



“Is such the fast that I choose?”

Meditations For Lent

By

Members Of St. James' Episcopal Church
West Bend, Wisconsin

Our Recommendation

In past publications of this booklet of meditations, we have always provided our readers a modified version of Morning Offering from the Cursillo movement. We hoped that you might use that model in conjunction with your daily reading of the meditations herein. Of course, it is permissible and in order to simply read the meditations daily during Lent, but some kind of framework gives a good structure for reading these thoughts of our writers.

This year, we get back to our roots, (i.e., *the Book of Common Prayer*). That book is the glue that holds us together as Episcopalians, as Anglicans. Remember when our families gave us a copy for Confirmation? The BCP is no longer just for Sundays — it never was. A parishioner once told me that I had prayed a most beautiful prayer. I confessed that I could not accept the adulation for the prayer I used was from the *Book of Common Prayer*. I recall the short Sunday school course I taught, “Have a love affair with the *Book of Common Prayer*.”

Beginning on page 136, the authors have made available a series of Daily Devotions for Families and Individuals. There you will find suggested uses of this section.

In so many Episcopal churches today, the parishes provide copies of the prayer book for use by those that worship there. People don't generally find a need to have them at home. There was a time when all Episcopalians had their own copies of this venerable book. Pull yours out, if you have one. You can purchase one in the bookstore.

So that you might get back to our roots, we are suggesting in this booklet that you read, over the course of these forty day, our meditations in conjunction with these devotional forms:

In the Morning, 137

At Noon, 138

In the Early Evening, 139

At the Close of Day, 140

”Is such the fast that I choose?”

Introduction

Each year since 1998, I have sat down and contemplated a theme, a title for the booklet of meditations my parish and I would publish. This has proven to be a very good exercise for my people and me as it causes us to think deeply about the scripture appointed for the “weekdays” of Lent and to appropriate those words to our own lives, and translate them in words for you.

I took this title from Isaiah, the alternate lesson for Ash Wednesday. In the past, you could have bet your life that I would always use the lesson from Joel. It is ever sufficient for me to ask, “Who knows, perhaps God will turn back and relent and leave a blessing behind?”

This year, in preparation, I considered all the acts taking place on the world stage, (i.e., presidential races and debates in this country, ISIL harming people wherever they may be, a refugee problem larger than any other in history since World War II, hunger, weather events, and the like). Isn’t it time we examine our lives in light of the scriptures written for us in this season of Lent and as our lives intersect with the lives of all the other people at home and abroad?

When we give consideration to our own personal piety and the condition of the world, do we draw a line on how we will live out our Christianity? I think that gets to the heart of what the prophet is pondering in the snippet I have quoted above. What do our fasts look like from year to year? Are our fasts manageable or are we often finding that we have to stretch? Do our fasts really address ourselves in a way that they move God?

This will be the fourth booklet we have written at St. James. The groups have varied in composition and particularly in size. One person, realizing that she would be away for most of January, asked me to send her a couple of “weekdays” on which to meditate. That’s the kind of spirit I have witnessed in those that write on God’s words in these pages.

As I have said in the past: read, reflect on what we have presented here. If so moved, write some meditations yourself. This is one way to accept the priest’s annual invitation and to have a holy Lent.

Richard+
a servant of God
Lent 2016

Ash Wednesday - February 10, 2016

Isaiah 58:6 “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”

On the day I have begun this meditation, a number of governors around our country are making statements that they will not accept any refugees from Syria. [Interestingly, scholars are indicating that there is no constitutional authority given to governors to do such a thing.] Some on the campaign trail have stated that only Christians among the refugees should be admitted into this country. I hear my now, new favorite word of political campaigns, (i.e., vetted).

A time before the recent tragedy of France, the people emanating primarily from South of our border were the topic of immigration discussion, along with building walls, and in some instances, sending all illegal aliens back to their countries of origin. One woman had suggested that we should put them all on boats and “send them back to Mexico.”

Bread for the World is an organization whose purpose is summed in this passage from the Wikipedia: “Bread for the World is a non-partisan, Christian citizens’ movement in the United States to end hunger. The organization describes itself as a collective Christian voice urging nation’s decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad.” I receive emails from them soliciting funds to assist them in their ministry.

Isaiah, a prophet that lived centuries ago and purportedly talked to God goes on to tell us: “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

Friends, this is a quandary for me. Can what I need to do be so simple either way? Feed and house people? or send them back from where they came?

A prophet in Atlanta, Georgia, Rob Wright, suggested that all we need to do is pray to God about our needs, our dilemmas. I assume that means about anything that troubles us, that we wring our hands over, and the like.

What is God going to say to us? Feed? or Send away?

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; 2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Thursday after Ash Wednesday - February 11, 2016

Luke 9:24 “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

A martyr is someone who is killed for or during the practice of his religion. As a young Christian in the sixties I was sure I would be able to give my life for Jesus. We were assured by our religious teacher that if this happened we were certainly assured a place in Heaven.

In the first century, many Christians were persecuted and gave their lives. St. Stephen was believed to be one of the first Christians martyred. Apostles Peter Simon and his brother Andrew were both crucified. Peter was crucified upside down and Andrew was crucified on a cross in the form of an X because they did not feel worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Christ.

The Oxford Martyrs Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer wrote the new Anglican Religion. Thomas Cranmer wrote the first Book of Common Prayer. In 1555 and 1556 when Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon took the throne, they were burned at the stake.

Archbishop Janani Luwum was a leading voice in criticizing the excesses of President Idi Amin. In 1977, Archbishop Janani Luwum delivered a note of protest to Dictator Idi Amin against his policies of arbitrary killings and unexplained disappearances. Shortly after he and other church leaders were charged with treason. Although he died in a car crash, it is accepted that he was murdered on the orders of Idi Amin.

June 12, 2015 members of the Emmanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston South Carolina died as a result of inviting a young man into a prayer meeting. During the prayer meeting the young man stood up and announced that “he was there to kill black people.” He killed nine.

August 5, 2012 a gunman entered the Seik Temple in Oakcreek, Wisconsin. He martyred six people that Sunday.

We are living in dangerous times. Will I be ready if I have to stand up for my faith? Will I be strong? Will I run?

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and further us with your continual help; that in all our works begun continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy Name, and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 1; Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 9:18-25

Friday after Ash Wednesday - February 12, 2016

Matthew 9:13 “It is kindness that I want . . .” “I have not come to call respectable people but to call outcasts.”

Society creates outcasts. It creates a system of exclusion and a system of division. Depending on the choices we make in life and how we are perceived by others, we may be considered outcasts ourselves. Being an outcast can be a relative position or place. In one moment, we may be considered an important part of the group or we may be looked down upon and excluded. What we do know about this flexible position is that Jesus says that he came to call outcasts. Those who are cast-a-side by people are sought after by Jesus. That is very important for us, as we could easily be in that negative position. No matter the propensity of exclusion or the level of exclusion, we are never devalued and excluded by Jesus.

When I was in high school, a friend of mine became pregnant before graduation. Some of the parents became outraged and wanted to restrict our contact with our friend. I was appalled by their attitude. This young lady was one of my dearest friends. Before the pregnancy, she had always been welcomed into my home. But, now, after one mistake, she had become an outcast. We were devastated by our parents’ attitude. For the girls, our friend had not changed, she was the sweet young lady she had always been. She was shunned by all of the adults she encountered. She felt that she had brought shame to her family. She and the teen father were required to get married and even that did not make the situation better or acceptable. “After all” said the adults, “She had had to get married.”

My high school girlfriends were at opposite positions from their parents. We continued our friendship with our girlfriend into adulthood. We tried to protect her from ridicule and societal ugliness. We did not wear caps and gowns for graduation. We wore white dresses that were bought in bulk so that each young lady had the same white dress. Our friend was unable to wear her dress which had been ordered many months ago. She was the first high school graduate in her family. She wanted to give a moment of pride back to her family. She wanted to participate in her high school graduation. All of the girlfriends met and brought their graduation dresses. Our goal was to find a dress that our friend could wear. We did. As a petite young lady, she was able to graduate unnoticed.

Who are the Christ figures in this incident? What was Christ’s mission? Was Christ’s mission accomplished? What would you say to these young ladies who graduated 53 years ago?

Support us, O Lord, with your gracious favor through the fast we have begun; that as we observe it by bodily self-denial, so we may fulfill it with inner sincerity of heart; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalms 51:1-10; Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 9:10-17

Saturday after Ash Wednesday - February 13, 2016

Isaiah 58:10 “If you give food to the hungry and satisfy those who are in need then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon.”

I once lived in a city that was plagued with poverty and homelessness. When homelessness first showed up in our American cities, it was populated by men. We didn't see women or children, just men. We, now, know that many of the men on the streets are veterans. Some have alcohol and drug abuse issues. Others are victims of mental illness. The American government decided if the men were not harmful to themselves or to others - no social services were needed. After awhile, we noticed that women were a part of this new societal group. Homeless women were not only without homes but many had lost family connections. These new faces suffered from lack of mental health care. The men could go to the V. A. Hospitals where they could get care and appropriate medication. The medication acted as a small Band-Aid over a large wound. Medication without psychological services often falls short of its intent.

The homeless have evolved into larger groups that often included families. Many American Children live in poverty. Too many children are homeless. Too many children are in shelters. As a society, we have not provided for the needs of those less fortunate. We praise men and women who go to war but we don't provide for those who return with emotional and mental wounds. Mental health for centuries has been thought as a failing of character. Cancer patients are seen as victims of disease but not so with those who have mental health disabilities, as if someone would choose to live a life of pain and anguish.

One small town shuffled the homeless to the back streets of the town. The town leaders made it known that they were not happy having “those” people on Main Street. It became a political issue with some of the parishioners agreeing to stop feeding the homeless. What had once been a productive ministry was again being snuffed out by the “pretty” people who no longer wanted to share the streets, the churches, or common courtesies with less fortunate people. We do not know where the homeless will go on the sub-zero days and nights. Some cannot go to the library because many library patrons are uncomfortable and frightened in the presence of the homeless.

The city is dark with despair. Unemployment is in the double digits. Businesses are closing. Only a few places provide meals for the homeless. The local government was challenged for not supporting the needs of the homeless. The darkness continues as the least of God's people are underserved.

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth your right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 86:1-11; Isaiah 58:9b-14; Luke 5:27-32

Monday in the First Week of Lent - February 15, 2016

Psalm 19:7-14 “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

As I enter into the season of Lent I have decided to use this as my prayer and mantra. I have often heard our priest use this as his prayer before beginning his sermon. The first time I heard it I came home and wrote it on a note and put it up in my office. This verse from Psalms spoke to me and moved me.

There is a long standing joke in my home that I am the grand opener of Pandora’s box. It would seem that Pandora’s box is actually my mouth and that whenever I open it, the evil of the world escapes and creates great mayhem. My desire to fix what I think is a wrong or proclaim what I believe is an injustice is stronger than my desire to control my mouth. Inevitably I open my “Pandora’s mouth” and nothing but trouble ensues. No matter how hard I try it is impossible to put everything back into the box.

In the myth of Pandora’s box, after the evil has been released, the only thing remaining in the box is hope. This hope has potential to grow and flourish and change what has turned into mayhem and bring good back into the story. When it seems that all is lost and that there is no way to fix what has been broken hope lies in the dark recesses of the empty box and sparks a small light of love.

My hope is that as I enter this Lenten time of reflection and contemplation that the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart truly are pleasing and acceptable to God. I hope that I can meditate on those things that bring me closer to spiritual maturity. I hope that when I open my mouth the words mirror the meditation of my heart.

In the Christian story, with all the evil in the world, Jesus is the hope that was left in the box. His life, His sacrifice, His resurrection gives the potential for all of us to have hope to grow, flourish and bring good back into the story.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully increase in us your gifts of holy discipline, in almsgiving, prayer, and fasting; that our lives may be directed to the fulfilling of your most gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 19:7-14; Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18; Matthew 25:31-46

Tuesday in the First Week of Lent -February 16, 2016

Matthew 6:13 “And do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one.”

I have quoted the NRSV Bible for this verse, but I know this better as “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”

Oh temptation you wicked tease
My selfish desires I want to please
Oh how I want to eat the second piece of pie
Or how it would be so much easier to lie

I'd rather read than do the dishes
How much more fun to satisfy my wishes
To buy those fancy shoes
And ignore the naked I choose

Did I feed the hungry or myself
With the cans on the shelf
Did I judge the prisoner in his cell
Instead of visiting for a spell

Dear Lord, lead me from temptation
Guide me in every situation
From evil please deliver me
So only you will others see

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory
And for my weakness I am so very sorry
To follow you is what I intend
Forever and ever, amen

Grant to your people, Lord, grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow you, the only true God; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Psalm 34:15-22; Isaiah 55:6-11; Matthew 6:7-15

Wednesday in the First Week of Lent - February 17, 2016

Jonah 3:1 “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time....”

Why do I always get a passage from Jonah on which to meditate?

I can hear the young mother saying, “Don’t make me ask you a second time....”

The adjunct professor told the class to use the APA style of citing and making bibliographies. She even gave them digital handouts, put this reference into the syllabus for the class, and the like. One student chose not to follow these instructions, and she wonders why she got a B.

While waiting in the line to check out at the grocery store, I noticed a line for a different checker was moving much faster than the line in which I was standing. I continually told myself, “Move on over to the other line and you’ll check out faster.” I continued to disregard my admonition. Eventually I moved to the other line where there was only one person. Movement at that precise moment ceased as the clerk needed to send someone back into the store to do a price check.

A man named Boykin approached the Southern gentleman who was sitting way back on the bus, which meant some working women had to stand. Boykin approached the man and said, “Hey mister. How about moving up some so some of these women can sit down.” When the man responded, “Nothing doing,” Boykin took out his knife and said, “Man I’ll give you the jitters this morning.” The man ran up to the bus driver and complained.

My younger son was driving his new car one day when a bunch of teenagers drove up and started “Messing with him.” The more he protested that they should move on and stop getting so close to him, the more they antagonized him. Suddenly [they did not see an oncoming car] they plowed right into the other car. My son drove calmly away.

When God calls us, why do we hesitate? Do we intend to disregard the call? Does what he asks of us seem an impossibility to accomplish? Is there some other reason why we need more than a single prodding from God to do his will?

In all too many cases, our best course of action may be to act when we are initially asked to do something. At least, when it comes to God, we probably can assume that the outcome will be good or positive or beneficial. Jonahs of the world, “let it not take two reminders.”

Bless us, O God, in this holy season, in which our hearts seek your help and healing; and so purify us by your discipline that we may grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 51:11-18; Jonah 3:1-10; Luke 11:29-32

Thursday in the First Week of Lent - February 18, 2016

Psalm 138:6-8 “For though the Lord is high, he regards the lonely; but the haughty he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou didst stretch out thy hand against the wrath of my enemies, and thy right hand delivers me.”

This passage from psalm 138 says so much to me, and yet it is very basic and simple. I sometimes miss the message because I am trying too hard to decipher what God is trying to say to me. God doesn't want to be so complicated that we get confused and give up. I've always rooted for the underdog, and in this passage we hear God is high, yet He regards the lowly. I find this very comforting. I need to work on remembering this when I feel down or overwhelmed. Hearing that He knows the haughty from afar puts more of His wonders in perspective. He stretches out His hand against the wrath of my enemies. This in the midst of trouble. My troubles? Our troubles? Each time I feel beaten down by my enemies or what I perceive as my troubles, it is comforting knowing that my Lord and Savior is there for me, and He will see that justice is done; His way, not mine! This is still hard for me to accept, but I must if I want to truly rejoice in the resurrection even though we must first walk in agony through the crucifixion.

Strengthen us, O Lord, by your grace, that in your might we may overcome all spiritual enemies, and with pure hearts serve you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 138; Esther (Apocrypha) 14:1-6, 12-14; Matthew 7:7-12

Friday in the First Week of Lent - February 19, 2016

Ezekiel 18:27-29 “Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is lawful and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.”

These words surely bring hope. Sin itself does not have to be our downfall. Committing sin is certainly bad and wrong. Turning away from sin and deciding to follow Jesus and His ways is what can help open the door to salvation. To be able to “live in heaven” is a comfort. What better incentive can there be? I can get pretty “down” on myself when I do sin in either thought, word, or deed, but in Jesus there is hope. He will forgive me. Yes, I still need to turn from evil and follow and obey Him, but realizing I have a “chance” with Him makes it all worthwhile.

Lord Christ, our eternal Redeemer, grant us such fellowship in your sufferings, that, filled with your Holy Spirit, we may subdue the flesh to the spirit, and the spirit to you, and at the last attain to the glory of your resurrection; who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 130; Ezekiel 18:21-28; Matthew 5:20-26

Saturday in the First Week of Lent - February 20, 2016

Matthew 5:48 “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

God is Perfect

I didn't find anything that “spoke” to me in the Bible selections for today including the chapter and verses from Matthew's gospel until I got to the last line which I had underlined in red in my Bible many years ago. “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In the white space under this verse I had written (also in red) – sharing God's perfection.

I own a Revised Standard Version of the Bible purchased at a neighbor's rummage sale for 25 cents in the late 1970's when I became a layreader at church. My King James Version was not the translation being used in church at the time. I have put many “miles” on this now very ragged looking book. I believe it is a good thing to underline and write in my Bible.

I clearly remember being at a Bible study which was led by our priest and almost gasping out loud as I read that I must BE PERFECT!! What? How could I, a sinner, be perfect, as my heavenly Father is? Then the priest offered clarification by giving us those words “sharing God's perfection.” I underlined the verse & wrote the phrase in red. I knew I could never be perfect like my heavenly Father no matter how hard I tried but I could understand “sharing God's perfection.” Without God I am nothing but with God, I can be and do much.

I used to do some quilting years ago and through that hobby, I also read lots of books on various quilting styles and the history of quilting. I recall reading that Amish quilters would intentionally create a small mistake in their final quilt. This was to assure themselves that they did not produce something perfect.....since only God is perfect.

The craftsman who made the cabinets for our kitchen remodel also proclaimed the same idea about the imperfections in his work also stating, that God alone is perfect. He admired my plaque of Jesus the Carpenter and I located one for him at a gift shop and presented it to him when his work was done.

I often wonder how those who don't have God in their lives can face their struggles. I am then reminded that we of faith can pray for them and be their lifeline to God. This Lent as I am sharing God's perfection may I continually pray for those lost souls. Through the Holy Spirit my love is made perfect in Him.

O God, by your Word you marvelously carry out the work of reconciliation: Grant that in our Lenten fast we may be devoted to you with all our hearts, and united with one another in prayer and holy love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalms 119:1-8; Deuteronomy 26:16-19; Matthew 5:43-48

Monday in the Second Week of Lent - February 22, 2016

Luke 6:38 "... give and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Today I'm meditating on how I want to be. Although I try, I don't always get it right: I am a sinner. I wish that I always could be kind and sweet to everyone, but I struggle. My sense of humor is a gift I was given, but I need to use it more when things don't go my way. I share my time with others, but sometimes I'm selfish and want to go my own way. Sometimes I'm too rigid in my way of looking at things; I need to be more flexible.

When I was younger, I never even looked at myself this closely. What is it they say, "With age comes wisdom?" Well, I'm no Solomon and never will be, but now I'm starting to see how I could have handled my life differently, treated people kinder, and lived a little slower.

I was raised to believe in God and always will, but I'm always quick to complain about the bad that happens to me. I realize now that I'm not always so quick to thank him for all the good he's put in my life: my teachers (in school and in life), my family, my friends and neighbors, the people I meet throughout the day. Every time I do something right by them, it comes back to me. I know this, but I see that I have to acknowledge this more to myself and to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

During this season of Lent, I will work on being more mindful of my actions, ask for forgiveness for my past failings, and the strength to always remember to be kind and good humored to everyone that I interact with, knowing this will come back to me.

Let your Spirit, O Lord, come into the midst of us to wash us with the pure water of repentance, and prepare us to be always a living sacrifice to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 79:1-9; Daniel 9:3-10; Luke 6:27-38

Tuesday in the Second Week of Lent - February 23, 2016

Isaiah 1:2 “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken; I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.”

As a young child going to a Roman Catholic school, I remember the nuns always reminding us that we were “children of God” and that our heavenly father loved us, no matter what, he was always there for us. This was probably more of a comfort to me than most kids in my class, because my brother and sisters and I were being raised by our mother without the presence of our father. It was the early 1960’s and that was not as common an arrangement as it is today.

Our mother loved us and expected us to be good to each other, stay out of trouble, stay away from a bad crowd, respect authority, and stay out of jail. We loved her and because we didn’t want to disappoint her or make her look like a bad mother, we were pretty decent kids.

Once when we got together to buy her a gift (I don’t remember the occasion), we kept nagging her about what she wanted and she said she didn’t need anything. Of course that didn’t stop us from asking and so she said, “Be good to each other; to love each other.”

I think this is exactly what God is saying through Isaiah; To be good and love each other, do not bring shame on ourselves and our God by not being the persons he wants us to be. If we can hold to his laws and avoid sin, we will have shown our appreciation of his love. We will not have “rebelled against him.” We can show him that we are grateful for the life he has given us and the love he has shown by sending Jesus to redeem us and opening the gates of heaven.

O God, you willed to redeem us from all iniquity by your Son: Deliver us when we are tempted to regard sin without abhorrence, and let the virtue of his passion come between us and our mortal enemy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 50:7-15, 22-24; Isaiah 1:2-4, 16-20; Matthew 23:1-12

Wednesday in the Second Week of Lent - February 24, 2016

Jesus so often spoke in parables so we would remember his words. To me a good story stays with me forever, quotes are soon forgotten.

Recently I finished a novel, *Jayber Crow*, by Wendell Berry. Like Jesus Christ, Jayber Crow is a humble, loving man. He is a simple barber and a grave digger in a small southern river town.

Jayber is orphaned at an early age, lives with relatives for a short time and orphaned again. After time in a Christian orphanage he goes on to study theology. He abandons his studies and returns to his hometown of Port William during a flood of biblical proportions. Here he matures and is reshaped like the pot in a potter's hands. Here he finds community with its flaws and blessings.

Jayber is a quiet man, but he is an observer. He watches over the town with loving eyes. His prayer is "Thy will be done." There is one man in the town, Troy Chatham, that he struggles to love. Troy is a study in self-centeredness. He, like John and James in the gospel, wants to be an important man. His competitive drive for success destroys the land and his family. He has no core. While Jayber quietly watches, he rushes through life leaving destruction in his wake.

As he ages Jayber retires to live in a small cabin on the river. People still come to him to sit and watch the river, converse and get a haircut. He is the quiet servant. He spends time watching the shadows change, the flowers bloom, the seasons pass. The sounds and beauty of nature bring him peace. The author writes: "I am a man who has hoped in time, that this life, when poured out at the end, would say, 'good-good-good-good-good-good,' like a gallon jug of the prime local spirit. I am an old man of loses, regrets, and griefs. I am an old man full of love. I am a man of faith."

This story will stay with me forever. It is a reminder of the path I want to be on, Jayber at the end chooses to love Troy Chatham. With all of his flaws Jayber sees he needs a friend. Jayber chooses to love.

O God, you so loved the world that you gave your only-begotten Son to reconcile earth with heaven: Grant that we, loving you above all things, may love our friends in you, and our enemies for your sake; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalms 31:9-16; Jeremiah 18:1-11, 18-20; Matthew 20:17-28

Thursday in the Second Week of Lent - February 25, 2016

Psalm 1 Happy those who do not follow the counsel of the wicked,
Nor go the way of the sinners, nor sit in the company of the scoffers.
Rather the law of the Lord is their joy: God's law they study day and night.
They are like the tree planted near the streams of water.

It is early in the morning. The sky is lightening. It is cold and cloudy. God, I need you today. God, I need coffee. The two go hand in hand. I sip my coffee, get my meditation material and God and I talk. Joy slowly seeps into my pores. Ah, the combination of grace and caffeine. I watch the birds at the feeder and say thank you God for your glorious creation, for giving me this day of life. Protect my loved ones at church, at home, my friends and family. I feel like the tree planted near the stream. God gives me strength. I plan my day, basking in the love of God.

The phone rings. The temptation not to answer is crying out. I wait and listen to the message. "Is there any chance you could_____?" Fill in the blank. Okay. My first decision of the day. I think it over, talk to God a bit and return the call. I say yes. It's winter it's cold. I really want to just stay home. I want to make a nice dinner, do a little laundry, and yes, maybe even dust. I want to finish my book!

After I say yes, I realize my joy and contentment would have disappeared if I had said no. My attitude changes. The happiness creeps back in. God, the day will unfold as you wish. Thank you for giving me the opportunity today to help someone. Thank you for giving me the chance to be fruitful, like the tree near the stream. And thank you for saving me from dusting. I will finish my book tonight. Thy will be done.

O Lord, strong and mighty, Lord of hosts and King of glory: Cleanse our hearts from sin, keep our hands pure, and turn our minds from what is passing away; so that at the last we may stand in your holy place and receive your blessing; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 16:19-31

Friday in the Second Week of Lent - February 26, 2016

Matthew 21:37 “Last of all he sent his son to them. Surely they will respect my son, he said.”

In the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard, the owner of the vineyard sent slaves in to harvest the grapes. The slaves were beaten and some killed by the tenants. Puzzled by this behavior the owner decided to send his son into the vineyard. He was convinced that the tenants would respect his son. The tenants did not. They threw his son out of the vineyard and killed him.

This parable is the story of how the prophets and the servants of God have been treated as he has sent them into the world. The prophets were there to “harvest” people for God. Who would think that those who worked for God would be treated so poorly? The owner’s son, Jesus, was treated with even more acute disrespect. He was killed. It did not matter to the tenants who the owner was sending forth. Their needs were more important.

One vineyard in Christendom is the church. Many of God’s workers - ministers, priests, deacons, pastors, bishops, and lay leaders have been hurt by the tenants of the church. Even in the house of the Lord, we can find those with their own agendas. People with a mission are often very dangerous. Some people feel that they are God-driven to make things happen. If decisions and plans are forced, they are not the will of God. If coercion and subterfuge are involved, that, too, is not the will of God. Cliques may be formed. Exclusions may happen. What has been done in the name of God is shameful.

I have known people to be treated so poorly that they have never darkened the door of the church again. I have seen Ladies Circles pick and choose who will be allowed in their organization. Some members have been excluded from singing in the choir. Choir rehearsal times have been changed to eliminate a particular member. One lady was treated so poorly that she not only left the choir but the church. Clergy families are not always embraced by the members. The “preacher’s kids” were criticized by the other kids and sometimes even the parents. The clergy spouse must be careful what he or she says. Parishioners often think they are hearing the voice of the pastor, which is usually not true. One clergy spouse was bullied so much that she stop attending her husband’s church.

This parable is not as antiquated as one may think. It is very reflective of churches, mosques, and synagogues left to their own whims, when the holy spirit is not invoked for guidance. What can you do to not be like these tenants?

Grant, O Lord, that as your Son Jesus Christ prayed for his enemies on the cross, so we may have grace to forgive those who wrongfully or scornfully use us, that we ourselves may be able to receive your forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 105:16-22; Genesis 37:3-4, 12-28; Matthew 21:33-43

Saturday in the Second Week of Lent -February 27, 2016

Luke 15:24 “For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost but now he has been found. And so the feasting began.”

On Wednesday nights, our family comes together for dinner and Bible Study. The Lost Son Parable was the lesson for last Wednesday. It created lively discussion with all points of view given. We addressed the parable through the eyes of the lost son, the father and the son who stayed at home. For those of you with siblings, you can imagine how our children responded. As someone reared as an only child, the sibling defenses were lost on deaf ears.

We have no wealth for our children to share and no inheritance to give the child who wants to leave home for great adventures. I do understand the symbolism invoked in this parable. The Father is God. The older son has stayed home and been loyal, responsible and faithful. He has been the responsible, good son. The younger son has asked for his inheritance and gone into the world and squandered it. This son represents those of us who have lived life to its fullest with no regard. In this adventurous life we tend to grow away from God and the tenets with which we were reared. We grow away from God. The separation from God is known as sin. Another synonym for sin and separation is lost. The younger son is lost. Being lost can be a common valley, when we make poor choices. We allow our desires to direct our paths.

What I love about God, the Father, is that he never walks away from us. We separate from Him but he never separates from us. God is always happy and acceptant when we return. This was difficult for the older son to understand. He felt like his father was being unfair to him. He did not understand how his father could accept his brother’s behavior. He wanted his brother to suffer for the choices he had made. The older brother was not forgiving.

Parents, who have a child who has left the family and gotten into dangerous, carousing antics, understands the joy of having the child return home to his family and safety. I stepped away from the church in my late high school years. I was the younger brother. I had always gone to church. I attended a neighborhood church that I could walk to as a child. My family was devastated when I announced that I wasn’t going to Centenary Methodist Church. In fact, I wasn’t going to any church. We had been asked to take a temperance pledge. I had seen some members of the church lie about drinking alcohol, as they took the temperance pledge. I refused to take the temperance pledge. I left no room for forgiveness for the church members. I was the older brother. Who are you in this parable?

Grant, most merciful Lord, to your faithful people pardon and peace, that they may be cleansed from all their sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 103:1-4(5-8)9-12; Micah 7:14-15, 18-20; Luke 15:11-32

Monday in the Third Week of Lent - February 29, 2016

2 Kings 5:10-11 “Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, ‘Go wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.’ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, ‘I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!’”

Naaman was a great commander and a mighty warrior in the army of Aram. He suffered from leprosy. A young Israelite girl became a captive during one of his raids and he took her to serve his wife. This girl told him to go to Elisha to be healed of his leprosy.

As you can see by the above passage, Elisha didn’t even come to meet this important man, and gave him very bizarre instructions to be cured. He should be treated with more respect! He felt the instructions to bathe seven times in the Jordan River was beneath his station. He felt that Elisha should have come himself to do the healing. How many times, like Naaman, do we try to make ourselves more important and things more difficult than they need to be? Things don’t need to be more difficult to be effective.

We’re all the same in the sight of God, and sometimes we get in the way of what God has planned for us. We are loved and directed by Him no matter what our station is in life. We come to God humble and full of hope whether dressed up in fancy duds or in our grubbies; whether rich or poor. The important thing is that we come to Him as we are, no matter what station in life and follow Him no matter how easy or difficult the task is that He puts in front of us.

Look upon the heart-felt desires of your humble servants, Almighty God, and stretch forth the right hand of your majesty to be our defense against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 42:1-7 2; Kings 5:1-15b; Luke 4:23-30

Tuesday in the Third Week of Lent - March 1, 2016

Psalm 25:3-4 “Show me your ways and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.”

How would our lives be if we practiced the sentiments in the above verses of Psalm 25?
How many times do we ask God to teach and lead us in His ways? What would our lives be like if we actually followed this simple practice?

Sometimes, when I sit and pray, I try to pray an elaborate set of requests and desires. I think if I would pray this simple prayer and sit quietly, my paths would become clearer and more directed.

I remember a time when I was planning a weekend event at St. James’ that entailed making phone calls, sending invitations, lining up musicians and sleeping arrangements. All the signs God was showing me were to cancel this event, that it wasn’t the right time. I didn’t listen, my mind was made up. Guess what? The event was a spectacular failure. I was doing all the talking and none of the listening, how could the Spirit have a chance?

Since that time I have tried to be more open to His leadings. I don’t always succeed, but when I give the control over to Him there is a much greater chance of success.

We need to take the time to sit quietly, calm our minds and let the Holy Spirit direct us as is best for us.

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom you have given a fervent desire to pray, may, by your mighty aid, be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 25:3-10; Song of the Three Young Men 2-4, 11-20a*; Matthew 18:21-35

* In some Bibles, Daniel 3:25-27,34-43

Wednesday in the Third Week of Lent - March 2, 2016

Deuteronomy 4:7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?

The writer was not aware of the claims hurled by two potential warring nations prior to the start of the first Gulf War. I recall hearing the president of this country declare that God was on our side, and we would be victorious. Saddam Hussein, dictator of Iraq at the time, indicated that Allah would bring victory to him and his nation. How near was God and to whom? Both leaders assumed that God was in their corner. He was near to them and was working on their behalf and for their good.

Jesus stood before a tomb, one in which his friend who had been dead for four days now. The man's sisters were distraught and they both realized that if Jesus had come sooner, their brother would not have died. Standing all around were the mourners and other individuals that hung out at funerals and around the widows and others that were grieving.

Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven who must have been close at hand. According to our account, Jesus gave God his thanks for always hearing him, and with that, Jesus proceeded to make the dead man come forth from the grave. And, he did.

Nations, seemingly, have now gotten away from dependence on God. We think in these days about the closeness of God to those that seek him and choose to follow in his ways. Why if our nation, for example, called on God, wouldn't some of our problems be solved without wrangling and ill-will and incivility toward one another?

Sometimes we know when the Lord is near to us. Remember the story of Jesus and Peter when Jesus asked Peter if he wanted to go away as well? Peter said to Jesus that he did not because Jesus had the words of salvation. Peter knew who was standing in his midst. He knew how close he stood to salvation and everlasting life.

There are two important words we need to keep in mind. They are transcendent and immanent. For some people, God is unknowable, unapproachable, and that would be descriptive of a transcendent god. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was clearly involved in human history and he continues to be to this day. This is descriptive of a god that is immanent. Our God has had this property since in the beginning when he created all that is seen and unseen.

For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?

Give ear to our prayers, O Lord, and direct the way of your servants in safety under your protection, that, amid all the changes of our earthly pilgrimage, we may be guarded by your mighty aid; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 78:1-6; Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 5-9; Matthew 5:17-19

Thursday in the Third Week of Lent - March 3, 2016

Jeremiah 7:28b “This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.”

This passage comes from a long time ago, in Jeremiah’s time in fact. But, does it ring true for this current age? Jesus often referred to his time as this adulterous and sinful age. In our time, we have heard some of the more fundamental preachers, particularly those that appear on television, warn us about our age, that we are a nation that is headed down the wrong path. One said that Katrina was the result of sinfulness in New Orleans.

Is there merit in what these men are saying about our nation in particular?

During the wild west days, I am sure the temperance societies were on the case of all those cowboys that spent so much time in saloons with hard drinking and loose women.

I was not alive for these, but I have heard about what went on in the so-called speak-easy of the days during prohibition and gangsters, and the like.

Although most people in this country answer polls stating that they believe in God, evidence may say something different. So many people refer to this nation as a Christian nation, yet attendance at Christian services has plummeted to historic lows. More and more, couples are not getting married in the church. A recent television newsmagazine showed that a number of couples are using the funeral home as a venue for their weddings.

Some Christians are going armed to their regular worship services on Sundays. Does that speak to faith in God? Does that indicate that anybody believes that God is in charge?

Couples live together without benefit of marriage. They have multiple children out of wedlock and rarely does anyone see anything wrong with that.

Bankers steal money from the people and they do not go to jail. Bernie Madoff is the only person of note serving any jail time. Crime in the cities is up. Deaths by guns is up. Police have killed too many minority people in their custody and always they are exonerated. Our government has teetered on the brink of default. Politicians are not civil to one another.

I love and hate this expression at the same time, but “You do the math.” What do you think? Are we a nation that hears the voice and do his will?

Keep watch over your Church, O Lord, with your unfailing love; and, since it is grounded in human weakness and cannot maintain itself without your aid, protect it from all danger, and keep it in the way of salvation; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 95:6-11; Jeremiah 7:23-28; Luke 11:14-23

Friday in the Third Week of Lent - March 4, 2016

Mark 12:30-31a “so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.’ And here is the second: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ “

This passage is one of my favorites. In my study Bible on the side of the passage I wrote “this, in a nut shell, is our life best lived.” I don’t remember when I wrote that in but obviously it was impactful to me then and still is now. Here the religion scholar asks Jesus what the most important commandment is, and Jesus answers to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. (The words used in *The Message Bible* are, love God with all your passion, intelligence, and energy.) The next part is, love your neighbor as yourself. I always find this one to be harder to follow because I don’t always love myself. Actually I do now, but I didn’t in the past. I held myself to a standard that was beyond my capabilities, I felt unworthy of kindness from others, I found fault with just about every part of my body, and often wondered why I tried to do anything because it, whatever “it” was, was never good enough. With all of that inside me, how could I ever love God completely, and love my neighbor as myself?

I attended a Chaplain volunteer program a couple of years ago and my teacher saw all of that stuff in me and gave me an assignment. She asked me to look in the mirror each day for a week and say to myself “I love you.” The first thing I said to her was “I can’t do that.” She insisted and I followed through. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done and the best thing I have ever done. Talk about with all my strength, it took all of it! At first, I would say “I love you even though... or, even with... so I was still judging myself, but by the end of the week I could actually say it without any comments, just those three simple words. I could look at myself and see God in my eyes. I felt God’s presence in the words. I learned to let the negativity go, knowing it separated me from God. I wondered how much it hurt him when I said and thought all those awful things. After all, if I believe I am made in his image how could I think myself as unworthy, and complain about what he had blessed me with. It was a very powerful exercise. Because of that assignment I really do love myself now for who I am, and how God made me. Now, I can do the same for my neighbor. I am free to love God at a much deeper level and I can love others deeper too. I can accept others for who they are and let them live without any judgement from me. Naturally, I fall every day from this place but every day I wake up knowing I have another chance to try again.

Grant us, O Lord our Strength, a true love of your holy Name; so that, trusting in your grace, we may fear no earthly evil, nor fix our hearts on earthly goods, but may rejoice in your full salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 81:8-14; Hosea 14:1-9; Mark 12:28-34

Saturday in the Third Week of Lent - March 5, 2016

Luke 18:9- 14

This is a story of humbleness at its best. Jesus tells the story about the Pharisee who sees himself as a step above the tax collector standing beside him. He thanks God that he is not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and this tax collector. He even starts to list what he does to justify this feeling of superiority. He fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all he gets. The tax collector just stands there not able to look up feeling totally unworthy when he admits he is nothing but a sinner. Two very different attitudes, I would say.

I observe that attitude around our church often. People measure how often others attend church, how much they pledge or don't, who gets involved and who sits on the sidelines. I hear a "better than thou" attitude in their voice. I wonder how many of us stand in church on a Sunday and do this. There should be no judging here. We should be gracious with them. That is what God expects of us. That is Jesus' example. There is no room for the "better than thou" attitude in church or anywhere else and yet it happens all the time.

This story is all about humility. It is hard to stay out of that judgement seat. The temptation is all around us. When someone makes comments about others in a judgmental way and I don't say anything, am I not like the person who is making the comments? In a perfect world we would let people be who they are and not measure our differences but embrace them, but our world is not perfect, I am not perfect, so I pray daily for God to forgive me and to have mercy on me, a sinner.

The next time you find yourself in that place where you are feeling superior over the person standing beside you, for whatever reason, stop. Change your focus and realize they are different from you and that's all. Life gets exhausting when we categorize, measure, and compare. For me, being myself, without measuring or comparing, gives me the room to live and grow in right relationship with God. In my NIV Study Bible verse 14, Jesus says; I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. In The Message Bible this same verse reads; this tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.

As quoted from The Rule of Benedict, by Joan Chittister; humility lies in knowing who we are and what our lives are meant to garner. The irony of humility is that, if we have it, we know we are made for greatness, we are made for God.

O God, you know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: Grant us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 51:15-20; Hosea 6:1-6; Luke 18:9-14

Monday in the Fourth Week of Lent - March 7, 2016

Isaiah 65:24 “Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.”

Wow! God knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our “needs” and “wants” before we do. He always wants what’s best for us. His communication with us is always open and His desire is to grant us our requests. He knows if our wants are best for us or not, and responds accordingly.

We are connected to Him with an umbilical cord that He will not cut. Even though we might walk away from the connection at times, it’s still there reaching out to us. Holding us tight and calling us back.

I know a young woman who was very spiritual and involved in many Christian youth events as a teenager. As a young woman she did something that made her feel unworthy of a relationship with God, and she walked away. Whenever she tried to go back to church, she’d make it to the front door and turn around and leave. After many long discussions of her situation, and encouragement to return to church and to God, she was able to take baby steps and then giant leaps back to that special relationship she had experienced and been a part of. She is once again an exceptionally spiritual young woman, serving Him and loving Him with all her heart.

Though her umbilical cord was nicked and nearly severed, He was there waiting for her and encouraging her to return to Him. He’s always there waiting for communication with us.

O Lord our God, in your holy Sacraments you have given us a foretaste of the good things of your kingdom: Direct us, we pray, in the way that leads to eternal life, that we may come to appear before you in that place of light where you dwell for ever with your saints; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 30:1-6, 11-13; Isaiah 65:17-25; John 4:43-54

Tuesday in the Fourth Week of Lent - March 8, 2016

Psalm 46:1-3 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth shall change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”

Always look to God as your refuge, guide and strength through good times and bad. He will not abandon you, but waits for confirmation from you to enter into your times of trial and your times of joy.

God has given each one of us talents, strength and ability to carry out whatever He puts in front of us. Rely and lean on Him to give you the tools to complete any task He requires of you. We may have challenges ahead that we do not feel ready for, but He will provide us with whatever knowledge, talent, guidance and encouragement that we need to accomplish what He sets before us. He will never ask us to do more than He knows we can handle, but He asks us to continually stretch and grow in our understanding of His love and presence.

We all grow and understand God’s will for us at different rates and times. We can’t measure our knowledge and understanding with someone else’s, as everyone has his own path to follow. What we must know is that God will hold our hand, light our way and see us through times of trials and challenges.

Do not judge yourself by the gifts and contributions of others. Only trust in the Lord that He will meet your needs and give you the necessary skills to grow in your spiritual journey.

O God, with you is the well of life, and in your light we see light: Quench our thirst with living water, and flood our darkened minds with heavenly light; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 46:1-8; Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12; John 5:1-18

Wednesday in the Fourth Week of Lent - March 9, 2016

Isaiah 49:8-15 "...In the time of my favor I will answer you..."

What exactly does this scripture mean? Exactly what it entails. Everything is done according to God's timing. I'm sure many of you can relate with me when I say I prayed to God for what seemed like everything- wanting the latest toys for Christmas, getting an A on a test, buying a new car, or landing the perfect job. But, what is it that you often hear being said about the Lord? He is not a magician. He hears our prayers, but He will answer them in his time and what He deems to be the best outcome for us. It's often hard to see the big picture because it's easy to be in the here and now, but putting trust in the Lord to take care of it, will open you up to all the glories He has prepared for you.

I'm at that age where everyone is getting married, are married, or unfortunately, have divorced. I've put most of my energy into school and building a foundation for my future. I'm financially independent and have a good job, so I'm thinking, "What's the logical step? A family." I can't say I have had much luck in the dating world. It's not what it was like when I was in my 20's. I'm encountering many people my age who have different values from me, which I believe are a result of relaxed viewpoints and possibly the disruption of the nuclear family.

I recently spoke with one of my good friends who just went through a divorce. We were discussing the woes of relationships and dating. She told me about the blues of a good marriage gone bad and I told her about the pitfalls of the dating scene, but she told me something I'll never forget. She said it will happen for me in God's time. I won't lie, initially, this was a bitter pill to swallow. I don't think of myself as the type of person who is chasing a man to be married, but I do desire finding my best friend and lifetime partner. As I get older, I seek that more than ever, but I'm very stubborn and won't settle either. I'd put myself out there to meet new people, but nothing came of most of my encounters, except one time meet ups and some friendships. However, now that I've thought about what I want *right* now in my life, I've realized that I'm not so ready to "jump the broom."

It turned out that my friend was God in disguise to tell me that my plan will be handled accordingly to His plan. Sometimes we are so eager to live in the moment and rush the future that we fail to realize that God has a purpose for us. He hears our prayers before we pray them. He knows what our hearts desire and He knows what is best for us. The message I want you, the reader, to take away is that the Lord will always bless you and keep you because you are His child. He will never leave you hanging and will always be by your side through all things, but most importantly He will answer you. Sometimes it may not be what you expected or planned, but God will know the right path for you to take to lead you to happiness. So like Carrie Underwood's song let Jesus take the wheel. God's got this. He had your life planned out before you were born. Let him provide for you at his discretion.

O Lord our God, you sustained your ancient people in the wilderness with bread from heaven: Feed now your pilgrim flock with the food that endures to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.
Psalm 145:8-19; Isaiah 49:8-15; John 5:19-29

Thursday in the Fourth Week of Lent - March 10, 2016

John 5:30 “By myself I can do nothing...”

We are born into this world with the inability to care for ourselves. We must rely on our parents to care for us, feed us, clothe us, and provide shelter. Through time and maturity we learn to crawl, stand, walk, and run. As we grow, we learn things that will protect us and enable us to care for ourselves and our future offspring, but there is a part of us that will always need support from those around us. That is how our relationship with the Lord works. We can do nothing without Him.

When I was 18, I began to have some problems and ended up having to take a break from school. I sought professional help and got back in school, eventually graduating with both my bachelors and masters degrees. I continued to see a psychiatrist and a psychologist throughout my early adulthood and remained pretty stable. Through therapy, I learned the proper coping mechanisms and how to seek out people for support.

Now fast forward to the Summer after my 31st birthday. Life has dealt me a hand I can't seem to manage. I was at a crossroads in my life where I was unhappy at my job, I was dealing with rumors of a family member that I knew weren't true, and most importantly, I just hated life. I was mad at everything and everybody, even God. I was upset one day, wasn't coping well, and took off to clear my mind. I headed to my brother and sister-in-law's house to vent. I wasn't feeling supported and became angrier. I told my brother that even God couldn't help me and I took off without a peep of where I was going to next.

I headed to Lake Michigan over by the local community college to think. I wasn't suicidal, but I wanted all the pain to go away. I felt I had no one. I was refusing my brother's calls. He called my dad, who in turn, had called me. I told my dad where I was and he came over to talk. His comforting manner made me realize that I was loved and people did care about me. I realized then that I needed to get help. I spent the next couple of days in a hospital getting help for my depression. That moment saved my life. My brother saved me. My dad saved me and most importantly, God saved me. I tried to handle things my way, but I was out of control. I was not rational. I had to let go and let God or else that would be the end of me. I'm grateful to this day. I don't regret being hospitalized. It saved me and made me who I am. I'm just thankful that nobody, especially God gave up on me. Without *Him*, I can do nothing.

Almighty and most merciful God, drive from us all weakness of body, mind, and spirit; that, being restored to wholeness, we may with free hearts become what you intend us to be and accomplish what you want us to do; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 106:6-7, 19-23; Exodus 32:7-14; John 5:30-47

Friday in the Fourth Week of Lent - March 11, 2016

Psalm 34:15-16 “Turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. The Lord has eyes for the just and ears for their cry.”

Seek peace and pursue it, blessed are the peacemakers, I leave you peace, my peace I give you. After the resurrection when Jesus breathed on the fearful disciples and said “Peace be with you...Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:21-22) he made a clear connection with the first creation of Adam. God is again breathing into the “clay of the earth” (Genesis 2:7). As God breathed life into Adam, humanity, Jesus breathes the life of the Holy Spirit into his followers. As Jesus was resurrected so shall we be.

Peace and war stared me in the face a few years back when I visited Washington D.C. My husband and I made our first stop on a Sunday morning for a service at the National Cathedral. It was truly awesome. The church was under construction for 83 years. It was a peaceful place,

We returned another day for an official tour. We started at Arlington Cemetery. After that we toured war memorials. I couldn't stay long at the Korean or Vietnam sites. I felt like I was being crushed by ghosts of grief. The sadness was palpable. Looking up you see Abraham Lincoln peering over it all with his desolate expression. Martin Luther King's statue is encased in stone, strong like he was, but again the sadness. We chose not to go to the Holocaust Museum, and opted for some beauty at a Smithsonian.

Our history is filled with wars and violence. Recently I read some history of the Crusades. The mobs of people joined because they were promised immediate entrance into heaven upon their death. They were going to regain the Holy City of Jerusalem by killing Muslims and also Jews along the way. Jesus was depicted as a soldier on a horse. The hatred spread to more burning at the stakes of “heretics,” gays and even lepers. So many horrors were committed by Christians on non-Christians and Christians alike.

We are called to be peacemakers. Jesus calls us to love God and love our neighbors. I truly believe that The Holy Spirit resides in us all. This is where the Kingdom of God is, it isn't in a far off place up in the sky. If we, as followers of Christ's teaching, see God and goodness in our fellow man, there is no room for hatred and violence. Seek peace.

O God, you have given us the Good News of your abounding love in your Son Jesus Christ: So fill our hearts with thankfulness that we may rejoice to proclaim the good tidings we have received; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 34:15-22; Wisdom 2:1a, 12-24; John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Saturday in the Fourth Week of Lent - March 12, 2016

John 7:38 “Jesus stood up and exclaimed, ‘Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’”

Many of you reading this attended our retreat day in January at St. James’. It is a challenge in our busy lives to stop moving, to pause for a retreat. So many things call to us. We are pressured to keep doing, to be moving. We have mothers to visit, children to tend to, grandchildren to cuddle. Perhaps we need to get organized for the week. Many just need to sleep and some were ill. Unfortunately, our culture measures our success by our productivity.

I am definitely not writing these words to make anyone feel guilty if they were unable to attend. Quite the opposite, I just want to share. I hate guilt. It shuts us down in our relationships with each other and with our loving God. That’s another meditation.

I do want to share how the day renewed me. The Holy Spirit, the Living Water, was with us. We shared our stories and our journeys, our hurts and our joys. Many bared their souls and what beauty and grace there was in that gift. We quietly, gently listened.

It takes courage to share your personal stories. You need to be in a safe environment, a place where you trust your listeners to open their hearts and their minds. You need to trust God to give you the right words and to trust your own intellect. My guess is many had to choose words that told their story without making them too emotional. Some talks were difficult for the speaker to get through. One person had the courage to sing a song. Another broke a bottle and pieced it back together as God had remolded her life after tragedy. The stories were powerful.

I am so grateful for the stories shared that day. Thank you all for sharing. Thank you for giving of yourself. God has blessed us in our small community at St. James’ with so many kind, loving people. We share our successes and our failures with each other. We don’t judge. We are all seeking the Living Water that strengthens us. The love of God shines through each other. We are so blessed. God has given us a family where we are safe and where we all, hopefully, know we are supported and nourished.

Mercifully hear our prayers, O Lord, and spare all those who confess their sins to you; that those whose consciences are accused by sin may by your merciful pardon be absolved; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 7:6-11; Jeremiah 11:18-20; John 7:37-52

Monday in the Fifth Week of Lent - March 14, 2016

Psalm 23:1 “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

I saved an email that I got several years ago, because it tells of great love and protection. I was deeply moved by the story it tells and I want to share it with you:

After a fire in Yellowstone National Park, some forest rangers began a trek up the mountain to access the damage. At the base of a tree, one of the rangers found a bird, literally petrified in ashes. Somewhat sickened by the sight, he picked up a stick and pushed it aside. As he gently nudged it, three tiny chicks scurried out from under their dead mother’s wings. The loving mother, keenly aware of impending disaster, had carried her offspring to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would rise.

She could have flown to safety, but had refused to abandon her babies. When the blaze had arrived and the heat had scorched her small body, the mother had remained steadfast. She had been willing to die, so those under her wings would live.

“He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.” (Psalm 91:4)

Every time I read the 23rd psalm, I feel the love and protection of our Lord. Being loved this much should make a difference in how we live our lives. Remember the one who died for us and be different because of him. Time waits for no one. Treasure every moment you have. You’ll treasure it even more when you share God’s love with others; realize the value of a friend or loved one.

Be gracious to your people, we entreat you, O Lord, that they, repenting day by day of the things that displease you, may be more and more filled with love of you and of your commandments; and, being supported by your grace in this life, may come to the full enjoyment of eternal life in your everlasting kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 23; Susanna* 1-9, 15-29, 34-62 or verses 41-62; John 8:1-11 or John 8:12-20

* In some Bibles, Daniel 13

Tuesday in the Fifth Week of Lent - March 15, 2016

John 8:24 “I have told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.”

Jesus is speaking in the temple. He’s been trying to tell the people that he is going to his father and unless we believe that he is one with his father, we will die with our sins. “I am he!” — the great I am. The gospel goes on to say that, as he was speaking many believed.

Why couldn’t they all believe? After all, they were seeing and listening to Jesus, the Son of God, made flesh. Surely, there was something special in his manner in his aura, or in his eyes. The eyes are said to be the windows of the soul. They were there with him, face to face, speaking with him: they saw the miracles he performed; the blind to see, the deaf hearing, lepers cured, raising the dead, casting out demons. Why is mankind so rigid when the proof is right in front of him? We only believe what we want to believe?

I never saw Jesus, but I personally can’t understand not believing in God or Jesus or some higher entity; some overriding force in our universe and in our lives. How lonely it must be, not to believe; of going through life that alone and then, dying into emptiness. Not having a new life to hope for would be horrible for me. I can’t imagine not believing in heaven and being in the nearer presence of God. I believe heaven will unite us once again with those whom we loved and lost. Believing in Jesus Christ who died for our sins, so that we could have this wonderful new beginning.

Baptism is the beginning of being a ‘child of God.’ A beginning of the faith and hope and trust in God who created, cares for, watches over, and loves us. I’m a believer.

Almighty God, through the incarnate Word you have caused us to be born anew of an imperishable and eternal seed: Look with compassion upon those who are being prepared for Holy Baptism, and grant that they may be built as living stones into a spiritual temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 102:15-22; Numbers 21:4-9; John 8:21-30

Wednesday in the Fifth Week of Lent - March 16, 2016

Daniel 3:16-17a “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, ‘Oh Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace’”

Fires of Life

Do I have the kind of faith in my God that these three Old Testament men displayed? Do you? How in the world could I ever be able to consent to being thrown into a fiery furnace and be so confident that my God would deliver me?

And yet I know throughout my lifetime (and most likely that of many pilgrims who follow the way of Jesus) life has cast me into a fiery furnace of sorts. I faced the fire of my circumstances knowing God was with me and I had faith He would see me through. I *would* come out of my walk through the fires of life whole.

I am reminded of the St. Louis Jesuits song: Be Not Afraid and the line “If you walk amidst the burning flames you shall not be harmed.” My experience is that you will not be harmed but changed. My faith grew stronger as I came through those fires of life – a roll over car accident; loss of jobs; scary medical tests and diagnoses; family members & friends’ battles with cancer; and so much more. But I went through none of it alone. God was with me.

Sometimes in the midst of it, we can’t always see God but when we come through the fire, we know it was He who saved us. And it will be in that knowledge that I am ready to face the next fires that I am yet to encounter.

I pray that you, too, hang on to that hope and faith. May we like Shadrach, Meshach, & Abednego be able to state with certainty that God will deliver us from the burning fiery furnace.

“Be Not Afraid, I go before you always, come follow me” – St. Louis Jesuits song

Almighty God our heavenly Father, renew in us the gifts of your mercy; increase our faith, strengthen our hope, enlighten our understanding, widen our charity, and make us ready to serve you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm Canticle 2 or 13; Daniel 3:14-20, 24-28; John 8:31-42

Thursday in the Fifth Week of Lent - March 17, 2016

O God, you have called us to be your children, and have promised that those who suffer with Christ will be heirs with him of your glory: Arm us with such trust in him that we may ask no rest from his demands and have no fear in his service; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Today's collect contains several statements, along with promises and requests. Each caused me to have a number of reflective thoughts from this collect.

God has called us to be his children; all of us, me included. I feel good, and warm, and thankful to be a part of this familia. I'm not left out. I belong. No need to feel lonely.

Now we ask Him to arm us with such trust in Him that we may ask no rest from His demands, and no fear in His service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Now we're talking faith that I didn't think I had. His demands can call for a lot of effort, and trust in Him. Somehow I feel I should not refuse Him. Not just out of fear but of obligation to one who has, and continues to give so much. I was never much of a joiner or volunteer. The last few years I have been changing, in that I now want to be more involved in His service. I now have no fear of doing God's work and listening to His calling. In fact, I look forward to seeing where God will put me next, and what he expects of me; and then equips me to do so.

Psalm 105:4-11; Genesis 17:1-8; John 8:51-59

Friday in the Fifth Week of Lent - March 18, 2016

Jeremiah 20:11-12 “But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.”

There is comfort, promise, and a sense of victory in those words from Jeremiah. The confidence of the Lord with me as a dread warrior helps lessen my fears of my persecutors. So who are my persecutors? Any enemy who has or intends to harm me is one. Temptations of many forms is another. My lack of ambition or courage or skills is yet another. My regrets could also be a part of this list. That my persecutors or enemies will not overcome me is God’s promise to me. As far as getting even with all those forces and seeking justice, God will take care of that, in His way, and in His time. Even though Lent is a cold, hard, dark and lonely journey, these words of Jeremiah begin to show me a glimpse of the light of Christ’s resurrection to come.

O Lord, you relieve our necessity out of the abundance of your great riches: Grant that we may accept with joy the salvation you bestow, and manifest it to all the world by the quality of our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Psalm 18:1-7; Jeremiah 20:7-13; John 10:31-42

Saturday in the Fifth Week of Lent - March 19, 2016

Ezekiel 37:23b “They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them.”

Consider what faith God placed in his people.

As descendants of those people of God from centuries ago, I am not set to proclaim that we have been as faithful as God had wanted. “Never again defile themselves....” Who can say that, and about any people on the face of this earth?

Because we are creatures that sin, there has grown a whole topic and discipline about forgiveness. Luke tells that great story about the Forgiving father in chapter 15. Peter approaches Jesus with a scenario about a person having sinned against him a great number of times and how many times he must forgive the person.

Many years ago, in a San Antonio, Texas, Presbyterian church, I witnessed and heard words emanating from a protestant minister’s mouth that made my jaw drop. This was an ecumenical group gathering and we were discussing the topic of confession. It seems that most present had a kind of general confession in their various liturgies, which they used on Sundays. There were no Roman Catholics present, and I was the lone Episcopalian.

This minister said aloud, “At times I think we made a big mistake of discontinuing the use of Confession. Sometimes, a person needs to hear the absolution pronounced aloud.” The sacrament of confession in other than a sacramental church?

The Holy Spirit has moved in the church over the years to provide an instrument for people whom they learned might sin, even in the face of having been baptized. We are God’s people, and we need a way to be made whole again after we have fallen. That way is in the Reconciliation of a Penitent. “Yes,” Dr. Kate, “the Episcopal Church does have the Confession.”

Hear the priest as he says to you, with all certainty, “your sins have been put away from you.” and, as God promised, he has cleansed us.

O Lord, in your goodness you bestow abundant graces on your elect: Look with favor, we entreat you, upon those who in these Lenten days are being prepared for Holy Baptism, and grant them the help of your protection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 85:1-7; Ezekiel 37:21-28; John 11:45-53

Monday in Holy Week - March 21, 2016

2 Corinthians 1:5 “For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.”

Watching the news shows us the great suffering of so many. My heart aches from the constant negative stories of death, lies, torture, sorrow, loss and pain. I half expect to hear, “Tonight at five: We will cover awful stuff, it will mostly be the same awful stuff we talked about yesterday and will cover again tomorrow.” Interestingly, I still tune in every day to hear the awful stuff. I really should just watch a sitcom, it would do a lot of good for my spirits.

Alas, the sad truth is that there is much suffering in the world, in our communities and in our own personal lives. Every person I have ever met has their story of suffering, struggle and hurt. What amazes me is how each person deals with it in a different way. Some become bitter, others cold and callous, some are angry, yet there are those who find peace, joy and grace.

Yes, there is abundant suffering, but there is also an abundance of consolation to be received. We only need to open our eyes and choose to see it. We need to be open to receiving and accepting the ease of our suffering. Happiness is a choice, love is a choice and doing nothing is a choice.

The disciples suffered great sorrow, and fear when they lost their friend, leader and Lord. God consoled them with the resurrection of Jesus. They accepted God’s great gift of love and took their suffering and spread the good news far and wide. Of course, there was a bit of doubting by Thomas, because he was human, but he did accept the good gift of the resurrection.

God consoles all of us with the resurrection. So when the dark days are upon us and the awful stuff seems overwhelming, we have the hope of the resurrection. The promise of a better time that we only need to be open to receiving. Like the butterfly whose wings flutter at the opening of the cocoon, we too can take flight and be carried on the winds of the good news!

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 51:1-18(19-20) or 69:1-23; Lamentations 1:1-2, 6-12; 2 Corinthians 1:1-7; Mark 11:12-25

Tuesday in Holy Week - March 22, 2016

2 Corinthians 1:8-10 “We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again.”

Paul shared with the Corinthians the perils of being an apostle. We get a small glimpse into what must have been the most terrifying of events. Being unbearably crushed, despairing life and facing a death sentence seems like it should have warranted a bit more description on Paul's part. Yet, Paul seems to focus more on hope in God and seems very sure that He will save him again.

I am struck by this. If this had been me, first of all, I would not have put myself into this kind of situation to begin with. Second, had I found myself in this situation and been saved, I certainly would never go out and risk experiencing it again.

Oh, if only I had the faith that Paul had, maybe I really could move mountains. Sadly, I am not even remotely close to having this kind of faith. Normally, I consider myself a faith filled person, with love and trust in God. When I read these verses I felt rather unworthy and was humbled.

Maybe being a Christian in America today has softened me. The most peril I experience for Christ is attending the annual meeting and fretting over budgets. After reading these verses I feel a little spoiled. I genuinely wonder if I were faced with a death sentence for sharing the Good News would I deny Him to selfishly save my life?

In today's collect we ask that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of Jesus. This prayer is rather scary to me. I am a selfish human who does not want to suffer shame and loss. I am reminded that I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under His table.

Today I am going to choose to be grateful for those apostles and saints that have gone on before us to pave a path where I can freely worship Jesus. Today I am going to thank God for the abundant blessings in my life that I far too often take for granted. Today I am going to try to have faith like Paul. Today I am going to glory in the cross of Christ.

O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 6, 12 or 94; Lamentations 1:17-22; 2 Corinthians 1:8-22; Mark 11:27-33

Wednesday in Holy Week - March 23, 2016

Psalm 55:10-11 “I see violence and riots in the city, surrounding it day and night, filling it with crime and trouble. There is destruction everywhere, the streets are full of oppression and fraud.”

The year 2015 was a year of violence, anger, fear and hatred. I grew up in the 50s when segregation, hatred and violence were common. Children in my first grade class wore dog tags (military-like tags) to identify their bodies because schools were being bombed. When I went downtown, I often saw Klansmen in full “regalia,” with their wives, and their children marching up and down the streets. Their purpose was to invoke fear. Emmett Till was murdered when I was 10 years old. He was stolen through a bedroom window. I still cannot sleep with an open window. I have actually seen crosses burned on the lawn of a family because they were unwanted in the neighborhood.

While standing at a bus stop with my boyfriend, a car drove by filled with teenagers. A boy threw an egg out of the window, it landed in the face of my boyfriend and dripped down on to his sweater. He stood there in total humility. As an adult, he had another hate-filled incident. Upon leaving a church function, he drove across the Coastal Bend Causeway. A man, in a passing car, shot at him. He was not injured but the car wore the marks of a hateful man of the late 90s. The police were called and the officer admitted that the incident was a hate action based on where it occurred. The county was known for its high population of Ku Klux Klansmen.

The ugliness of the 50s and 60s should have paid for America’s people never having to experience violence, crime, hatred and oppression again. To have grandchildren who are exposed to this sin of disrespect, disregard and pure hatred, makes me very sad. We did not learn anything from all of the vile thoughts and actions of the “good ole days.”

We are not living the life that Jesus intended for us. There is no joy. There is no peace. We are in the midst of a sin-filled existence represented by crime, fraud, oppression, and the lack of love for our neighbors. We have no empathy. If we were empathetic, we could not hurt each other or each other’s property. We must learn from our errors or we are doomed to destruction. I want to live God’s peace. I want others to know God’s love. Anytime you hear name calling, it is needed to minimize persons to make them “less than.” It allows one to do and say ugly things. We are not racial, gender, cultural or regional slurs. We are the essence of God.

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Savior gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spit upon: Give us grace to accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time, confident of the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 55 or 74; Lamentations 2:1-9; 2 Corinthians 1:23--2:11; Mark 12:1-11

Maundy Thursday - March 24, 2016

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

Over the summer of 2014, we echoed this sentiment, this truth, as we sang on many occasions this new-to-some hymn. It is a popular tune in the wider Christian world. It is the appropriate meditation for this day.

Refrain:

One bread, one body, one Lord of all;
One cup of blessing which we bless.
And we, though many, throughout the earth,
We are one body in this one Lord.

Verse 1

Gentile or Jew, servant or free,
Woman or man, no more.

Refrain

Verse 2

Many the gifts, many the works,
One in the Lord - of all.

Refrain

Verse 3

Grain for the fields,
scattered and grown,
gathered to one, for all.

Refrain

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 102 Or 142, 143; Lamentations 2:10-18; 1 Corinthians 10:14-17; 11:27-32; Mark 14:12-25

Good Friday - March 25, 2016

Psalm 95:1 "Come let us sing to the Lord; let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation."

When I first read this Psalm for my reflections I was puzzled as why this was picked for Good Friday. Where was the sad soul searching message I was looking for? Shout with joy on Good Friday? Where is the joy in someone's death? What joy could there be in the persecution of Jesus?

As the Gospel is read, I am reminded of the scourging, long procession carrying the cross, the nailing and finally the piercing of his side. I put myself in that position and wonder if I would have that kind of love and courage. Would I have the faith that God would redeem me?

Come let us sing. The songs I connect with Good Friday are "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" and "O Sacred Head so wounded," where is the Hallelujah in those Hymns? I must be missing the message.

Let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation. Could the Rock of our salvation be Jesus? Jesus is my salvation. That is joy. I am saved because Jesus gave his life for me. If I look past all the agony of that day I can see why Jesus did it. He freed me. He gave me a precious gift.

If there was not a Good Friday there would be no Easter. There would be no hope. There would be no promise to be united with God.

I can sing and shout for joy on Good Friday. Jesus opened heaven for us. Thank You Jesus.

Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 95* and 22 or 40:1-14(15-19), 54; Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-33; 1 Peter 1:10-20; John 13:36-38** or John 19:38-42***

* For the Invitatory ** Intended for use in the morning *** Intended for use in the evening

Holy Saturday - March 26, 2016

Psalm 27:14 "Trust in the Lord. Have faith do not despair. Trust in the Lord."

Trust in the Lord. I don't know of any other way to live my life. Even as a child, I knew that God was my great provider. My grandmother was very religious in a quiet, dignified manner. I knew by her lyric soprano singing when things were of great concern. I remember her sitting on the front porch singing - "I will trust in the Lord, till I die." Her favorite Bible verses were - "Be still and know that I am God," and "In all thy ways, acknowledge him and he will direct thy path." Mama, my grandmother, was an English major. She loved poetry. On quiet afternoons, she would read poetry to me. Langston Hughes was one of her favorite poets. His poem *Mother to Son* taught me to be resilient. "Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had tacks in it, and splinters and boards torn up. . . Don't you set down on the steps. "Cause you finds it's kinder hard. Don't you fall now - For I'se still goin', honey, I'se still climbin', And life ain't been no crystal stair."

Life was not a crystal stair. We had to trust in God for everything. We dealt with segregation, Klansmen, burning crosses, spitting in your face, disregard and disrespect. Yet, hope was what kept us moving forward. We believed that things were getting better, whether they were or not. My parents were teenagers when I was born. They couldn't take care of themselves, how were they going to take care of me? I weighed five pounds at birth and the normal expected weight gains were not occurring. It was quickly discovered that my nursing mother had insufficient milk. My two grandmothers both believed the Lord would provide - just trust in Him. During World War II, the grandmothers compiled their food rations tickets. They were able to get milk for my formula. What was this young mother going to do? The only work that she could find was either picking cotton or working as a maid or cook in a private home. God's provision for her and me was for my father's mother, Mama, to take me to Atlanta. Mama cared for me until her death, when I was 13 years old.

I thought that I would die myself, in fact I wanted to die. How was I going to live without Mama? "I will trust in the Lord, till I die." I could hear Mama's song in my head. My maternal grandmother, Granny, had moved to Atlanta to help with me. She was my touchstone of hope, faith, love and security. She said, "Babe, when you trust in the Lord - you don't have to worry. She was my assurance and God was her assurance. We survived. Mama taught me that I could go to college by being a good student. Granny taught me that she would do whatever was needed for me to graduate. Our trust in the Lord was our lifeline. What lifeline has God provided you?

O God, Creator of heaven and earth: Grant that, as the crucified body of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, so we may await with him the coming of the third day, and rise with him to newness of life; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 95* and 88 or 27; Lamentations 3:37-58; Hebrews 4:1-16**; Romans 8:1-11***

* For the Invitatory ** Intended for use in the morning *** Intended for use in the evening