

FOREWORD

Come Home to Jesus in Lent 2021

Genesis reminds us that God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” Do you need light in your life this Lent? I certainly do. The past year has been a year unlike any other, and darkness seems to have covered the entire world.

The pandemic has changed so many things, and far too many of our sisters and brothers have died. Political chaos along with the continued killing of our black sisters and brothers in too many places have brought to our consciousness systemic issues of racism, racial inequity, housing challenges, homelessness, and the list goes on.

And yet, you are reading this Foreword, perhaps because God is calling you to God’s very self this Lent. God may be saying, “Come home; you who are weary, come home.” “Come home to Jesus” could be a mantra for our time of walking together this Lent. Socially distanced and with masks, we can walk the path of life with Jesus at our side.

Jesus calls us “o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea, day by day his clear voice soundeth, saying ‘Christian, follow me.’” (Cecil Francis Alexander) “Follow me and come home where I will give you comfort and rest.”

Matthew 11:28-30 is my prayer for all of us this Lent, as we journey together as followers of Jesus to his Cross and on to Resurrection: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Christian +

The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato, Rector
St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Ash Wednesday, February 17

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. — Matthew 6:20-21 (Full text, Matthew 6:1-6,16-21)

A few lines before this in Matthew we are told, “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” This is the explanation for how the “treasures” are to be perceived.

And what are those treasures? What is it we can actually salt away, invest if you will, for our eternity?

Every action taken for another, every prayer we pray, every kindness we bestow, every giving of ourselves comes in two parts. One is the actual deed, which in reality is already a double blessing — for both the giver and receiver. However, it is also received in Heaven and placed in our account. There are only deposits in that account, never withdrawals. We never lose them. Instead, each one increases the chances for another, directs our minds toward grace-filled decisions and acts.

God is the ultimate good banker, always on our side, always adding interest to our account.

*Heavenly Father,
Open our hearts to be mindful
of our thoughts and actions,
aware of what we must do and be
in our desire to store up treasures in Heaven. Amen.*

Marlene Fabbro, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Thursday, February 18

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. — John 15:4 (Full text, John 15:1-11)

Jesus probably used the example of the grapevine in this passage because grapes were a common crop in ancient Israel. Vines are interconnected and dependent on one another. Vines cannot grow properly and bear fruit unless they are well supported and receive frequent nurturing. The branches need constant care.

Like a vine, we too need support and guidance in our growth. We need community, family, church, friends, and mentors. Many of us receive that support through regular church attendance and fellowship. But now there's the COVID-19 crisis.

During the pandemic, maintaining contact with nurturers and mentors has become difficult. In-person worship has been temporarily suspended. Many of us are working remotely. We don't have daily contact with extended family and friends. We can't sit down and have coffee and conversation.

So, we've improvised. We worship with recorded services or video conferencing. We maintain contact with friends and family via social media or Zoom meet-ups. Like grapevines, we can be resilient under stress.

*Holy God,
We are grateful for community.
Help us to remain connected.
Amen.*

Dale Baxter, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Friday, February 19

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! — Psalm 27:13-14 (Full text, Psalm 27)

Psalm 27 opens with David's proclamation, "The Lord is my light." My thoughts turned to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's words: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

It is God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit who show us how to move forward on the path of light and love. God and the sun are sources of light. We cannot stare into the sun nor touch or hear it, just as many have not experienced hearing, seeing and touching God. Here is an example of "believing is seeing." God gives us the chance to draw aside the curtains on our heart and to let God's light shine in to combat those times of darkness.

In verse 13, David gives us hope that we may have faith in seeing God's goodness on earth. This is especially hard to believe when faced with despair, loneliness, violence, and injustice. Yet if we do not depend solely on our own strength and courage but instead rely on God, we are assured that we need not wait for eternal life to see God's love, peace, faithfulness, and kindness. God is our light, strength, and salvation and will complete his work in us on the earth. I take comfort in knowing that God is beside me to assist and guide me through life.

Almighty and Gracious God,

Lift the heavy shroud of darkness from our souls and let your light permeate those areas of doubt and fear so that we may experience your love and comfort in our lives every day. Amen.

Megan T. Harding, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Saturday, February 20

"Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'" — John 8:31-32 (Full text, John 8:30-32)

Twenty-twenty was a year of introspection, coming to grips with who we are without the crutches of our routines and habits. Perhaps more than ever we sought to understand why we are on this earth and what our purpose is. We know God lovingly created us in his own image and likeness. In this creation he revealed the inseparable covenant between us and him. The covenant, our purpose, is to be one with him, to live with him and in him. To live in this beautiful, eternal state of grace.

Even though God offers us this beautiful eternal life, we prefer to make our own muddled paths filled with sin, distraction, and transgressions. We are conflicted between our weakness and the greatness we know we are capable of. Our heavenly Father sent to us his only begotten Son — not only to show us the way but also to provide us with the means to follow his path. Jesus with his words and actions taught us how to bear our own cross and become Christlike.

The freedom of the yoke of sin is the truth, and Jesus himself is the truth that sets us free. He suffered out of love for us, to free us to abide in him as he abides in us. In doing so we become closer to God and allow this truth to become one within us.

God,

Help us to heed your call to transform the world by the way we lead our daily lives and proclaim your truth. Amen.

Crystal Bravo, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Sunday, February 21

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. — 1 Peter 3:21-22 (Full text, 1 Peter 3:18-22)

I've been thinking about stains. There are physical stains – grass, blood, oil, dirt, and others – and invisible stains – character issues, lies, hate, jealousy, etc. I'm not sure which is harder to erase, but because I know commercial stain removers are just a click away from next-day delivery, I often find myself worrying more about stained hearts and souls, not the least of which is mine.

I've always been under the impression that we are saved by the grace of God, and that baptism is a demonstration of our faith. Reading the beginning of today's verse, one might think it is baptism that "now saves you." Which is why we keep reading. Peter goes on to tell us that baptism is an appeal to God for a good conscience, not literally becoming clean of the flesh. By the end of the verse, we are reassured that we are indeed saved by God's grace and the death and resurrection of His only son, Jesus Christ.

So, what to do about stained hearts and souls? Even baptized we continue to break our promises. That makes Lent the perfect time to search through the cupboards of our souls to rediscover the most powerful stain remover ever known, the love of God. Unlike manmade cleansers, the beauty of our faith is that no matter how long it has been idle, there is no expiration date and it is guaranteed 100% effective if used as instructed.

God Almighty,

Thank you for your gift of salvation and forgiveness. May I always honor you and the promise of my baptism and live a life of good conscience and actions. Amen.

Bryan Bickford, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Monday, February 22

You have turned my mourning into dancing; You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy. — Psalm 30:11 (Full text, Psalm 30:6-12)

What a promising passage of Scripture during this pandemic! We are surrounded by loss, social unrest, and uncertainty of what the future holds. We've been separated from friends and family. We are masked and distanced from others. We've lost loved ones, livelihoods, hugs, and human

connection. We've exchanged gatherings for virtual relationships. There is much lamenting of "how things used to be." We are mourning.

As we reflect and pray during this Lenten season let us seek to bring comfort to the hurting, peace in the unrest, and hope in the midst of uncertainty. As Jesus' followers we must allow the Holy Spirit to remove the sackcloth from our hearts, and dance into the world with the love and joy of Jesus.

A Prayer of Self-Dedication (The Book of Common Prayer):

"Almighty and eternal God,

So draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen."

Cathy Stevens, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Tuesday, February 23

My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. — Psalm 121:2-3 (Full text, Psalm 121)

It is easy to feel alone and afraid these days. We have been under quarantine due to the pandemic. Our work schedules and times with friends and relatives have been disrupted. We look at our state and national political situations and wonder. What next?

The psalmist has a message of comfort and a reminder: Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not desert us. He will not let us down. We can call upon him at any time.

But how can that be, we think? God can feel “out there,” and I am “here.” I believe the solution is to “stay with him” as the disciples did when John the Baptist pointed out Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” (John 1:35-42). We can stay with him through prayer and meditation upon His Word, and be safe always.

*Lord Jesus, help us to hear
your invitation to “come and see.”
We have been isolated too long.
Please bring us into your warm
and loving embrace, where
we will be safe forever. Amen.*

Jean A. Malone, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Wednesday, February 24

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. — Philippians 3:13-14 (Full text, Philippians 3:13-21)

A fitting lesson as we navigate through an entire year of a worldly pandemic, worldly activist movements, despair, attacks, fighting, destruction, death, and hatred. Our hearts have been beaten down and the pain is real.

We will never forget what lies behind us, but I look forward to what lies ahead (and I hope you do too). We will be lifted up as people of Christ and continue to do his work in the world. There is renewed hope, and we will press on toward the goal. To bring love, peace, kindness, decency, and strength to others as well as to ourselves. We will continue on to do HIS will in the world. There, you will find the prize.

*Loving God,
We thank you for your guidance
in an uncertain (and sometimes scary)
world. We thank you for your
love and patience as we work
to do your will in our homes,
communities, cities, and beyond. Amen.*

Lainie Moore, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Thursday, February 25

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. — Romans 3:31 (Full text, Romans 3:21-31)

Grace is the one thing we need, for “there is no one who does good, no, not one...all have sinned.” (v. 12-23). So much for a “find the good in you and make it grow” gospel!

“Then, what becomes of boasting?” (v. 27) God’s beloved community will *not* be singing a self-made version of “Amazing Grace”: “Excessive works! How sweaty the sound / That came from the god in me! / I once was bad but now I’m good / Thanks to my sincerity.”

“Now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed.” (v. 21) “We are justified by God’s **grace** as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (v. 24)

James I. Packer, the great Anglican theologian, describes **grace** like this: “I am graven on the palms of His (God’s) hands. I am never out of God’s mind. All my knowledge of God depends on God’s sustained initiative in knowing me. I know God, because God first knew me, and continues to know me. God knows me as a friend, One who loves me; and there is no moment when God’s eye is off me, and no moment, therefore, when God’s care falters.”

May we all know the *much more* of **grace** this Lenten season. I’m counting on that. I hope you are too. For our prayer, read or, better yet, listen to this hymn:

“Be still my soul, the Lord is on your side.” Amen.

Howard Soehl, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

LINK for song - [FINLANDIA BE STILL, MY SOUL - Bing video](#)

Friday, February 26

“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers 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.” — John 4:23-24 (Full text, John 4:1-26)

To worship God in spirit and truth is to be open toward the Spirit, which Jesus gives. God gives his Spirit through his Messiah.

The Oxford Bible Commentary suggests that “spirit and truth” in today’s passage is a double phrase with a single meaning, similar to the phrase “spirit of truth” that is used frequently in

John's Gospel. Similarly, "God is spirit" is intended in an existential way. We experience the Spirit through God's Messiah. We draw the conclusion: God is spirit.

*Dear Spirit,
Help me always to be open
to your call and direction.
Help my worship be true
and pleasing to my God. Amen.*

Jack Hoffman, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Saturday, February 27

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." — Matthew 5:1-3 (Full text, Matthew 5:1-10)

Anyone else been down in the dumps during the past year? No year has tested my general happiness and satisfaction as has the past twelve months. I don't blame anyone for being a little grim about it all. But there's a bright side; Jesus beginning his Sermon on the Mount telling us that it's okay to be hurting in spirit, for whatever reason. That said, I'm going to take this first Beatitude and wrap myself in it like a down comforter on a cold winter's night.

Life isn't all sunshine and roses. Try as we may, we can't always be healthy or wealthy or happy, though we sure look upon those folks with favor and envy, and scramble to achieve their lot. The fact is many people never enjoy any combination of those luxuries. In this verse, Jesus assures those who may seem to be on the outside looking in that Heaven isn't a country club to be joined, it's a gift to be anticipated.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel. For some it may be a vaccine, a mild case, herd immunity, or just springtime. For some it will still be a freight train. But unlike that light, God's light will never go out. And even when things seem most bleak, we know Jesus died for our sins and Heaven surely awaits all who believe.

God, Father of All Creation,

Help us understand the depths of your love in order to be filled with hope and possibility in the resurrection of your Son and the promise of the kingdom of Heaven. Amen.

Bryan Bickford, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Sunday, February 28

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. — Romans 4:13 (Full text, Romans 4:13-25)

Paul tells us what a right relationship with God looks like by reminding us of Abraham. In turning toward God — being unwavering in our devotion, listening, praying, giving glory, and believing all things are possible through Him — amazing things can happen in our lives.

It doesn't mean we have to be perfect; we have God's grace. When we slip up, we repent, dust ourselves off, and keep following Him. Even in the darkest, most challenging times, He is still with us and our story is not over.

Keep the faith! Amazing things are still ahead.

Heavenly Father,

Even when I think all hope is lost or my story has been told, let me be reminded that when I am in right relationship with You, what is seemingly impossible is possible. Amen.

Jeff Brown, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Monday, March 1

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." — Mark 4:26-27 (Full text, Mark 4:26-29)

Through God's wisdom we are given the truths from which to teach and spread the good news of the gospel.

We are the sower when we spread the gospel. We cannot know that everyone will accept what is being told, but we can show by example — through our actions and to tell the truth of what the word of God means to us.

*Holy Spirit,
Please enlighten us
to know the truth,*

*and give us grace to help
spread the word of God
through kindness and love. Amen.*

Maureen Coleman, currently residing in Ohio, but will always be a member of the Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Tuesday, March 2

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” — Luke 14:13-14 (Full text, Luke 14:1-14)

Jesus is speaking to a leader of the Pharisees who has invited him to dinner on the Sabbath. First, he cures a man with dropsy, and asks the lawyers and Pharisees whether this (or rescuing their own child who has fallen down a well) is acceptable on the Sabbath. Next, he instructs the guests how to choose their place at the table: they should humble themselves so as to be exalted later. He then addresses his host about the guest list, advising him to invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. By that time, I suspect, the host was regretting his hospitality.

Of course, Jesus' message in this passage cannot be avoided by analysis, interpretation, or the context in which it was written. The words mean the same now as they did when Jesus spoke them. So, instead of an easy Bible passage to contemplate, it is *hard*.

I have done some things with and for people less fortunate than I, but never enough. With the exception of some extraordinary people, the only place I know of where Jesus' instructions are followed, or attempted to be followed consistently, is the church. That is one of the reasons I belong. We have to do what Jesus is telling us, together as a community of God's people and on our own, out in the world. Then we can leave the repayment to God.

Dear Jesus, please help me to follow your simple, clear, and loving instructions, for no repayment in this world but hopefully in the next. Thank you for making it simple, even if it is hard. Amen.

Judith Simonson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Wednesday, March 3

Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. — Psalm 98:8-9a (Full text, Psalm 98)

Psalm 98 is a deeply inspiring message for all of us who believe in the power of God, Jesus, and Love. This psalm clearly articulates that mercy and salvation are with us **always from the Lord**. Bringing joy and peace to our hearts, and joy to our steps, the psalm's passages reinforce our belief that a higher power influences our lives, especially when We Believe. This belief is especially vital amid these turbulent times due to the pandemic and unrest and turmoil.

This psalm also shouts out the strength of our belief in the Lord, with the words, "let the sea roar," "make a joyful noise," and "sing unto the Lord with the harp." Further, the Lord "will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity." (v. 9b) This reinforces the joy of building equity for all; we are in this together and we have the Lord's support. This continues to build upon the interfaith-learning and work that area churches have been doing while creating a foundation of support for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Let us continue to build that pathway together, and to do it while making a joyful noise.

O, Lord,

Please help us to focus our efforts as we ALL join together to feel the joy and strength of our belief in You and Your wisdom. Help us to do Your will in creating a more equitable world while caring for others and respecting all. Keep us on the right track, Lord. Amen.

Jacqueline Taylor, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Thursday, March 4

Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. The people all answered as one: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do." — Exodus 19:7-8a (Full text, Exodus 19:1-9a)

The Israelites' arrival in the Wilderness of Sinai ends the most important stage of their journey from Egypt. Like sheep following their shepherd Moses, they have traveled for three months to escape slavery. I am sure they were tired and had endured many hardships. At times they questioned why they had even left Egypt as they faced famine and thirst. But every time they grumbled at Moses and did not think God was there for them, He showed His love for His chosen people.

God parted the Red Sea to allow them to escape from the Egyptians. When they were the hungriest, He provided food. When they were thirsty, He told Moses to strike the rock of Horeb so the water would flow from it. Again and again the Israelites were tested. Each time God did not fail them. So, when Moses came down from the mountain with the words of the Lord to keep His covenant and obey Him, the elders eagerly responded that they would do anything that the Lord commanded. Their faith was rewarded.

How great it would be if we would answer the Lord like that whenever He asks something of us. What a wonderful world we would live in.

Dear God,

You have given me so much. You are looking out for me always. Let my eyes be open to what You are showing me, so that when the time comes, I too will answer, "Everything that the Lord has spoken to me, I will do!" Amen.

Leslee Hardebeck, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Friday, March 5

***The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. —
Psalm 19:1 (Full text, Psalm 19)***

I believe my life would be less without the change of seasons that we have in Michigan. Yet 2020, the first year of COVID-19, was emotionally and experientially seasonless for me. The year lacked the expectation of spring's warm weather and the excitement of the first crocus peeking through the snow. I missed the summer picnics and family barbeques. Although autumn was arrayed in brilliant foliage, I found myself looking down at fallen leaves.

But with the New Year and the promise of the COVID vaccine, I have surprisingly experienced a personal change of season. Even though I deeply dislike the cold and ice of winter, last night as I took my dog Charlie for a walk, the nippy chill on my cheeks and the sparkle of the gently falling snow inspired unexpected awe. Even in the darkness of night I saw the truth of today's verse, and had hope for the future.

Indeed, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

Dear God, creator of heaven and earth,

May I and all who journey with me not lose sight of your glory. Inspire awakening awe in our hearts, that we may proclaim and share your wondrous love. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Donna Engstrom, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Saturday, March 6

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. — Mark 9:7-8 (Full text, Mark 9:2-8)

Are we listening?

There are three types of listening. (1) Half-listening: We pay attention to some and tune out some. We may be distracted by other things around us or focused on our response and when we can break in. (2) Word listening: We hear the words but not the meaning behind them and miss the point of the message intended. (3) Active listening: We are focused on the message, seek to understand, listen with our whole body.

In this passage, from a cloud that comes out of nowhere, God reaffirms Jesus as his Son, as he did at Jesus’ baptism, reminding the disciples and us to listen to him (Jesus). Poof! The mystery and majesty are gone and only Jesus is there. God calls us to be active listeners to lead active lives as followers of Jesus.

Will you listen — not just half-listen or just hear the words — but actively listen to his calling?

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for speaking to us through your Son. Open our ears and our hearts to hear His words that continually provide us with guidance and strength to do Your work. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

Kate Pyles, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Sunday, March 7

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. — 1 Corinthians 1:25 (Full text, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

The paradox of the cross: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Lent is a period of purification through which I might come to enlightenment. But what is Paul talking about? What has the cross got to do with wisdom or foolishness? I cannot know until Easter! I once heard Father Richard Fragomeni speak about how we spend our life working on our so-called survival projects and we tend to ignore our real-life survival project. Too often my wisdom is about my daily survival. God's wisdom is about eternal survival. He knows that the cross is only the beginning of the end. The end is revealed at Easter in resurrection!

I need to purify myself, to lay down my supposed survival quests for power, pride, wrath, envy, greed, lust, gluttony and not caring. These come slyly into my life and consume me. Only then can I find enlightenment! Only in laying them down am I able to pick up my real-life survival that is centered on God's desire for me: faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. These are the building blocks of relationship, a loving relationship with God, with my fellow human beings, and with Creation.

Reveal to me, O Lord, what is in my life that needs to go. Give me the courage to let those things go so that I can take up my real life in relationship with you, with others, and caring for this lovely home you have provided. Amen.

Fred Johnson, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Monday, March 8

In the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the LORD. — 1 Kings 6:1 (Full text, 1 Kings 6:1-4,21-22)

Reading the entire chapter of 1 Kings 6 reminded me of TV's "Homes of the Rich and Famous." The writer pays special attention to the dimensions, decorations, and riches put into construction of the "house of the Lord." Dates and details are included, so that readers will understand how the temple was built, and who built it.

Who was Solomon trying to impress? Does God really need such a fancy edifice for His people to honor him? It was 400 years since God's people had escaped slavery in Egypt, with no real riches of their own, and here was Solomon showing off how far they had come. Did the Temple in all its glory bring the average person closer to God? The writer explains that this grand edifice took seven years to finish. Yes, the Ark of the Covenant needed to be safe, but was such a showy building necessary?

How do we worship today? Do we value big buildings, ornate vestments, stained glass, or other things over people? Is it more important to have big bank balances, new cars, or bigger homes, than to care for others? A popular story on the Internet involves how a mother and daughter said goodbye to each other: "May you always have enough." It made me realize, I have always had enough.

Holy God,

When I get caught up in wanting more, help me remember those who do not have enough. Thank you for providing me with enough for today. May I always see others' needs through your eyes, and honor you through my life. In Jesus' Holy Name, Amen.

Patricia Baxter, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Tuesday, March 9

For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty, therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. — Wisdom 7:24-25 (Full text, Wisdom 7:24-28)

I usually try to connect the devotional passage to something in current events so the reader is able to identify with the Scripture. Unfortunately, I am writing this shortly after the attack on the United States Capitol and just before the inauguration of our 46th president. Both of these events needed or will need wisdom. The ransacking of the Capitol showed what a lack of wisdom can produce. The new president needs a huge gift of wisdom to bring our country together again. Wisdom is a gift that Solomon asked of God instead of riches. God granted that request and gave him blessings and riches even though he did not ask for them.

We desperately need wisdom in these divisive times. How do we discern between truth and fiction? We need wisdom pure and simple just as the Scripture reads; “for she (wisdom) is a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty.” (v. 25) With wisdom God will help us to determine what is right and what is wrong.

We should pray fervently for God to grant wisdom and grace to all of us in our journey of enlightenment and joy. Jesus is the way and, in the end, “against wisdom evil does not prevail!” (v. 30)

Dear Lord Jesus,

Please bless us with the gift of wisdom so we can discern what is good and what is evil. We will worship and adore you for ever and ever! Amen.

Aleta M. Wells, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Wednesday, March 10

For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. — Luke 11:10 (Full text, Luke 11:5-10)

I have been asking for eleven years for a prayer to be answered. It involves a niece who suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car accident. At first, I begged for her life. Then I demanded angrily that she be healed. Not much time passed between the two kinds of prayer. I became bitter and distant from God while I waited. I hardened my heart. Finally, again in desperation, I prayed that God's will be done. I asked humbly and with great sorrow for my bitterness toward God. I received forgiveness, peace, and understanding. Perhaps, the answer to my prayer has been the healing of my relationship with God.

In suffering, we may find God's plan for us. My brother and sister-in-law learned to humbly accept the help of those who loved them and their family. Their faith has grown exponentially. They have witnessed to groups about the tender mercies of God who has carried them through this ordeal. They have established a foundation that helps others with traumatic brain injuries. They are grateful to still have their daughter in their midst. I am grateful for the example they have set.

O God,

Help me come to you with open mind and heart, ready to do your will. Let me seek to serve you first. May my prayers be ones of trust in you. I ask humbly, but with the assurance that you will answer me in a way that will bless me. I ask for hope daily, I seek to do your will in all things, and I knock, knowing that the door will be opened to greater faith. Amen.

Catherine Darling, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Thursday, March 11

(Then God said to Noah and to his sons): “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth. ... I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” — Genesis 9:11,13 (Full text, Genesis 9:8-17)

I have seen this called the Rainbow Covenant. The 13th verse establishes the sign of the covenant as the rainbow.

Rainbows have always been special to me. It's a bit of magic to be able to see something so beautiful appear in the sky. Rainbows often come and go quickly, and the environment has to be just right to catch them. They also carry much symbolism. A “rainbow baby” is a baby born after a miscarriage or loss of a child. A light after a storm. Our Adam is our rainbow and there was literally a rainbow in the sky the day he was born. Rainbows are also a symbol of love and acceptance of all people.

Twenty-twenty was a year full of so much loss and darkness. I am looking forward to seeing some rainbows in the year ahead as we continue to heal and fight this pandemic and keep working toward a time when gathering together is safe again for all.

God's love and promise guide us as always, even if it is sometimes difficult to find that arc of colors in the sky. We will come out of the darkness. With God there is hope and love.

Dear Lord,

Thank you for your covenant to all of us on this Earth. May we see rainbows in our life that remind us of your promise to us. I know we will always find you in nature and in our love for one another. Shine your light on us this week, O Lord. Shine through whatever darkness we may be feeling. In Jesus' name. Amen

Keri Milkovich, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Friday, March 12

Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn. — Psalm 57:8 (Full text, Psalm 57)

How do you wake up? Shower, coffee, email? In its way, Lent is like a wake-up routine: How do we wake up so we can follow Jesus? Psalm 57 has some ideas.

Like Lent, the psalm flows from a cry for mercy to glorious exultation. It is a study in how the light of God's dawn answers the spiritual problems of storms, chatter, and struggle. It begins with the storm. We're overwhelmed, looking for shelter and mercy. We've all been there. The psalm gently directs our attention to God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Though we may not see it, God has a purpose, an end for us, and God will fulfill that purpose.

Sure, we think. Doubts and disappointments — our self-talk chops up our inner peace like a sharp sword. The psalm stops our self-accusations with praise, "Be exalted, O God..." (v. 5) Yes, God's purpose really is at work.

And those struggles, those habits so hard to shake? The psalm tells us, "you've got this." As the coming light hits our eyes, "my heart is steadfast, my heart is steadfast." (v. 7) We can do it because God is steadfast. So joy breaks forth at dawn — Easter's dawn, a joy bigger than ourselves, a joy that is incomplete until it includes our neighbors.

*Guide us through the storm, still our fears,
help us to sing of your steadfast love
and faithfulness in the face
of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Bill Harris, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Saturday, March 13

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" — John 3:3-4 (Full text, John 3:1-13)

As a recent catechumen, I can now empathize with the concept of being reborn. However, this idea must have sounded strange to Nicodemus as he questioned the supposed duplication of human birth. God created us in his image to find peace and joy in communion with him and his statutes. Though we place our plans above his and divert from his path sometimes, hope in our hearts instilled by the Holy Spirit renews our covenant with Jesus as he encourages our reconciliation with no hesitation. Nicodemus is a man of secular law. When informed of baptism by water and heavenly ascension once our commission as descendants to become unified with the holy elect is complete, Nicodemus responds, “How can these things be?”

The mystery of faith professed during this lesson by Jesus, in conjunction with his more structured analysis of our spiritual upbringing, becomes apparent toward the end of his exchange with Nicodemus. When the sensation of wind is used as an analogy in reference to the Holy Spirit, Jesus recounts that we “hearest its sound but dost not know where it comes from or where it goes.” (John 3:8) Given a variety of circumstances in daily life, we perceive light breezes or whistling gusts of faith to experience connection with our holy roots. This Lent, let us face the elements and gratify in the subtle beauties God has woven into our origin story.

Dear God,

Help us to replicate Nicodemus’ steadfast yearning for sacred knowledge and strengthen our hearts to embrace your glory. Amen

Allison Dible, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Sunday, March 14

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. — Ephesians 2:10 (Full text, Ephesians 2:1-10)

The full context of this passage talks about being saved by grace, even in the depths of our transgressions. We cannot do anything to make ourselves worthy or be “more saved.” We

were created for good works, however the amount of those works does not compare to the grace we have been given.

As I write this, our new president has been in office for four days and it seems nobody is happy. The pandemic rages on. While there's hope in a vaccine, the flaw of human nature threatens to extend this pandemic if we cannot act as one. My heart frequently hurts, especially as I see posts spewing what I feel are hurtful and accusatory words. So what does any of this have to do with being created in Jesus Christ?

It's a reminder to me that I cannot change hearts and minds; only Jesus and God can do that. We are wholly at the mercy of his grace and love. While terrifying to feel like we have no control, we can also take comfort in knowing God's love and grace in an unknowable time. I can't control the world around me, but I can control my actions and base them in Christ's love, and I can rest in the knowledge that his mercy and grace is abundant.

God, help me to be an example of your love and grace. Show me how to spread Christ's message of love to those around me, and wrap your arms around me when the world feels like too much to bear, reminding me that you are in control. Amen.

Elizabeth McNicholas, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Monday, March 15

He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. — 1 Samuel 2:8 (Full text, 1 Samuel 2:2-10)

Earlier in the book of Samuel, we read about the corruption of the priest, Eli and his sons. They have abused their positions as priests and caretakers of the Temple. It is also about the boy Samuel, whose mother dedicated him to the service of the Temple in gratitude to God.

God calls Samuel to His service, and Eli and his sons die in shame. God will have justice, and we know that he will have mercy on those who trust in him and follow His commandments. We must be agents of love and mercy in our world, that is our call.

Listen, pray, follow.

*O God, our comforter and guide,
Be our strong guide and lead us
throughout our lives
in the way of justice
and peace. Amen.*

The Rev. Susan York, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Tuesday, March 16

Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had died when our kindred died before the LORD! Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here?" — Numbers 20:2-4 (Full text, Numbers 20:1-13)

It didn't take long for the Israelites to become angry with God and his prophets, even after saving them from slavery. The situation must have been especially dire for them to wish for

death back in Egypt instead of following Moses and Aaron. Rather than placing their faith in God and his chosen servants, the Israelites wanted to take matters into their own hands.

The path that the Lord sets for us rarely aligns with the plan that we have in mind. In the wise words of Woody Allen, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.” When the road of life is precarious, we must ask ourselves: Where do we turn when life gets tough? Do we place our faith in God, or do we stubbornly cling to our ideas about what we *think* our life should look like?

This past year has been hard for so many. Take some time to reflect on how God has helped you navigate the struggles even when you felt deserted.

Dear Lord,

I know that you are there, even when I feel scared and alone. Like the Israelites, sometimes I fight the plans you have for me. Help me to always follow you, trust you, and love you through all the challenges of life. Amen.

Sam Surgalski, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Wednesday, March 17

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. — Isaiah 60:19 (Full text, Isaiah 60:15-22)

Isaiah 60 is promising change to a people who desperately need hope.

I’m writing this on Inauguration Day, a time of change, and, for some of us, renewed hope. A political science professor I used to know taught that government exists to solve problems. We

have a ton of problems that need solving, and I hope that the new administration, with bipartisan support, can be effective at making things better for everyone.

In her inaugural ceremony poem, Amanda Gorman asked,

“When day comes we ask ourselves,
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?”

The answer, according to Isaiah, is to find joy and security and beauty in God’s everlasting light.

Again, quoting Amanda Gorman:

“There is always light,
if only we’re brave enough to see it.”

Holy God,

Shine your everlasting light on your people. Show us how to heal. Keep us safe. Bring justice to all nations. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Dale Baxter, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Thursday, March 18

But though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. — 1 Thessalonians 2:2 (Full text, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12)

Courage in the face of adversity is something that many pray for. We ask God's intercession for bravery when we face the stresses of our day, and when all hope seems lost. This past year many have asked the Lord for this courage.

The courage to spread God's Word is another courage altogether, as Paul and the

apostles knew. Many of them would become martyrs for Christ's teachings, and I am sure they knew that each time they walked through the gates of a new city, it may have been their last chance to share the Word of God.

The apostles preached as if it was their last day on Earth, they shared the message of Christ's peace, love, and mercy. Though we may not be able to share this peace in person, we have a duty to share the Gospel today in spite of great opposition. Amen.

God,

Grant me the apostles' courage — and their sense of urgency — to spread your Son's message of peace, love, and mercy. Amen.

Ethan MacDonald, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Friday, March 19

When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ... After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ... 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." — Luke 2:43,46,48b (Full text, Luke 2:41-52)

Have you ever wondered why Jesus “stayed behind” in Jerusalem? Do you think that, as a 12-year-old boy, he was beginning to exert his independence? Maybe looking ahead to his bar

mitzvah? It seems evident that he was seeking the wisdom and knowledge of the temple teachers.

Why might we “stay behind?” Maybe today (or tomorrow) make the decision to “stay behind” for a few minutes ...

- As you begin the day in your bedroom, taking time to read a Bible passage, focus on a reflection, or ask God’s blessing on the hours ahead.
- As you check in for work, asking for energy, tolerance, patience, inspiration, positivity or whatever virtue is needed for this workday.
- As you come to the end of your shift, volunteer to help others with necessary unfinished tasks so no one is left to do it all.
- As you leave work, consciously letting go of the stress, tensions, and activity of the day so that you can be present to family to refresh, finding balance in your work-life situation.
- As you come to the end of the day, thanking God for his blessings and presence in the events that you encountered.

Lord Jesus, we turn to you asking to be attentive to your voice and the needs of others. As you yourself “stayed behind,” help me to imitate you. In this, let me find You and know you more deeply. Amen.

Sr. M. Rosita Schiller, RSM, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Saturday, March 20

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore, teach me wisdom in my secret heart. — Psalm 51:6 (Full text, Psalm 51)

Is something bothering you that you are too embarrassed to speak? Do you harbor a sin that you are too ashamed to confess? Perhaps you engage in “whataboutism” – Look what the other guy did! – instead of confronting your own offense.

Well, today's reading is for all of us sinners. Psalm 51 is a guide to FULLY and SINCERELY confessing our faults to God. And King David had a lot to confess: He made love to a married woman, impregnated her, and sent her husband to be killed in a war. Adultery, lies, deceit, cover-up, murder — no wonder the king kept mum. It is hard to face the consequences.

Yet David ultimately confessed when the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront him. (2 Samuel 12:7-13) Why did he give up the cover-up then and there? What brought him to abject contrition? Something else must have been stirring in the king's "inward being" or "secret heart," and he pleads, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." (Psalm 51:12a) Perhaps sin became too heavy to carry. Maybe guilt had been standing in the way of a closer relationship with God.

Has God sent someone or something to convince you to confront a sin imbedded deep within yourself? Does God care whether you unburden yourself? Why?

Let us close with a prayer from Psalm 51:10:

*"Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me." Amen.*

Mike McCarty, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, and the Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Sunday, March 21

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. — Jeremiah 31:33 (Full text, Jeremiah 31:31-34)

To conquered Judeans facing exile to Babylon, the Prophet brought assurance of divine guidance. Though bereft of the temple — to them, the seat of God's presence — they would carry that presence into whatever lands they were driven. If not in a sacred building, they would find God within their own hearts. As of this writing, pandemic restrictions bar us from our sacred buildings. For months we have not been encountering God in sacrament, word, congregation. Even small groups, we've been warned, carry measures of risk. By nature, you and I, household of the faithful, do not warm up to "pop religion."

Unlike Frank Sinatra, we don't make a creed out of "my way." To us the Christian journey is something made in community. Yet not even times of enforced solitude shut out the pervading Spirit.

As in the lives of exiled Judeans, the Holy One enters our hearts. While we patiently wait to gather once more, we can pray, read, enjoy silent moments, and — with modern devices — even serve one another through phone, email, Zoom sessions. Many ancient Judeans held on to the faith. When conditions permitted, they returned to their city, rebuilt the temple, and served God in their time-honored way. So will you, so will I. In the meantime, we search our hearts.

Divine Spirit, whose presence we feel when together and when we're alone, stay with us and guide us during enforced solitude, that we may remain firm in our faith. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Hugh Dickinson, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Monday, March 22

The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself. — 2 Timothy 10:11-13 (Full text, 2 Timothy 10:10-15,19)

Jesus paid the price of our redemption by his suffering and death on the cross. After he conquered death by his resurrection, he returned to invite us to share in his inheritance. I am in awe of Jesus' love for us.

Jesus has chosen us. Not just an elite group of people, *all* people are invited to **follow him**.

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:34-38)

The choice is ours. Follow Jesus and share in his inheritance or choose the absence of God's presence forever.

For our prayer, let's pray excerpts of Psalm 25:

To you, I lift up my soul. I trust you, O my God. Show me your ways, O Lord, O teach me your paths; for you are my God and savior. Remember your compassion and love; O Lord. Remember no more the sins of my youth. Remember me only in light of your love. Amen.

Cynthia A. Smith, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Tuesday, March 23

Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one. — Isaiah 44:8 (Full text, Isaiah 44:1-8)

This Scripture was written after the Israelites had been exiled to Babylon and Jerusalem had been destroyed. The prophet cries out to the exiles, reminding them of the importance of the First Commandment, and reassuring them that God will “pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessings on your offspring” (vs. 3). In other words, Isaiah tells the Israelites not to be afraid because God will save them.

I don't know about you, but this sounds remarkably similar to what I hear on the news every day. Stories of hostages, terrorists, and violent events worldwide permeate my TV screen on a nightly basis. Even our own Capitol recently came under siege. I suspect that, like me, you are disheartened and fearful when you hear about the turmoil that envelops us.

The exiles listened to God's word, eventually returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city. I believe God will calm our fears too, and through the power of Jesus will deliver us from the unsettled state of the world. We only need faith to calm our personal storms.

*Lord,
Send us peace, and help us
remember that You
are always by our side. Amen.*

Robert H. Swanborg, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Wednesday, March 24

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." — John 12:23-24 (Full text, John 12:23-32)

In this passage, Jesus tells us that death is a crucial and even beautiful part of the cycle of life, despite the surrounding despair and grief. He reminds us that a dying seed produces many more, and indeed this is the gift of nature. In late fall, dying grasses and flowers grow tough and hard. Their colors fade, and stalks wither and brown. Finally, they die. Their pods split open and release hundreds of seeds that are carried by wind, and burrow into the ground over our long, harsh winter.

At a time when we are surrounded by so much death, and during this Lenten season when we draw closer to the cross, closer to the death of our embodied God, Jesus' words here feel personal. Jesus understood when he spoke these words, that he was soon to die, but like the dying seed, his death would produce many more like him — apostles and disciples who would spread and grow the faith that we still participate in today.

Lord Jesus,

We struggle with your command to set down the comforts of life. We are afraid of what is required of us. Help us to glorify your name by following in your acts of service and devotion to others. Help us to love this life a little less, and look toward your kingdom a little more. Amen.

Laura Kozminski, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Thursday, March 25

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. — Isaiah 7:10-12 (Full text, Isaiah 7:10-14)

I don't know about you, but there have been at least a few times in my life when I would have appreciated a sign from God, preferably a big and obvious one. Maybe that's why I'm so confused by King Ahaz's refusal to ask for a sign, even after the Lord tells him to. Twice!

"I will not put the Lord to the test." I wonder if his hesitation came from humility or from doubt. Did he really feel unworthy? Or was he afraid of the disappointment that would come if he trusted and the sign didn't come?

Whatever the reason, the Lord responded through Isaiah saying, "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." (Isaiah 7:14) Emmanuel. God with us. Jesus is our sign. An ever-present reminder of the Father's goodness and faithfulness. A promise that whatever our circumstances, whatever desires we hold in our hearts, he is with us through it all.

As we journey through Lent, perhaps carrying the doubt and hurt of unanswered prayers and signs that never came, let us also carry with us our real and living hope, the sign from our Father, Emmanuel, God with us.

Father,

You are with us in every moment, even closer to us than our own breath. Make us ever more aware of your abiding love in our lives, and deepen our trust in your good and perfect will. Amen.

Cecilia Berkemeier, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Friday, March 26

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! — Psalm 133:1
(Full text, Psalm 133)

Seriously? How is it possible to live together in unity when we, the church, disagree on so many social issues, including LGBTQ rights, gun control, immigration, Black Lives Matter, etc.? And don't get me started on doctrinal differences!

Recently a fellow customer at Lowe's helped me load a heavy, awkward box into my car. As we were leaving, my wife asked if his lack of a mask and his political attire bothered me. I was so grateful for his generosity that I hadn't noticed. It became a profound moment for me as I thought about his simple act of kindness and how our differences didn't matter.

In Philippians 2, to make his joy complete, Paul urges the church to be one in spirit and mind. This is where the "rubber meets the road" for me as a Christian. I need to drop my ego and stop trying to prove I'm right. I need to take the time to understand the other person's story and to look out for his or her needs first. My attitude should be the same as Christ, "who made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...and became obedient to death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7-9)

I am grateful for my brother's example at Lowe's. Living together in unity starts with me.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.*

Mark Wilson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Saturday, March 27

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death.” — Mark 10:32-33a (Full text, Mark 10:32-34,46-52)

“Those who followed were afraid.” Lent in 2021 has many of us afraid after a year of so many challenges and changes in our lives. Many churches have been shuttered at a time when we have needed our faith communities more than ever. Fear and necessary precautions challenge even the best of us to be faithful followers of Jesus.

The verses above chronicle the fear of the twelve when Jesus told what awaited him in Jerusalem. Well, we know the ancient story, and we “love to tell the story,” do we not? In 1866, Arabella Hankey wrote: “I love to tell the story, ’Twill be my theme in glory, To tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.” That story is about love, the love of God in Jesus, poured into the world in Jesus who gave his very life that we might have life.

Week after week in Lent, we read the story of Jesus, his sacrifice for us, his death and his resurrection. It is a timeless story, and it never changes. Can we cling to that rock like never before?

O God,

Increase our faith during this much needed season of Lent. Give us the grace of Jesus to reign in our hearts and in the hearts of all that we might be people of peace, love, justice, and mercy. Give us this day our daily bread, so that the reign of God will be in us, through us, and all around us. We pray: Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato, Rector
St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Palm Sunday, March 28

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD; we bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God; and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. — Psalm 118:26-27 (Full text, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29)

Today Jesus makes his final trek into Jerusalem, paradoxically as both king and victim. His believers give him a warm welcome and quote from Psalm 118: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord...and he has given us light.” Jesus comes in the name of the Lord, and it is he who gives us light.

In our darkened world, filled with grief over deceased COVID patients, anger over political enemies, and anxiety about our planet's future, we gratefully welcome the light that Christ gives to us and the hope that springs within us.

But Christ does not save his light only for a select few. He shares it with all. And sometimes it is our job to radiate that light to others. Sometimes we are the ones “who come in the name of the Lord.”

As we enter into this Holy Week, may we take a line from a popular children's hymn: “This little light of mine; I'm going to let it shine.” Christ gives us a light to shine on others, even and especially in this holiest of weeks. While we prepare for Christ's resurrection, we already feel it in our hearts and can shine our hope onto the lonely, the abandoned, and the oppressed.

My Lord and King,

Yours is the light that radiates the world. Help me to feel the hope that accompanies that light and share it with others. Amen.

Deacon Mike Cruickshank, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Monday, March 29

For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! — Hebrews 9:13-14 (Full text, Hebrews 9:11-15)

Different churches use slightly different nomenclature and may even emphasize slightly different aspects of the sacrament, but most recognize that what God provides us with during the eucharist is but a beautiful foretaste of what is to come. Like we'll emphasize in our worship services this Thursday, Jesus offers us bread and wine to help us remember our participation in his selfless gift of love for this world. More is to come. This is why I love emphasizing the grand banquet table of Psalm 23 at funerals or in critical pastoral moments. Not only are we fed with God's peace in such moments, but there is also already a banquet table of overflowing love prepared for us by our Maker who joins us at the feast. More is to come. We are actively, and lovingly part of this future.

Which is what I hear in this passage where the impact of Christ's sacrificial love is compared to ritual sacrifices of dead animals. Even at our best, we fall short. We have never been able to purify ourselves enough to deserve a place at God's everlasting banquet table. And yet, because of the blood of Christ, we have assigned seats at the banquet. So does this world that God deeply loves. We are free to worship this living God, knowing that we are truly loved while also anticipating that there is more to come!

Gracious God, continue to purify our hearts with your love. Forgive what needs forgiveness and excite us with not only a foretaste of what is to come, but also the hunger to dive into this love this very day. Amen.

Pastor Karsten Voskuil, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Tuesday, March 30

“While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” — John 12:36 (Full text, John 12:20-36)

Light during Lent.

During Advent we light another candle each Sunday until all the candles on the wreath are glowing. During Lent we extinguish a candle each Sunday until we are in total darkness on Good Friday and throughout the Triduum. On these still and quiet days, we should be contemplative and examine our Theosis (journey into the life of God).

Then on Easter we see the Light of God reappear suddenly and joyously. The Light has never left us, but it was “hidden under a bushel.” Now our lives are brightened and filled with this glorious Light. This Light makes our pathway clearer so that we may enter into the state of being “the children of Light.”

During these days of Lent, with the Light becoming less visible, let us listen to the still small voice of the Spirit that will guide us along our path and bring us into the arms of the Light.

*Dear God, fountain of Light,
Guide and sustain us
during these darkening days
of Lent, so that we may join you
as your children. Amen.*

Doug Karsen, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Wednesday, March 31

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. — John 13:21-22 (Full text, John 13:21-32)

Betrayal is complex and also simple. It can be a word spoken thoughtlessly. Someone we trusted let us down.

Betrayal can be an act with deliberateness and malice.

Jesus knew that one would turn from and betray him. IT HAD TO BE.

Through his death, Jesus gave us mercy, forgiveness and a life. "God made us alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Jesus Christ's cross. (Colossians 2:13-14)

*Jesus,
You gave us salvation! Alleluia!
Amen.*

Kate Sullivan, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Maundy Thursday, April 1

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. — 1 Corinthians 11:26 (Full text, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

These words to the congregation of Corinth are St. Paul's paraphrase of Jesus' words to his disciples on this holy day we call Maundy Thursday. The Corinthian church was struggling with sharing food as they gathered and worshipped together as they formed a Christian community. Who's in and who's not? St. Paul was reminding them of the reason to eat and drink TOGETHER. Seems like not much has changed in 2,000 years as we continue to be challenged with inclusion of all in our community.

What has not changed is our Lord's command to eat his bread and drink his cup and celebrate the gift of his death, and proclaim this by living our lives in grace and truth until he comes again.

I look forward to the time when we can literally share our Lord's body and blood in communion together. Let us continue to share his bountiful grace among all.

*Gracious God,
Thank you for your gift of your Son
and his sacrifice on our behalf.
Help us to proclaim this in our lives.
Thank you, in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Iris Boettcher, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Good Friday, April 2

But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. — Isaiah 53:5 (Full text, Isaiah 53:13-53:12)

Lent is over. All the lights were extinguished at the end of last night's service. We are in the darkness of the Triduum until Easter.

Last night Jesus was captured by the Pharisees and his suffering began. Today, Good Friday, he was wounded, beaten, flogged and Crucified. The darkness enveloped him and he cried out, "It is finished." (John 19:30). And now begins the mystery of how through all this pain and suffering our broken relationship with God is made whole again. Christ has pieced together all the scattered fragments of our relationship with the Father. The darkness will be overcome with the Light on Easter morning and our spirits will become one with the Spirit.

We will still live in a broken world, but our souls will be joined with our God and live in peace and harmony. This was all made possible by our Savior Christ.

*Father whose Son endured the pain
and suffering of the cross,
We pray that you will welcome your children
into your Being, so that we may live
in the presence of your Light.
In your Son's name we pray. Amen*

Doug Karsen, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Saturday, April 3

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. — 1 Peter 4:7-8 (Full text, 1 Peter 4:1-8)

During Lent, we believers sometimes find ourselves paying a great deal of attention to “the end of all things” that Peter refers to in today’s reading. We approach Lent with heavy hearts, the joy of our salvation subdued. We seek to end our focus on self by giving up something for Lent. We attempt to put an end to our guilt with prayers of confession.

And those practices are undeniably good and holy.

But what if, instead, we saw Lent as a kind of *beginning*? What if rather than emphasizing what we have given up, we come to see that without the distraction of unhelpful habits we are able to move closer to God’s image? Maybe instead of falling into despair over our faults we look instead to how we are being transformed by our shortcomings into more compassionate children of God. What if we finally begin to forgive as we have been forgiven?

Some might point to Good Friday as an example of the greatest End of all, but that is far from true. Because Good Friday gave straightaway into the most glorious Beginning. A beginning that renewed God’s whole creation and set us right with Him. A beginning that means we need no longer fear — because Christ’s love covers everything.

*Lord Jesus,
May your end become my beginning
and turn me back to You.
Lead me, I pray, deeper into Your love. Amen.*

Laurie Larson, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Easter Sunday, April 4

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. — John 20:1-12