday: Psalm 22 • Isaiah 52:13–53:12 • Hebrews 10:16-25 • John 18:1–19:42

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” As a kid these were the words that most affected me in the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. Perhaps because I was not brought up in the Mel Gibson school of Christianity, but perhaps also because the reality of crucifixion was so foreign, the physical agony hit home for me with less intensity than this simple exclamation of despair. Here was God himself at his most human. Feeling betrayed, crying out in incomprehension, and receiving no answer. Alone. Just how we feel when we are brought lowest.

So I was surprised to read John’s account and be reminded that these words are nowhere to be found. In John’s telling, the closest Jesus comes to expressing discomfort is to say, “I am thirsty.” But even here we are assured in advance that he does so only “in order to fulfill the scriptures.” This Jesus knows what must happen when and calmly executes the plan, until, just as calmly, “It is finished.” I can catch no flicker of doubt or human hesitation.

I believe that both these crucifixions, both these Christs, have something to tell me about God. But perhaps I need his humanity more right now. Rediscovering Jesus’ anguished words at the beginning of Psalm 22 gave me a deeper sense of what I had responded to so strongly in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Here was a human being struggling to understand his suffering. The Psalm ends with rejoicing; God has heard the prayer. But as humans we don’t know in the moment what the end will be. Things have worked out in the past, but will they this time? God knows. But on the cross, in the fullest expression of his love for us, Jesus takes on our burden of not knowing.

Peter Moench

April 20, Holy Saturday: Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16 • Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24 • 1 Peter 4:1-8 • John 19:38-42

“What do we do now?” It is a question families often ask the nurse, the priest, the doctor, the paramedic, or the police officer after the one they love has died. The experience of death is so momentous, and so far beyond our everyday experience that we just don’t know what to do.

Call the priest, prepare the body, call the funeral home. John tells us here that Jesus’ clandestine disciples, Joseph and Nicodemus, did basically that—they carried out their customs of honoring the life that once was by respectfully tending to the body. They retrieved Jesus’ body from either the cross or the ground next to it, carefully treated his body with about seventy-five pounds of myrrh, aloes, and spices, then tautly wrapped the body in linen cloth and put it in a tomb hewn from the nearby rock.

What do we do now? We tend to the body and in doing so honor the life it once contained. Grief is as tender as a bee’s wing and as forceful as a battering ram on the human heart. The acts and rituals we have around death channel our grief into life-affirming actions.

Joseph and Nicodemus came out of the shadows to do this holy work. Once they stepped toward that body everyone would discover that they were Jesus’ friends. That was risky business, especially considering he was just executed for treason. They did it anyway. They did it because it had to be done. The dignity and the miracle of life has got to be honored even in death. Perhaps especially in death.

— The Reverend Mark Wastler

WORSHIP SERVICES IN LENT

Ash Wednesday (March 6)	7:30 a.m., 12:15 p.m., 5:30 p.m.
Sundays @ 8 a.m., 10 a.m., 5:30 p.m.	Holy Eucharist
Mondays @ 9 p.m.	Chanted Compline
Tuesdays @ 12:15 p.m.	Holy Eucharist in Chapel
Wednesdays @ 5:30 p.m.	Evening Prayer in Chapel

HOLY WEEK SERVICES

Palm Sunday (April 14)	8 a.m., 10 a.m., 5:30 p.m.
Monday in Holy Week	9 p.m. Chanted Compline
Tuesday in Holy Week	12:15 p.m. Holy Eucharist
Wednesday in Holy Week	7:30 p.m. Solemn Tenebrae
Maundy Thursday	5:30 p.m. Eucharist with Foot Washing
Good Friday	noon, 5:30 p.m.
Holy Saturday	7:30 p.m. Easter Vigil
Easter Sunday (April 21)	7:30 a.m., 9:00 a.m., 11:15 a.m., 5:30 p.m.