

A LENTEN JOURNEY
2024

NORTHMINSTER BAPTIST CHURCH

A LENTEN JOURNEY 2024

Our Lenten Journey begins on February 14 with Ash Wednesday. So often ashes are a symbol of destruction, a burning of what was. However, nature teaches us that fire is a cleansing, a stripping down to the essence of what is. Only then can there be a chance for what will be.

Ashes mark our foreheads as we begin the walk through Lent, and these 40 days mark a time for searching, wandering, questioning, stumbling, and persevering. During this time, the “alleluias” are buried, but they are not destroyed. The purple of preparation fills our weeks with conviction, with a search for redemption, with a longing for guidance; however, our journey is punctuated with the exclamation of Sundays – moments of joy and hope providing refreshment for the continuation of our journey. Sundays are in the season of Lent, but not of the season of Lent, and they provide a time for rest and recognition of the “bright sadness” of our journey.

Our journey culminates in the hurdle of Holy Week. After the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, we are forced through the trials of accusations and betrayals, through the gift of new words of remembrance, through the humility of being served by our king, through the testing of friendships, through the pain of misunderstandings and disbelief, through the cry for deliverance, through the utter darkness of despair. We find ourselves faced with the cross and the hush of death.

But the glory of our faith is that the story does not end with Lent. Lent is simply the preparation for the great celebration to come. Remembering what was and knowing what is, we turn to walk in faith toward what will be, and we have seen a great Light.

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 14

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17;
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

The ashes on my forehead
 make me somber.
Tears fill my eyes,
My heart is heavy
 for
I am weary!
My ways are not your ways.
I am so homesick.
 Lord, hear my cry!
Today I walk into Lent.
My first step is a turn -
 a returning to you.
Guide me to gospel living.
 Lord, hear my cry!
I hate my selfish ways.
Illuminate the needs of others.
Help me make a difference.
 Lord, hear my cry!

Mary Jane Ridgeway,
“Lent: Devotional Guide 2004”

Thursday, February 15

Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:1-14; 1 John 1:3-10

Time. It seems like just last week that we were anticipating Advent. The Word became flesh in the form of a baby, setting God's plan into action.

And now, here we are on the journey through Lent to the cross. The Word in flesh is a strong, humble, respected man fulfilling his purpose of serving and saving humankind. He is healing, performing miracles, and teaching His Way, Truth, and Life, through love, mercy, repentance, and forgiveness. His words and ways anger the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Skip to modern times. Horror, hunger, and helplessness prevail. Hope seems doubtful. "Hard-hearted" has clear meaning. Hate and harassment are occurring around the globe. Satan is having a heyday hatching havoc everywhere.

In 2 Peter we read, "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (3:8). Does that mean that in the Lord's sight, it's only been a couple of days since Christ was crucified and resurrected? Aren't some of us wondering if the Rapture is near? Isaiah 55 tells us that God's thoughts and ways are not our thoughts and ways (55:8). We try to remember that God does have a plan.

How do we cope with all of this? The psalmist says we should ask the Lord to show, teach, lead, and humble us. Daniel's example tells us to fast, confess, humble ourselves, and pray for righteousness. And John tells us that the Word is the Light. All of this seems to be a good path to follow on our journey through Lent so that we may find Peace.

Time. Past, present, future. The answer - I AM.

Friday, February 16

Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:15-25a; 2 Timothy 4:1-5

“The Secret of Waiting”

The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is the moment. A waiting person is a patient person. The word patience means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us.

Henri J. M. Nouwen,
Mornings with Henri J. M. Nouwen

Saturday, February 17

Psalm 25:1-10; Psalm 32; Matthew 9:2-13

“Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and handcuffs of hate. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness.”

Corrie ten Boom

In the book of Matthew, Jesus calls Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him. Matthew did just that. The Pharisees did not understand why Jesus was associating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus replied that those who were well did not need a doctor but rather those who were sick; he did not come to call the righteous but sinners. Because of this being true, we should be thankful that Christ does not condemn us: we can come boldly before the throne of grace. In this Lenten journey, I pray that we may know God’s love even when we make mistakes and know that God in his mercy still loves us.

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

February 18

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:10-16; Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

Monday, February 19

Psalm 77; Job 4:1-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

Without God, we were once walking emptiness, but by grace we are saved – we are filled up. Frederick Buechner says, “Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you deserve the taste of raspberries.” What will we do with this grace? It’s ours for the taking, but what is our responsibility? What would grace have us do? Pádraig Ó Tuama asks similar questions in his poem, “Narrative Theology #1.”

And I said to him
Are there answers to all of this?
And he said
The answer is in a story
and the story is being told.

And I said
But there is so much pain.
And she answered, plainly,
Pain will happen.

Then I said
Will I ever find meaning?
And they said
You will find meaning
Where you give meaning.
The answer is in the story
And the story isn’t finished.

May we reach out and take this gift of undeserved grace and use it, writing meaning into our stories by sharing it with others as easily as we would a bowl of ripe raspberries on a summer day.

Tuesday, February 20

Psalm 77; Job 5:8-27; 1 Peter 3:8-18a

The author of Psalm 77 is in trouble. God feels so far away that heartbreaking questions pour forth. “Has God’s steadfast love ceased forever?” and “Are God’s promises at an end for all time?” are just two of the questions posed. Anyone who has ever struggled with the experience of God’s absence can relate.

Also understandable are the psalmist’s musings about why God feels so far away. The New Revised Standard Version translates verse 10, “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed,” while the New Jewish Publication Society states, “It is my fault that the right hand of the Most High has changed.” The exact meaning of the Hebrew in verse 10 is unclear, but it is worthy of note that some scholars locate the cause of suffering with the psalmist while others focus on the grief caused by the suffering, leaving open the possibility that, like Job, the psalmist has done nothing wrong.

Sometimes, our difficulty is caused by poor choices we have made. Confession and repentance are required before healing can begin. At other times, we have done nothing wrong. We suffer because we live in a broken world in which God’s reign has begun but is not yet complete.

Whatever the reason for our distress, we would be wise to make use of the psalmist’s antidote: the power of memory. The latter half of the psalm is a recitation of the exodus, with echoes of the creation story. When we are blasted by the storms of life and feel as if God is far away or even absent, recalling God’s help in “ages past” may serve as a reminder that God never forsakes us. The One who loved us then loves us now.

Wednesday, February 21

Psalm 77; Proverbs 30:1-9; Matthew 4:1-11

Forty days alone,
a wilderness of thoughts,
tempting and inviting thoughts,
which could so easily have distracted you
from your task, your mission,
your vision.
Yet you emerged, stronger and more attuned
to all that had to be done,
despite a time constraint
that to our eyes would have seemed hopeless.
We too live in stressful times.
Demands are made of our time,
that leave so little
for the important things of life.
We are easily distracted
in the wilderness of our lives,
by every call to go this way or that,
to turn stone to bread
leap from mountains,
and do all that would keep us from the truth.
We listen to the voices of this world,
and ignore the one who endured all this
and so much more,
and emerged triumphant,
that we might not have to suffer so.
Forgive us, Father,
when we get distracted from our task.
Forgive us those times when we try
to be all things to all men,
and fail to be anything to anyone.

Jack McDaniel,
“A Lenten Journey: 2014”

Thursday, February 22

Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18; Romans 3:21-31

Faith can be hard, as illustrated for me in Psalm 22, Genesis 15, and the fact that Jesus spent 40 days and not 40 hours in the wilderness. Over 20 years ago, during one of the darkest periods of my life, my friend and pastor, Amy Joyner Finkelberg, shared with me the following quote which, since that day, has occupied a prominent place on a bulletin board in my office and in my soul:

“I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. I know what torment this is, but I can only see it, in myself anyway, as the process by which faith is deepened. A faith that just accepts is a child’s faith and all right for children, but eventually you have to grow religiously as every other way, though some never do.

“What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe. If you feel you can’t believe, you must at least do this: keep an open mind. Keep it open toward faith, keep wanting it, keep asking for it, and leave the rest to God.”

Flannery O’Connor,
The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor

Friday, February 23

Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:1-6; Romans 4:1-12

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin” (Romans 4:7-8).

Holding our own tension between good works and grace is a tension that we have created among ourselves, for ourselves, and (to go a step further) have imposed upon others whom we deem in need of judging. So tight is this tension created by us, we may find ourselves in a tug of war, believing that we are on the “right side” of the rope only to look up and see ourselves on the other end, tugging just as hard.

All this time spent tugging, counting good deeds, and judging, we are missing the loving grace that God is patiently holding out for us on the sidelines (also of our own making). Oh, if only we would let go of this rope and fall into grace, if only we would trust our own falling, and if only we would stop the tallying of our deeds and those of others, then maybe we would fall into the warmth of God’s embrace of grace – the embrace of grace that has been and is waiting for us on the sidelines of our own creation.

Saturday, February 24

Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:7-15; Mark 8:27-30

“ . . . for the Lord has given heed to your affliction” (Genesis 16:11).

“For [God] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; [God] did not hide [God’s] face from me, but heard when I cried to [God]” (Psalm 22:24).

One way we know the miraculous nature of Love is by feeling seen. Often, we may feel confined by the afflictions we endure, as if our identities are reduced to the hardships or difficulties thrust upon us. Though we are all too familiar with the loneliness of suffering, our natural response to strife is to turn our faces from it. We avoid bearing witness to discomfort and pain; however, God does not turn away from our distress but instead hears our calls. We are called to see one another, just as God sees us. To be heard and known even in the depths of affliction is an intimate triumph of God’s Love.

“To be fully seen by somebody, then, and be loved anyhow – this is a human offering that can border on miraculous.”

Elizabeth Gilbert

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

February 25

*Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25;
Mark 8:31-38; Mark 9:2-9*

Monday, February 26

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Genesis 21:1-7; Hebrews 1:8-12

I've been reading Megan Phelps-Roper's *Unfollow* in which she recounts growing up in and leaving Westboro Baptist Church. Her learning parallels so much of my own. For instance, like Megan, once I began to meaningfully engage with the world as a young adult, I came to see that the more literally I interpreted Scripture, the more narrowly I drew the circle of God's salvation. At about the same time, I also came to understand that, too often, I made an idol of the Bible, holding its words above any new light God might want to shine.

Perhaps because I've been reading Megan's book, I read Psalm 105 with some sadness, especially verses 37-45 as prescribed for today. So much hurt has been wrought by those who claim to have God's exclusive favor, Westboro Baptist Church being the poster child here in the United States.

Certainly, Jesus shows us that, if anything, to be "chosen" by God is a great responsibility. If we are chosen - and all of us who hear and respond to the call of God are - we are to embody divine justice, mercy, forgiveness, and love in the world, not to use God, or God's favor, as a weapon or a banner.

Paul puts it this way in Colossians, "As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (3:12). Oh, that we would heed that call, for what does the world need more right now than this kind of healing presence?

Tuesday, February 27

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Genesis 22:1-19; Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-19

Almighty God, we confess that we are incurable scorekeepers. We judge others with a standard we never use for ourselves. We see the speck in others' eyes while ignoring the ugly log in our own. "Forgive us," we pray. Forgive us for ever thinking we could be, even for one moment, the measure of righteousness or the standard of justice. As the cross of Christ casts its long shadow over our Lenten journey, call us again to lives of genuine penance and amendment of life. By your grace and through your transforming love, make us the people you have fashioned us to be, your sons and daughters, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

David N. Mosser,
Prayers for Lent & Holy Week

Wednesday, February 28

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Jeremiah 30:12-22; John 12:36-43

I sit in the calm
‘midst the storm’s rage.
behind me whirl griefs and sorrows long ago exposed –
pains grown woozy with time.
Before me spin future unknowns –
In shadow dances they tempt me
to draw into their fury
and be shredded with anxiety
fear
questioning
despair.
To left, to right
turn today’s woes.
Ever-present, they stand
ready to suffocate,
but I sit in the calm –
for this moment, all is still.

Holly Benzenhafer,
“A Lenten Journey: 2020”

Thursday, February 29

Psalm 19; Exodus 19:1-9a; 1 Peter 2:4-10

“Fighting the Instrument”
by Mark Nepo

Often the instruments of change
are not kind or just
and the hardest openness
of all might be
to embrace the change
while not wasting your heart
fighting the instrument.

The storm is not as important
as the path it opens.
The mistreatment in one life
never as crucial as the clearing
it makes in your heart.

This is very difficult to accept.
The hammer or cruel one
is always short-lived
compared to the jewel
in the center of the stone.

Friday, March 1

Psalm 19; Exodus 19:9b-15; Acts 7:30-40

Today I take measured steps down the Lenten path. I am reminded daily of my fragility, both emotionally and physically. I pray to discover a new sort of strength in this weakness. I want to learn to accept my needs and to welcome acts of kindness. This frailty reminds me to notice God's love in the beauty that surrounds me and in the good souls that support me. Through the purple mist in the distance, I witness Jesus, greatly relieved when Simon lifts the cross to carry it to the top of the hill. Jesus needed help. So do I.

As I face the uncertainty of these reflective days, I pray I find the courage to fully embrace my vulnerability. I have hope it will teach me to better recognize and respond to the frailty of others. Moving forward I will keep my eyes on Jesus. Jesus in the desert. Jesus in the garden. Jesus on the cross. Fragile, vulnerable Jesus.

Saturday, March 2

Psalm 19; Exodus 19:16-25; Mark 9:2-8

Preparation is required in many areas of our lives. For instance, in making a recipe we gather ingredients and follow directions for mixing and baking. It takes a lot of effort to create the final product. Perhaps you're going camping and must prepare what you need - clothing, insect repellent, blanket, food, etc. When we think in terms of preparation, it generally requires a lot of effort outwardly.

So here we find ourselves in the season of Lent - a season of preparation. But how does one prepare the heart? The soul? This preparation is not as easy as following a recipe or checking off a list. The scripture says we must listen. Listen. It requires being still - getting away from the busyness and the noise around us, not adding more to our to-do list. It requires a centering of our lives.

The disciples got so caught up in what to do during the transfiguration they missed the meaning of the moment. Their thoughts went to building a shelter and doing something. They started asking all the wrong questions. The moment disintegrated. What would have been their best response in that moment? To be quiet and listen. So what is our best response as we prepare ourselves during this Lenten season? To listen. Stop the busyness. No more to-do lists. Be still. Enter God's quiet presence. Let God take over the preparation of your heart.

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

March 3

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Monday, March 4

Psalm 84; 1 Kings 6:1-4, 21-22; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

Lent calls us to the often difficult and lonely work of looking back and looking within. Sometimes, though, memory offers us an unexpected gift.

“The Bell Rope” by Richard Wakefield

In Sunday School the boy who learned a psalm
by heart would get to sound the steeple bell
and send its tolling through the Sabbath calm
to call the saved and not-so-saved as well.
For lack of practice all the lines are lost—
something about how angels' hands would bear
me up to God—but on one Pentecost
they won me passage up the steeple stair.
I leapt and grabbed the rope up high to ride
it down, I touched the floor, the rope went slack,
the bell was silent. Then, beatified,
I rose, uplifted as the rope pulled back.
I leapt and fell again; again it took
me up, but still the bell withheld its word—
until at last the church foundation shook
in bass approval, felt as much as heard,
and loud as if repaying me for each
unanswered pull with heaven-rending song
a year of Sunday school could never teach
and that these forty years cannot obscure.
Some nights when sleep won't come I think of how
just once there came an answer, clear and sure.
If I could find that rope I'd grasp it now.

Tuesday, March 5

Psalm 84; 2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 16-19; Hebrews 9:23-28

“PILGRIMS HYMN”

by Steven Paulus

Even before we call on Your name
To ask You, O God
When we seek for the word to glorify You
You hear our prayer
Unceasing love, O unceasing love
Surpassing all we know
Glory to the Father
And to the Son
And to the Holy Spirit
Even with the darkness sealing us in
We breathe Your name
And through the days that follow so fast
We trust in You
Endless Your grace,
O endless Your grace
Beyond all mortal dream
Both now and forever
And unto ages and ages.
Amen.

Wednesday, March 6

Psalm 84; Ezra 6:1-16; Mark 11:15-19

On March 20, [2024], the sun in the Northern Hemisphere will stand directly over the equator, marking the day as the first day of Spring. The length of the day and night on March 20 will be approximately the same.

One of my favorite things about Spring is the moment that I notice buds appearing on the trees that have been dark and silent during the winter. I believe that God sends us messages all the time, we just have to be open to hear or see them. This is one of those messages. I can almost hear [God] saying, "See, I give new life to the trees every Spring, and I can do the same for you."

I always have to stop for a moment to whisper a prayer of joy and gratitude.

Prayer: Dear [God], open my eyes to see, my ears to hear, and my mind to comprehend the beautiful messages you send. Guide me to live today in joy and gratitude. Amen.

Gwen Anderson,
"A Lenten Journey: 2019"

Thursday, March 7

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Genesis 9:8-17; Ephesians 1:3-6

Recently during communion, Sheila Hess played a familiar tune on the organ, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is” (Henry Williams Baker, 1868). I recognized the melody, and I reached for a hymnal to follow along with the lyrics. We should never take for granted the beautiful music we get to enjoy at Northminster! Here’s the first verse:

The King of love my shepherd is,
whose goodness faileth never.
I nothing lack if I am his,
and he is mine forever.

In the reading today, we are reminded that God “chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4). Speaking for me, it is impossible to comprehend God’s care at that scale. I think it means in the entirety of human history, before and since, God chose us – individually, in love and grace – and provided redemption through “the One he loves” (1:6).

Comprehending is one hurdle; living in a way that honors God’s covenant is another. Our weekly prayer is for the Heavenly Kingdom to come to earth. Creating *that* world in *this* one is up to each one of us. Each day we can begin with the most powerful force in God’s world – love. Love one another and love God, like God loves us. Then, see where the Holy Spirit leads.

Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed,
but yet in love he sought me;
and on his shoulder gently laid,
and home, rejoicing, brought me.

Friday, March 8

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Daniel 12:5-13; Ephesians 1:7-14

Throughout the Bible, there appears a Hebrew word for which English has no direct, single-word translation. This word is "hesed," usually expressed by the phrase "steadfast love" or "amazing grace." However, some include other aspects of love, such as covenantal love of the Old Testament or agape love of the New Testament. Attributed to God, the importance of this trait for us humans cannot be overstated. This Hebrew word speaks to our unworthiness and to God's persistent grace and mercy towards us. Half the Old Testament occurrences of hesed appear in the Psalms, as in the opening verses of Psalm 107, where the people are urged to thank God for God's steadfast love and God's wonderful works on behalf of humankind. In Daniel's vision he is promised rest and the reward of resurrection at the end times. Paul's letter to the Ephesians shows that only in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fullness of hesed revealed at last. The sacrificial death of the Son of God is the utmost manifestation of God's love toward us. Redemption, forgiveness, and grace are available now, demonstrating God's eternal, steadfast love towards us all.

Saturday, March 9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Numbers 20:22-29; John 3:1-13

Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, challenges us to focus on the walk, not the darkness. She introduces the idea of embracing "lunar spirituality" as well as "solar spirituality" and reminds us that the "dark night of the soul" can be useful when we learn what she calls the "spiritual skill" of walking in darkness.

In the Psalm assigned for today's reading, Eugene Peterson's translation tells us, "Oh, thank God - he's so good! His love never runs out" (107:1). As with all of us at some time or another, in verse 19 we find that some darkness has entered the picture and someone "called out to God" in a "desperate condition; and he got you out just in time." We know neither the desperation nor how they were saved from it, but by verse 22 the instructions are to "tell the world what he's done—sing it out!"

Darkness arrives in all shapes and sizes, and we need that love that never runs out. The gift of that love often comes to us from others, and we find grace enough to embrace darkness, or at least we learn to live into it.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 10

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Monday, March 11

Psalm 107:1-16; Exodus 15:22-27; Hebrews 3:1-6

Lent is the 40-day journey to Easter which begins on Ash Wednesday. Walking with Jesus, Christians make this journey along a road of prayer, fasting, and charity. But the journey along the Lenten Road is not only about what we are willing to give up. It is also about the gospel burdens Jesus said we must gladly accept. Offer thanks to God through prayer:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever...

Some wandered in desert wastelands...

They were hungry and thirsty
and their lives ebbed away.

Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress (Psalm 107:1, 4-6).

Along the Lenten journey Jesus also calls on us to continually offer aid, comfort, and charity to those who suffer, to those who are lonely, and to those in need. As Maya Angelou said:

Alone, all alone

Nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone.

Now if you listen, I will tell you what I know.

Storm clouds are gathering, the wind is gonna blow.

...man is suffering, and I can hear the moan,

Cause nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone.

As we make the Lenten journey, we must offer compassion, comfort, and charity to all those in need. And on the days along the Lenten journey that we must fast, then fast like Pope Francis prayed:

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.

Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude...

Fast from worries and have trust in God...

Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy...

Fast from grudges and be reconciled.

Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

Mother Teresa agreed. As you walk with Jesus along this sacred journey, "Listen in silence so you can hear the voice of God."

Tuesday, March 12

Psalm 107:1-16; Numbers 20:1-13; 1 Corinthians 10:6-13

Though they probably did not know this at the time, the Israelites' long journey was almost over. They were almost there! Despite having seen God provide for almost forty years, the people immediately became alarmed when confronted with a need for water. So much so, they questioned why they left Egypt in the first place. Sara Groves sings about this in her song, "Painting pictures of Egypt":

I've been painting pictures of Egypt,
leaving out what it lacked,
cause the future feels so hard
and I want to go back.

The people's thirst wasn't imaginary. Like them, our need just won't leave us alone. Our humanity is ever-present. During Lent, whatever we gave up, we most want. Whatever we have taken on, we just can't do. We are so human. But God met their need and helped them keep going. And God helps us keep going. As we walk the Lenten path, we are growing: we are changing. The day after day, one foot in front of the other, over and over, is changing us. Groves's lyrics continue:

The places they used to fit me
cannot hold the things I've learned.
Those roads were closed off to me
while my back was turned.
We walk on and we walk with God.
We cannot go back.

Wednesday, March 13

Psalm 107:1-16; Isaiah 60:15-22; John 8:12-20

“Peace and Courage”

God, grant me peace to hold my tongue
when speaking would be detrimental.

God, grant me courage to speak
when injustice, slander, meanness break
and defense must be made or lost.

God, grant me peace to let go
when my visceral response is to retain.

God, grant me courage to be tenacious
when no one else will champion the noble cause.

God, grant me peace to remove my Self
when business at hand gets personal.

God, grant me courage to passionately flame
when the moment's issue is resonant.

God, grant me peace when the work is done,
and redefinition looms in the path.

God, grant me courage to move deliberately
when decisions are made and responsibility taken
for the course as yet uncharted.

Amen.

8-2-98

“Lent: Devotional Guide 2001”

Thursday, March 14

Psalm 51:1-12; Isaiah 30:15-18; Hebrews 4:1-13

“Lent”

by Maurice Manning

XXVI

For something to begin with nothing
and end with all,
though not to end, in order to fulfill,
to be revealed.

in full and yet requiring a fall -
routinely, too -
from all created after you, compelled
to call for you.

XXVII

Once I unwillingly become
remote from you
and wake to discover the distance I've suddenly gone,
I wonder who

was I, unknowing, following?
Then my own name
so starkly answers the wonder, paling, alone,
and burned by shame.

XXVIII

When rivers curl around and curve
as a hand to make
determined shapes and leave the land designed
I marvel and take

a steady look to find your mind
Behind the scene,
but see instead, in parsed and portioned green,
eternity.

Friday, March 15

Psalm 51:1-12; Exodus 30:1-10; Hebrews 4:14-5:4

Tidbits And Treasures

God's Explicit Instructions

The Tabernacle was important to God, and God gave exact instructions as to how it was to be constructed. Those instructions included size and materials – cubits, gold, and other precious materials. One can only imagine crossing through the Heavenly Gates and seeing that magnificent structure. God also provided God's Word as instruction for how Christians are to live their lives.

Prayers of the People

In Psalm 51, David, after visiting Bathsheba, entreated God, "Have mercy on me O God, according to your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (51:1-2). When we hide God's Word in our hearts, we foster spiritual growth by guarding against those things that hurt us and displease God.

In Our Thoughts and Prayers

Pastor Chuck Poole gave us a valuable tool which, when spoken with sincerity, shows our love and concern for others. That tool is, "I will hold you in my heart."

On Being Mature Christians

The mature are those who have their own power of discernment, trained by constant practice to distinguish right from wrong.

Our Prayer

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

Saturday, March 16

Psalm 51:1-12; Habakkuk 3:2-13; John 12:1-11

“For I know my transgressions, and my sin
is ever before me” (Psalm 51:3).

John the Baptist’s message heralding the coming of Jesus is “Repent.” Lent is a season of repentance. In a recent Sunday school discussion on repentance, we considered some interpretations of the word. Scholars say that the Hebrew verb for “repent” means to turn around, in effect to turn from. Certainly, acknowledgement of sorrow and regret is an important part of repentance: “We are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us” (*The Book of Common Prayer*). Yet turning from something also implies a turning *toward* something else. There is something positive in turning toward a newness of life. Are we neglecting the positive aspect of repentance?

What parts of our lives need a clean slate, a wiping away, a fresh board to be written upon? What actions or attitudes inherent in us already could we develop? There’s a freshness in a new start, an excitement, isn’t there? Lent can also be a season of hope, of newness, of faith and trust in God’s help and in our potential as God’s creation. So it seems that a question lies before us. “What can we do better, leaving behind old ways?” Or “what can we learn or do anew – afresh – with a new heart and new will, almost in the spirit of a new year?” ‘Tis the season of Lent.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 17

*Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10;
John 12:20-33*

Monday, March 18

Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 43:8-13; 2 Corinthians 3:4-11

“I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate
Your ways” (Psalm 119:15).

Many of us give up things for Lent (cheese straws, wine, Netflix). But consider adding something: meditation. Jesus spent forty days in the desert praying and contemplating. Set aside ten minutes in a quiet place. Close your eyes. Listen to your breathing. Your mind will wander, and that’s okay. In the sound of your own precious breath, God may have an opportunity to whisper something to you that has been drowned out by our bee-busy lives.

“Be still and know that I am God...” (Psalm 46:10).

“Stillness. One of the doors into the temple.”
Mary Oliver

Prayer: Almighty God, for a few minutes I am turning off the ruckety world. I come silently before you, opening my heart to hear a still, small voice. Amen.

Tuesday, March 19

Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 44:1-8; Acts 2:14-24

The Practice of Pentecost

I often find myself walking along the Lenten path, bouncing from one extreme to the other: the impossibility of living a life of holy perfection and the crippling despondency that comes with the reality of recognizing my own sinfulness.

But righteousness is not in the achievement of holy perfection, of living a perfect life of purity. Righteousness is also not found in living forever in sackcloth and ashes, lamenting the sinfulness of our souls. These explanations are tantamount to saying that we are brave if we avoid fear or strong if we avoid resistance.

Righteousness comes from the practice of Pentecost – the daily seeking to understand in heart and mind and soul just what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ. It is the daily journey, the seeking, the walking with the Risen God that reveals who we are – who we have always been in God. The call of the Psalmist, the admonishment of the Prophet, and the hasty sermon by Peter each point to the always uncomfortable place righteousness is found: in the seeking, the doing, and following Jesus in spite of our certainty that we ourselves are neither fully saint nor fully sinner.

Wednesday, March 20

Psalm 119:9-16; Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23; John 12:34-50

“Don’t mind if I fall apart, there’s more room in a broken heart.”

So sang Carly Simon a few years ago. There is a gift in being in desperate agony. It is a special kind of aliveness, like the bursting of a shoot from the ground or a bloom through a crack in the sidewalk. Agony can be a creative force: it can move; it can change; it can transform; it can remake. Agony can make room where there wasn’t enough. It can temper new strength. It can create new capacity for understanding and compassion. Agony can do all these things; it can, of course, be just as destructive as creative, depending on what WE do with it.

John Cosier,
“Lent 1996: A Time of Turning”

Thursday, March 21

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Deuteronomy 16:1-8; Philippians 2:1-11

Have you ever encountered a song that was so true and easily identifiable that you could not erase it from your memory? Such is the case with Philippians 2:1-11, appearing in some congregations as:

He is Lord, He is Lord;
He is risen from the dead and He is Lord.
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess,
that Jesus Christ is Lord.

This affirmation probably came into use as a type of liturgical litany used in worship gatherings of early Christians. Such functionality enabled believers to speak its phrases from memory, much as we do with the Lord's Prayer and the Gloria Patri. The essence of these phrases is that Christ "emptied Himself" by becoming completely obedient, even to death on the cross. God then exalted Jesus so that his name is above every name, to which every knee should bow and confess Jesus as Lord.

"He is Lord" is a traditional condensation of this "Christ-hymn" that has grown into frequent use by many congregations. It has all the characteristics of a folk expression that is full of doctrinal truth. When we sing it in worship, our voices are joined with those of countless believers of the early church as the gospel lives on through our voices.

Friday, March 22

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:1-9; Philippians 2:12-18

Faith In Darkness

Mark's gospel tells of Jesus and Bartimaeus, the blind beggar (10:46-52). As Jesus and his disciples neared the city, Bartimaeus cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Bartimaeus, blind for much of his life, had heard of Jesus, yet his blindness did not hinder his faith. If anything, perhaps, it caused him to plead even louder to Jesus, Son of David. Jesus heard his cries and said, "What do you ask of me?" Bartimaeus, in his blindness (darkness) at the feet of Jesus, replied, "I want to see." Bartimaeus' sight was restored. Jesus declared, "Go, your faith has healed you." Bartimaeus never lost his faith – even in the depth of his darkness.

Psalm 118:1 tells us God's love endures forever. This embodiment of infinite, divine, amazing love that we cannot understand healed a blind beggar. This love was beaten, condemned, and hung on a cross. Nails pierced His flesh to hang Him, but His love would have kept Him there.

This amazing love endures forever – through darkness, crucifixion, and even death.

Faith, especially in darkness, brings a deeper assurance of the hope of the Easter story – the glory set before Christ is ours to claim.

Saturday, March 23

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:10-16; Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24).

Who can read this verse without singing that joyful song in your head? It makes me think of a child, singing at the top of her lungs, seeing each day as full, rich, and precious with new opportunities and blessings. As we grow older, experience proves that even tough moments can be filled with opportunities and blessings. God never promised that life would be easy or free of strife. God walks with us through trials and reminds us that God is with us. God’s grace and God’s presence in difficult moments are a reassurance of God’s love for us and for all people. We may need to keep reminding ourselves of this on the days that don’t seem full of sunshine and sing at the top of our lungs:

This is the day, this is the day,
that the Lord has made, that the Lord has made.
Let us rejoice, let us rejoice,
and be glad in it, and be glad in it!

Prayer: Gracious God, during this Lenten season, fill us with your grace so that even in the darkest days, we know you are with us, walking us through what we cannot get around. May we return these blessings and grace to the community around us, rejoicing in your love. Amen.

PALM SUNDAY

March 24

*Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11; John 12:12-16; Isaiah 50:4-9a;
Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47; Mark 15:1-39-47*

HOLY WEEK

Monday, March 25

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

In this Holy Week, a week of great hope, pain, redemption, and joy, there is plenty of room (as there often is) for unfairness, loneliness, and grief. Feeling hope and despair, in any degree, can be humiliating and exhausting. Hope can feel humiliating and exhausting all on its own. So can the body, and so can the soul. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

This week we sat with passages that reminded us that Christ takes care, turns outward by turning inward, and occasionally, can only turn truly inward after facing those around him and allowing their care. Sometimes the most Christ-like thing we can do is to simply look at what might be possible while we are all here together. The simple act of living can cause fractures between yourself and those around you and sometimes between yourself and yourself. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isaiah 42:3).

The least and best we can do as we approach Holy Week (and the rest of our lives) is to be more loving to one another through the phases of grief and joy that affect our lives . . . to be gentle. . . to remember how easy it is to forget what a little tenderness can feel like. It feels like a lot – to those who need it most.

HOLY WEEK

Tuesday, March 26

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:20-36

Whoa! The road to Bethlehem is a lot easier to travel than this Purple Path. Just a few days ago we were anticipating a baby being born; now we are looking at a cross and a crucifixion.

And it is the Bethlehem Baby on that cross. So, we move from a manger to Golgotha, and Lent asks us to think about that: about that Bethlehem Baby that was the Christ Child whose life of love and healing and inclusion and kindness led from a manger to a cross. We have moved from anticipation to introspection. Personally, I prefer anticipation, but as Luke Petrinovic of Temple Church, Wall Street, says, “Comfort is not Lent’s brand...”

On this Lenten path we are asked to look inward, to pray more thoughtfully, to consider our need for repentance and salvation, to ask ourselves, “What does the cross mean in my life?” and then to tell ourselves the truth. The Lenten path that winds down from Golgotha asks, “What in my life needs to die so that something better can sprout and grow – the kind of dying Jesus talks about in today’s gospel reading?” And, yet, pulsing just underneath the introspection of Lent is the knowledge that we know something wonderful: Sunday is coming!

Golgotha will be a hill to climb during Lent, but there is a path on the other side of that hill – a Lenten path that brings the promise of transformation if we stay the journey, seek God’s presence, and once again say the “yes” of our baptism when Jesus said, “Follow Me,” and we did.

While comfort may not be the brand of Lent, neither is despair. Lent is full of promise because if we lean into a deeper “Follow Me,” something new will be resurrected in us too. And then there’s Sunday, and with the Psalmist we, too, can say, “I will always have hope.”

HOLY WEEK

Wednesday, March 27

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

For your consideration . . .

A deeply religious man, steeped in the Messianic theology of Judaism, who firmly believed the time was right for a Heaven on Earth that would overthrow Roman oppressors and usher in the Kingdom of YHWH. A zealous man – one of twelve – who followed an itinerant preacher from town to town and village to village, proclaiming the good news of that Kingdom. Yet now the coming of the Kingdom is in peril because the very same preacher who threw the moneychangers out of the temple will not claim that which is rightfully his – will not take the decisive action that would restore to the Jews the power of their birthright as God’s chosen people.

So Judas makes a decision. If the Kingdom is going to come, he must call Jesus’ hand, forcing the Son of the Most High to bring about the effective rule of God over all peoples. But how to do it?

Judas makes a backroom deal. “Surely,” he thinks, “even though it will look like a betrayal at first, it will quickly turn into THE Kiss of the Kingdom.”

How often have we, with the best of intentions, grown impatient with the seeming lack of progress in a virtuous endeavor, and pushed toward a goal, only to find that it was our timing that was off? It was our will, not Thine?

In his burning desire for the prophecies to be fulfilled, might Judas have been seduced by fear, and erroneously thought, “If it is to be, it is up to me”?

Pray for the patience, trust, and wisdom to let things ripen in due season as designed.

Randy Weeks,
“A Lenten Journey: 2020”

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Thursday, March 28

*Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19;
1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35*

Supper was special that night. There was both a heaviness and a holiness hanging in the air. We couldn't explain the mood. It was sacred, yet sorrowful. Gathered around that table, eating that solemn, holy meal seemed to us the most important meal we had ever sat down to eat. We were dwelling in the heart mystery. Though dark the night, hope felt right, as if something evil was about to be conquered.

And then suddenly the One we loved startled us all—He got up from the table and put on an apron. Can you imagine how we felt? God in an apron! Tenderness encircled us as He bowed before us. He knelt and said, "I choose to wash your feet because I love you." God in an apron, kneeling. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was embarrassed until his eyes met mine. I sensed my value then. He touched my feet. He held them in his strong, brown hands. He washed them. I can still feel the water. I can still feel the touch of his hands. I can still see the look in his eyes.

Then he handed me the towel and said, "As I have done so you must do." Learn to bow. Learn to kneel. Let your tenderness encircle everyone you meet. Wash their feet, not because you have to, because you want to. It seems I've stood two thousand years holding the towel in my hands, "As I have done so you must do," keeps echoing in my heart. "There are so many feet to wash," I keep saying. "No," I hear God's voice resounding through the years, "There are only my feet. What you do for them you do for me."

Macrina Wiederkehr,
God in an Apron, Seasons of Your Heart

GOOD FRIDAY

Friday, March 29

*Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25;
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42*

The Burial of Jesus

From the cross to the resurrection is the usual order of conversation. The burial of Jesus is often treated almost as an afterthought. Jesus was buried. I wonder if that seems too human, too final. Burying is the last rite we give a body. The trauma of the funeral and the graveside is finally over.

Perhaps a comfort in leaving out the burial is not having to deal for long with the fact that Jesus died. Somehow that still doesn't seem quite right. Jesus was God, the Messiah. Envisioning Jesus' dead body being laid in a tomb is hard, a harsh but real truth. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus care for the lifeless body of Jesus, but we don't hear sermons about them. They don't get the recognition of the people at the crucifixion or the empty tomb.

Calling this day "Good Friday" might help the day pass easier for some just as ignoring the burial might make the fact that Jesus died less dramatic. Today marks the anniversary of the death of Jesus. Jesus died; he really died.

"But God demonstrates [God's] own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

David Raddin,
"A Lenten Journey: 2017"

HOLY SATURDAY

Saturday, March 30

*Job 14:1-14; Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24; Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16;
1 Peter 4:1-8; Matthew 27:57-66; John 19:38-42*

Sunday Horizon

“He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters
for a boundary between light and darkness” (Job 26: 10).

Job of all people should have known
Light and Darkness bow to no one:
like children defying a parent’s boundary,
light seeps into dark creeps into light,
fingertips brushing one another
across a smeared battle line
in a cosmic sibling struggle
that aerates the horizon
(a Greek lie: “limiting circle”)
with hospitality enough
to let in and to let out
as Roman threshold’s Janus
looks both forward and backward
like Sunday’s
liminality marks both
beginning and end
of weeks for us
whose lives evince
the friendship and the feud
between light and darkness.

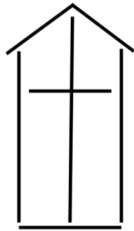
There is a “both/and” feeling of Sundays, the end of a week and the beginning of another. Today is not Sunday though. Today is Holy Saturday, a day on which we are sad because Christ was crucified but glad because Christ is alive. Is this a day fitting of a funeral, or a feast day of life? Yes. Very seldom are our lives colored wholly by singularity. Two things can be true at once: we mourn on this Black Saturday; we celebrate on this Easter Eve. But if God is God, then in the end, light wins. Light wins in the end.

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