



Lenten Devotional 2023

We hope you'll follow along daily, be deepened in your faith through this year's ministry of our community, and prepare your heart to celebrate at Easter the new life that Jesus Christ made possible for all as we reflect on *Imago Dei*.

Use this devotional resource in the way that best enhances your Lenten thoughts and practices:

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**PITTSBURGH
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY**

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Steve Tuell, Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament

SCRIPTURE

Jonah 3:1-4:11

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Humans and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 6 The LORD God appointed a bush and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort, so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die."

10 Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?"

DEVOTIONAL

Mostly, what folks know about Jonah is that he was swallowed by a fish. Our text today begins *after* that fish story, when Jonah set out a second time (his attempt to flee from God's call had put him in the fish's belly in the first place) to deliver God's message of destruction to wicked Nineveh (3:4). But when the people of Nineveh repented, "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it" (3:10). Jonah was furious—but not at all surprised. This, he said, is why he had fled earlier: "I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment" (4:2).

Jonah is (mis)quoting the Divine self-declaration in Exodus 34:6-7, which describes God as *wenaqqeh lo' yinaqqeh* ("by no means clearing the guilty"). Instead, he punningly describes God as *wenikham 'al-hara'ah* ("relenting from punishment"): sparing undeserving Nineveh, in conflict with God's own word. Jonah—rightly—accuses God of inconstancy. As Abraham Heschel observed, "God's answer to Jonah, stressing the supremacy of compassion, upsets the possibility of looking for a rational coherence of God's ways with the world."

On Ash Wednesday, as we reflect on ourselves as made from and returning to dust (Gen 2:7; 3:19), we may ask, with Jonah: shouldn't life, shouldn't God, be *fair*? But Scripture says no—that instead, God is gracious and compassionate. This offends our sense of fairness—until we are the ones in need of grace and compassion. Friends, as people made in God's image (Gen 1:26-27), may we extend to others the grace and compassion God has undeservedly lavished on us.

PRAYER

Thank you, God, for showering your grace and compassion upon us. Teach us through these forty days to be ourselves gracious and compassionate—to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our crucified Lord. Amen.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2023

The Rev. Canon Eric McIntosh '12

SCRIPTURE

John 1:29-34

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." 32 And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

DEVOTIONAL

Ok, straight to the point. John the Baptizer commands all to see what God has allowed him to see! Sometimes reflecting is an exercise of seeing. Poetically we are being asked to hold with our eyes, and deeper still, our mind, heart, soul, and spirit. For me, see is poetically bearing the weight of something with the inner me. I ponder what it was like for John the Baptizer to be given the privilege of seeing what the Holy Spirit looked like. God gave him the gift of seeing what no human has since declared seeing, The Spirit of God! John saw, beheld, took it all in, received and understood, in his mind, soul, heart, his inner man, his spirit! The magnitude and weight must have been overwhelming. The one who gave the Baptizer his calling and his sending, gave him the gaze of his Holy Spirit and the promise that this Jesus would be a baptizer of this Spirit! If that was not enough, John beheld, saw, understood, discerned that this Jesus was not only the Lamb of God, but the Son of God! This one takes away the sin of the world. John after seeing, proclaimed it! What keeps us from proclaiming it today? This Jesus, who is the Lamb of God, takes away sin, and can do so because he is also the Son of God. Could it be that we do not see our sin? Could it be that we do not believe we sin? Could it be that we have let go of eternal punishment? Could it be that we are just so entitled that we are blind and cannot see? Maybe we have yet to behold him! How about we behold him this Lenten season.

PRAYER

God almighty, stop us in our tracks and make us to see you, to see your only begotten Son, our savior who takes away our sin. Give us the capacity to hold with our hearts, with our eyes, with our spirits, who he is. Make us to humble ourselves to see our sin and with gratitude rise to proclaim to the

world, our worlds, the magnitude of this one who would die for us, Jesus, our Lord and Savior, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God now and forever. Amen.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Cindy Parker '10

SCRIPTURE

John 1:35-42

35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" 39 He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). 42 He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated *Peter*).

DEVOTIONAL

In 2008, during my first year attending the master of divinity program at PTS, I was fortunate to travel to Israel with Dr. Barnes and a large group of folks from PTS and Shadyside Presbyterian Church. Our travels took us to Jerusalem where I met and conversed with an olive wood merchant about purchasing a nativity set. Eventually, the topic of religion came up. He asked if I was a follower of Christ, explaining he was a Muslim, and then he laughed long and hard at the irony: a Muslim who sold Christian religious goods to tourists. During our conversation he mentioned that we were more alike than we realized because we worshipped the same God; we just called God different names.

When I returned home my 7-year-old daughter helped me unpack the nativity set, her delight in the smooth olive wood evident as she moved the pieces around on the coffee table. One day I came downstairs to find a lamb resting in the manger (baby Jesus was under the coffee table). When she saw me looking quizzically at the pieces, she replied, "Look Mom, it's the Lamb of God!"

We have so many names for the One we worship, for the One in whose image we've been created: Rabbi, Teacher, Messiah, Anointed, Allah, Lamb of God. No matter what name you call the One who continues to invite us to "Come

and see" (v 39), the invitation continues to be extended. "Come and see" what new thing God is doing through you and those around you.

PRAYER

Lamb of God, you continue to invite us to "come and see." Help us have the courage this Lenten season to do just that. Amen.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2023

Stephanie Backus, M.Div. student

SCRIPTURE

Titus 3:1-15

1 Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 The saying is sure.

I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone. 9 But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. 10 After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, 11 since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.

12 When I send Artemas to you, or Tychicus, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. 13 Make every effort to send Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way, and see that they lack nothing. 14 And let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive.

15 All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with all of you.

DEVOTIONAL

My family lost my grandfather this year. He was an incredibly pious man—the one who I looked up to in my own walk with faith. As I was gathering memories from all of the grandchildren for my eulogy for grandpa, I heard this theme over and over again: my grandfather was slow to anger. He was slow to tell someone they were wrong; whether he disagreed with their opinion or not. He valued different opinions and if we didn't have an opinion, he was quick to give us a middle of the road view on the topic so we could form our own thoughts. As I grew older I learned that theologically, we had very different beliefs, but they largely came from the same place: our faith in Christ.

As I read this passage for today, it reminds me of my relationship with my grandfather. Paul was clear: we may not agree with our political leaders, and we may not agree with one another. But because we put our faith in God, we have to devote ourselves to doing good. We have to focus on that instead of on what divides us. If we surround ourselves with those who share our love in Christ, no matter the differences we may have in our political beliefs or even in how we interpret the Bible, we can recognize that we aren't of this world—we are of God's kingdom. Together.

PRAYER

God of creation, we pray today that you will continue to remind us that we live in your creation. We pray that you will remind us that we are your children and are to continue living the life Christ taught us to in his ministry—the life where all are welcome in your kingdom. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2023

The Rev. Brett M. Dinger '09

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire

wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

DEVOTIONAL

As I read through the various texts for today, I found myself drawn to Paul's invitation to "consider your own call" (v 26). So I did just that. I enjoyed reliving old memories of the surprising and unlikely ways God called me into a life of discipleship and ministry. I recalled conversations with unusual characters—farmers and janitors among them—who named the Holy Spirit's work in me. I remembered encounters with strangers who saw something in me that I could not see in myself. And I recounted times in college when fellow students would randomly knock on my door to ask for spiritual advice. Looking back, I can testify to the truth of the Lord's words in Isaiah 55: 8, where we read that the Lord's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are the Lord's ways *our* ways. God was clearly writing a story that only God could write!

I don't know if Paul was thinking about Isaiah 55:8 when he penned 1 Corinthians 1, but he clearly understood that God's ways in this world sometimes look foolish. Only God would choose to take on human flesh to birth a new kingdom. Only God would count fishermen and tax collectors and sinners as worthy messengers of good news. And only God would defeat the darkness of death through the cross of Christ! Take heart, friends. What may look absurd and foolish in your life may very well be the redeeming and restoring work of a loving God.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, thank you for authoring the story of my life. Grow my trust in you when I encounter surprising twists and turns along the way. Remind me that your thoughts and ways are far better than my own. Amen.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2023

The Rev. Dr. L. Roger Owens, Hugh Thomson Kerr Professor of Pastoral Theology

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 121

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
2 My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
4 He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
5 The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
7 The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
8 The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

DEVOTIONAL

When I noticed several occurrences of the verb "keep" in this psalm, a translation of the Hebrew word *shamar*, I thought of the penalty shootout that climaxed the 2022 World Cup soccer tournament. With the kickers having a distinct advantage, the goalkeepers faced enormous pressure to prevent the ball from entering the goal. More often than not, they failed.

I struggled to imagine God that way—diving in front of evil, keeping us from danger. Sometimes deflecting it, sometimes not. Is that what "he will keep your life" means in this passage? Is a harried goalkeeper an appropriate image for God?

Perhaps Genesis 2:15 can help: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and to keep it." The word *shamar* occurs for the first time in Scripture in this verse. The image here is of a gardener, patiently caring for the soil, working to preserve its health and fruitfulness. What would happen if we read Psalm 121 with that connotation in mind? We'd get an image of a God who tends us as a faithful gardener tends the soil, a God who keeps us—not diving to deflect every evil and pain, sometimes missing—but tending us despite pain, caring for us in the midst of a life where things sometimes go wrong, working faithful for our flourishing and fruitfulness.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we pray that as we journey to the cross, we might understand ourselves as fruitful soil, kept by your grace, care, and love. Amen.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28 2023

The Rev. Connie Bennett Hoeke '94

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 34

1 I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
2 My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
3 O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
5 Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
7 The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
8 O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
9 O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
10 The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.
11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.
15 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.
16 The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.
17 When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.
18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.
19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.
20 He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
21 Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.

22 The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

DEVOTIONAL

This psalm calls us to continually bring praises before the Lord. God is near to us and sees us as beloved children. Even when things are going wrong, or we are struggling or brokenhearted, God surrounds us and loves us through these times. However, God also desires our praises and gratitude. When we are alone with God or when we gather as a community of faith, we are to praise God continually and bless God's holy name. God wants our desire and our longing to be for God and not for material things.

God does exhibit anger when we love other things more than God. He was angered by the Israelites in the wilderness when they grumbled and complained to Moses because the wilderness was not a comfortable place for them to be. They wanted to return to captivity and Egypt because they did not trust God to provide for their needs.

Jesus drove out the money changers from the Temple because it was not being used to praise God. He made a promise at that time that he would "raise this Temple in 3 days" (John 2:19). He was referring to his body and the resurrection that would come. Through Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, God was praised and glorified and we were given eternal life and forgiveness. We will stray from God but we are loved deeply. We are called to repent. God will walk with us through difficult times and they will not overcome us. Let us praise God and give ourselves to God that we may glorify God in all that we say or do and with all that we are!

PRAYER

Almighty and most merciful God, We love you and offer praise to you because you are God. We confess that we often turn away from you, but we know of your forgiveness and love. Thank you for meeting our needs and loving us as we are. We are filled with gratitude for the gift of your son, Jesus, and the gift of what his resurrection means. May we forever bless your name and bask in your love. Guide us to follow your will. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1, 2023

The Rev. Andrew Taylor-Troutman, D.Min. student

SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 3:12-19

12 Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the

living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. 15 As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

16 Now who were they who heard and rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? 17 And with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? 19 So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

DEVOTIONAL

Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews is an ancient question, and recently contentious even on *Jeopardy!* While most scholars deny that the Apostle Paul penned the letter, there is no doubt that the text quotes extensively from the Hebrew Scriptures. Crucial to modern interpretation is an understanding of Hebrew words.

This passage’s “unbelieving heart” might confuse modern English readers, for “belief” in our culture is often conceptualized as intellectual assent, while matters of the heart are typically thought of as emotions. But in the Hebrew Scriptures, such a phrase referred not to what was thought or felt, but to what was done: “Hear, O Israel . . . You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:4).

Today’s passage cites the Israelites in the wilderness as a negative example of following the Shema — they heard and yet did not obey (Heb 3:16). As Maya Angelou said, “When you know better, do better.”

Desiring to do better, I appreciate the call to “exhort one another every day” (Heb 3:13). A decade after graduation, I still maintain relationships with faculty, staff and fellow M.Div. students. Currently, I not only learn from my cohort of D.Min. students, but their support is also life-giving. Though no one has all the answers (even winners of *Jeopardy!*), our colleagues can inspire us to use our learning in service to God and the larger community.

PRAYER

Lord of the star fields, be God with us during Lent. Inspire us to do what we say and say what we mean. We thank you for the faculty, staff and students who journey with us. Bind us together to exhort and encourage one another in love. May it be so.

THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 2023

The Rev. Erin M. Davenport '05, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Special Projects

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 27

1 The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
2 When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh —
my adversaries and foes —
they shall stumble and fall.
3 Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.
4 One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.
5 For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
6 Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.
7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
8 “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
9 Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!
10 If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.
11 Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.
12 Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.
13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
14 Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

Refuge, sanctuary, safety: these are words that describe the desires of tired, worried humans. Whether it be looking for refuge at home from a busy chaotic world outside or finding sanctuary in the church building that you know so well, we are all seeking quiet and safety in our own ways. David illustrates this for us time and again in his life. Though the authorship of the Psalms is always in question, each time I read Psalm 27 I am transported to 1 Samuel 20-23, when David begins running from Saul. The first place David goes is the Tabernacle at Nob. David runs to a makeshift church to find refuge and safety from those who are attacking him. At the Tabernacle he finds the tools he needs for safety. From there his journey begins that will eventually lead to him becoming King. David's desire, as he seeks refuge in the midst of trouble, is the same as ours. He is looking for safety; he is looking for God; he is looking for hope. The Psalmist reminds us that the journey of life is long and requires a great deal of waiting. It is in the waiting that we are able to find moments of refuge, receive the tools we need for safety, and go out and do it all over again.

PRAYER

God our refuge, hear us as we pray this day. Help us to find rest and the tools we need for safety. Grant us willingness to offer grace and mercy to all those we encounter this day. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 3, 2023

Mitchell Stecker, M.Div. student

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 105

1 O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
2 Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
3 Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
4 Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
5 Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,
6 O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.
7 He is the LORD our God;
his judgments are in all the earth.
8 He is mindful of his covenant forever,
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,
9 the covenant that he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,

10 which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
11 saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan
as your portion for an inheritance."
12 When they were few in number,
of little account, and strangers in it,
13 wandering from nation to nation,
from one kingdom to another people,
14 he allowed no one to oppress them;
he rebuked kings on their account,
15 saying, "Do not touch my anointed ones;
do my prophets no harm."
16 When he summoned famine against the land,
and broke every staff of bread,
17 he had sent a man ahead of them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.
18 His feet were hurt with fetters,
his neck was put in a collar of iron;
19 until what he had said came to pass,
the word of the LORD kept testing him.
20 The king sent and released him;
the ruler of the peoples set him free.
21 He made him lord of his house,
and ruler of all his possessions,
22 to instruct his officials at his pleasure,
and to teach his elders wisdom.
23 Then Israel came to Egypt;
Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Ham.
24 And the LORD made his people very fruitful,
and made them stronger than their foes,
25 whose hearts he then turned to hate his people,
to deal craftily with his servants.
26 He sent his servant Moses,
and Aaron whom he had chosen.
27 They performed his signs among them,
and miracles in the land of Ham.
28 He sent darkness, and made the land dark;
they rebelled against his words.
29 He turned their waters into blood,
and caused their fish to die.
30 Their land swarmed with frogs,
even in the chambers of their kings.
31 He spoke, and there came swarms of flies,
and gnats throughout their country.
32 He gave them hail for rain,
and lightning that flashed through their land.
33 He struck their vines and fig trees,
and shattered the trees of their country.
34 He spoke, and the locusts came,
and young locusts without number;
35 they devoured all the vegetation in their land,
and ate up the fruit of their ground.
36 He struck down all the firstborn in their land,
the first issue of all their strength.
37 Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold,
and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled.
38 Egypt was glad when they departed,

SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 2023

The Rev. Dr. April Roebuck '14/'19

SCRIPTURE

John 4:1-26

1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” 2 (although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized), 3 he left Judea and started back to Galilee. 4 But he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” 8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” 13 Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” 15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” 17 The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’ 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” 19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” 25 The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

for dread of them had fallen upon it.

39 He spread a cloud for a covering,
and fire to give light by night.

40 They asked, and he brought quails,
and gave them food from heaven in abundance.

41 He opened the rock, and water gushed out;
it flowed through the desert like a river.

42 For he remembered his holy promise,
and Abraham, his servant.

43 So he brought his people out with joy,
his chosen ones with singing.

44 He gave them the lands of the nations,
and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,

45 that they might keep his statutes
and observe his laws.

Praise the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 105 is an exhortation to thankfulness among the faithful, undergirded by a recounting of Israel’s deliverance by God—the foundation for this spirit of gratitude. The psalmist notes, however, that the promised deliverance is not an action solely wrought on high; rather, in working through Moses and Aaron, God cooperates with humankind to bring God’s chosen out of Egypt.

The *Imago Dei* is a beautiful reminder during this penitential season that, in spite of our shortcomings, we all are fashioned after this divine pattern, and thus are each worthy of love and imbued with an indelible dignity. It may, however, be tempting to think of the *Imago* as a one-way dynamic, overlooking the responsibilities of bearing such a character trait. As we live, move, and have our being in God, God likewise desires to live and move in, and share in creative, reparative “be-ing”, with us. If we are indeed members of Christ’s own body, then we should naturally expect this invitation to actively participate in God’s will in the here-and-now.

As we follow the cloud and fire through this pilgrim season of Lent, let us embrace this two-way understanding of the *Imago*, savoring the sublime likeness within ourselves; and moreover, letting it propel us into cooperation with the divine will, to “work God’s signs and portents” in our day, like Moses and Aaron, and similarly participate in the Godly work of salving the wounds of oppression, hatred, and scarcity as we encounter them in our own contexts.

PRAYER

O God, be among us these forty days, just as you were with your people when you brought them out of Egypt. When we are wearied by the journey, bring us again to your tabernacle—not made with hands, but rather your Spirit, hidden and abiding within our heart—that we may be renewed for the continuation of our striving. Through Jesus, our deliverer, Amen.

DEVOTIONAL

She doesn't have a name in the text. She is marginalized. She is a woman. She is demonstrating some sense of shame because she goes to the well when no one is there. I wonder if her life decisions have caused her to live in the shadows. She cast her bucket one too many times for things and people who were not fulfilling. She has experienced one strained relationship after the next. Probably looking for love in all the wrong places. Jesus is not so much concerned with any of that. He sees her. Not only does he see her. He sees all of who she is. Then he asks for something from her.

This Lenten season it doesn't matter about your background, your life decisions or where you are in life right now. Jesus wants something from you. That something is your "yes" to go deeper with him. Cast your bucket into the well that never runs dry. The well that restores and replenishes.

This season is about preparation and reflection. What would it look like to prepare the way for the King in your heart? What would it look like to let go of your inhibitions and go deeper with God? What would it look like to see yourself as Jesus sees you? Forgiven. Free. Whole. His.

PRAYER

God, help us to see ourselves the way that you see us. Help us to exchange shame for salvation, guardedness for grace, and emptiness for your eternal fulfilling love. Everything we need is found in you. Lead us to the well that never runs dry, for a deeper dive with you. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 5, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Asa J. Lee, President and Professor of Theological Formation for Ministry

SCRIPTURE

Mark 3:31-35

31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." 33 And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

DEVOTIONAL

When I was a child, we always went down south to Georgia or North Carolina in the summer months for our family

reunion. Returning to our ancestral roots in Georgia and North Carolina reminded us of our humble beginnings but also re-established the familial bonds with those loved ones we hadn't seen in months or even years. But it also allowed us the important opportunity to be introduced to the new members of our family. Through births, marriages, and other new iterations of relationships, our family increased in number with new members young and old. With excitement we welcomed these new people as part of our family with all of the rights, privileges, and burdens who had just been strangers moments before.

Jesus in this curious encounter abruptly redefines the bonds of family. When his mother and brother come to see him, Jesus declares an expansive view of the familial bond and connections. Those who do the will of God are Jesus' brother and sister and mother. Like my family reunion moment, those of us working the will of God now come to meet new family members. In the light of this declaration we, like Jesus' family, must come to grips with the fact that those who do God's will are now members of one family. We have the joy of knowing that no matter what we face, in God we have a family and belong one to another.

PRAYER

This Lenten season, we pray for the openness to meet disciples as family and to commit to working toward God's will here on earth. Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 6, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Sterling '88/'98

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 1:11-19

11 The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a branch of an almond tree." 12 Then the LORD said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it." 13 The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north."

14 Then the LORD said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. 15 For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the LORD; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. 16 And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. 17 But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them

everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. 18 And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land — against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. 19 They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is a great time to get your eyesight checked, as this passage from Jeremiah reminds us. For those of us who seek to live according to God's truth, there are three kinds of "eyesight" we may evaluate:

The *eyesight with which we see light*. Our natural eyes see two kinds of light: light from primary sources, and light reflected off objects around us. The obvious analogy raises two important questions—what are your primary sources of light, and what kinds of things do you gaze at to see reflected light? I'll let you draw your own metaphorical conclusions from these questions, but don't forget to regularly have your "real" vision checked!

The *eyesight of the mind*. Evaluating what we are seeing is the realm of our mind. If we don't keep it progressing and sharp, we can too easily be deluded as to what we are seeing when we take stock of our *sitz im leben*, where God is in it, and what God is *up* to in the midst of it.

The *eyesight of the Spirit*. Just as there are wavelengths of light we can't see without filters or special instruments, so there are images we miss if we ignore the agency of God's Holy Spirit. This eyesight is kept astute by *exercising* it. The important "word" to Jeremiah here is: "What do you see?" Whatever God is going to *do* almost always begins with this question. And the best answer requires us drilling down on what we "see" using all three forms of eyesight!

PRAYER

God who pronounced the light "good," Jesus, the light of the world, and Holy Spirit of reflection, illuminate what I see today and teach me what the images mean, as I seek to stay on the lighted path and to please you! Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 7, 2023

Dr. Barbara Blodgett, Associate Dean for Academic Programs, Assessment, and Field Education

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 34

1 I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

2 My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
3 O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
5 Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
7 The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
8 O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
9 O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
10 The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.
11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.
15 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.
16 The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.
17 When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.
18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.

19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.
20 He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
21 Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
22 The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 34 is a promise of rescue from trouble and respite from broken heartedness for those who put their trust in God. In a devotional of her own, author and pastor Rachel Hackenberg once contrasted the psalmist's encouragement to pursue peace (v 14) with Pennsylvania's invitation to travelers to pursue happiness. About six years ago, the Commonwealth created new highway welcome signs. Their slogan riffs on a historic Pennsylvania-signed document, saying "pursue your happiness." With its flourished font and lower case letters, it invites visitors to seek trouble-free indulgence here.

The psalmist, on the other hand, asks us to do the harder thing: pursue peace. This is neither comfortable nor easy. The psalm is replete with references to evils and spirit-crushing troubles. We know what that is like. We are living through a time when it seems very hard to embrace promises of good because every day reminds us of nearby perils, from violence to climate change to pandemics to threats upon our liberties and our democracy. Some days it could be hard to raise a hand to the psalmist's question in verse 12, "Which of you desires life and covets many days to enjoy good?"

We know that Pennsylvania is a good place to find happiness. But faithful pursuit—of either peace or happiness—is hard work that demands our resilience and steadfastness. It's nothing like tourism. Thankfully, we are not alone on the journey, and ultimately God will keep us unbroken.

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, hear this poor soul crying out to you for deliverance. I know you will answer, for your goodness is great. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Franklin Tanner Capps, Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 51

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
19 then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 51 is a well-known passage because of verses 10-12—three short lines that are often sung in liturgical settings following a confession of sin. These verses are part of an extended petition that, among other things, finds the psalmist begging God for mercy and deliverance due to guilt borne of some unspecified transgression. Although the psalm closes with a word of hope that God will rebuild and renew that which has been broken, its tone is sober, rooted in a profound sense of the frailty and fragmentation of life. This life in fragments issues from grief over sin—*dis-ease* over what has been done and that which has been left undone.

"Sin is despair," says one Danish writer. "Sin itself is severance from the good, but despair over sin is the second severance." Another way of putting this is to say that sin, and the despair that follows, is shattering. The psalmist says as much. In a moment of severe introspection, they declare that their life has become like bones reduced to pieces (v 8). But rather than ask that their life be knit back together, they ask God to bring a shout of joy from that which has been crushed. Zion will be established, Jerusalem rebuilt, and rejoicing will rise from the dust. This is the kernel of hope.

And herein lies the difficult teaching: to believe that rejoicing can come *not after* but *from within* the devastation. God's power makes this possible.

PRAYER

Lord God, like the psalmist, our lives often feel like shattered bones. Help us find our voice in the midst of this undoing.

And may our spirit, however frail, reverberate with joy this season. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 2023

The Rev. Anthony R. C. Hita '13

SCRIPTURE

John 5:19-29

19 Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. 20 The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. 21 Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. 22 The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, 23 so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. 24 Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. 25 "Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; 27 and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and will come out -- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

DEVOTIONAL

If five random non-believers in your social circle were asked what top three things define you, would "Christian" make the list? Our identity in Christ is besieged, not from outsiders, but from our very selves. We let our jobs, nation, politics, sports teams, and hobbies define us first, giving Christ only the leftovers. During the Church's early years, "Christian" was a pejorative. In the Roman system, society was organized around the rituals of the Greco-Roman gods. By following Jesus, Christians became outcasts from the social network surrounding the temple cults. To be called "Christian" was to be called a cultural traitor, as by not participating in the dominant religion, people worried Christians would bring the wrath of the gods on everyone. Christians were identified as atheists ("denier of the gods"), a status having intense stigma attached to it. New Christians in this environment converted not because Christianity was attractive, but because they saw how Christians lived, heard how Christians talked, and realized Jesus was worth following as a result.

Accepting Jesus Christ is not merely an intellectual assent to some philosophical truth—it is a completely new primary identity. The point of being a Christian is to so closely identify with Christ that you are always introducing others to Jesus in both your actions and words. When Christians act, speak, or treat others contrary to how Jesus behaved, we corrupt our identity and introduce others to a false Christ. To lead to Christ, we must lead *with* Christ.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to decrease that you might increase; that acting or speaking, others might see you more and me less. Take first place in my life and let me use my unique individuality to more fully serve you so that others too may participate in the bounty you have given and promised all those who claim your name. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 10, 2023

Dr. Scott J. Hagley, W. Don McClure Associate Professor of World Mission and Evangelism

SCRIPTURE

Romans 2:25-3:18

25 Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. 29 Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart — it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2 Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. 3 What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 4 By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, "So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging." 5 But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) 6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world? 7 But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? 8 And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), "Let us do evil so that good may come"? Their condemnation is deserved!

9 What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, 10 as it is written: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

11 there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God.

12 All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;

there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one."

13 "Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of vipers is under their lips."

14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 ruin and misery are in their paths,

17 and the way of peace they have not known."

18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

DEVOTIONAL

I've often felt like Paul gets himself a little too worked up in the second chapter of Romans. Really? No one is righteous? *Everyone* is a liar?

But during Lent it is appropriate—and even good—to step back and consider how it is that all humanity are under "the power of sin" (3:10). For in our hyper-connected world, we can no longer claim ignorance with regard to the ways our buying, selling, and everyday life harms others. Awareness of such destruction might soften its impact—I might burn less gasoline or become vegan—but it fails to make the world and my place in it right.

Of course, we know where this story is heading. God's grace proves sufficient where our achievements fail. But during Lent, it is okay to just camp out a bit with Paul's honesty. The truth is, we live in a world of immense beauty and catastrophic loss; we are sustained by God's grace and yet often live with a numbing sense of moral ambivalence. These things are not easily harmonized, nor should they be. For as Ed Simon has said: "Acknowledging the presence of selfishness, cruelty, greed, rage, intolerance, and, in a word, sin . . . is that which makes the existence of good all the more obvious. Even if sometimes good only exists as a dim shaft of blurred light in our dark cell." Paul's honesty here is also his hope: the "dim shaft of blurred light" that is incarnation and resurrection.

PRAYER

From Psalm 22

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!
Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2023

The Rev. Kristen Renee Barner '97

SCRIPTURE

John 7:1-13

1 After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. 2 Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. 3 So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; 4 for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." 5 (For not even his brothers believed in him.) 6 Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. 7 The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. 8 Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come." 9 After saying this, he remained in Galilee. 10 But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret. 11 The Jews were looking for him at the festival and saying, "Where is he?" 12 And there was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying, "He is a good man," others were saying, "No, he is deceiving the crowd." 13 Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews.

DEVOTIONAL

Eleanor Roosevelt famously said: "What other people think of me is none of my business."

Even Jesus can't help himself. He is a tiny bit curious. Jesus is human, right? He's got siblings who don't quite believe in him and push him to prove himself. He has no interest in going to a place where people want to kill him. He knows himself well enough to know when it is and isn't "his time"—except for that time his mom made him help the wedding host in Cana.

Imagine him standing there, after his brothers left for Judea, pacing around in the dust, muttering to himself, and finally deciding, "Fine. I'll go. But I'm sneaking in. Thank you, God, that social media hasn't been invented yet."

He goes. He listens. He hears what people think of him and people only mutter because they are afraid of one another. His goal was to go unnoticed.

Do yourself a favor and read where the story goes from there. God calls us. God is calling to us. Jesus tried to be stealth. We find ourselves there. Doubtful and pushed, threatened or praised, challenged or flattered. Dig deep this Lent and listen for the call of God. Oftentimes, it is in these deep, dark, difficult, and dangerous places that we will be compelled to spring forth and be the very people we are called to be. It's possible. Pace around in the dust and mutter to yourself if it helps. (*I think it helps.*)

PRAYER

O God, we try to go unnoticed, but you see us. You know us. Jesus says that our time is always here. Is it, God? If it is, and you say it is, help us to know, to see, to be. As we pace in the dust and mutter to ourselves, let us hear you. Thanks. We need you more than ever. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 12, 2023

The Rev. Erik Hoeke, PTS Writer

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 150

1 Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

I have a friend and colleague whose presence is always noticed. Her voice, though friendly, is the loudest in any room. Since we are both clergy, we often see each other at meetings in large sanctuaries that amplify her voice, which reverberates in those spaces like LOUD, CLASHING CYMBALS!

“Loud” is not often how people describe me. I’m more like the lute and harp you probably didn’t notice in this psalm’s praise band amidst the trumpets and tambourines and clanging cymbals and dancing worshippers. There’s a lot of unrestrained energy in this psalm’s worship.

But in Lent, pastors and church musicians exercise restraint. Worship is contemplative; the organ and praise band are softer and quieter; we even embrace silence as much as we can stand the discomfort. Then on Easter morning, we *pull out all the stops*—a phrase originating in organ-playing, describing the time when all the pipes are used to get the fullest possible sound.

Some of us are Lent people. We are good at quiet contemplation and drawing others into a silence that notices things more deeply. Others of us are loud Easter people—the life of the party!—who pull out all the stops and release unrestrained energy and excitement reminding us of God’s mighty deeds and surpassing greatness.

God’s holy praise band has soft and loud people and soft and loud instruments. Each have their time and purpose. Each reflect the God we worship, who sometimes spoke in thunderclaps and other times as a whispering wind. People who are soft or loud, or somewhere in between, each bear the image of God.

PRAYER

God of the trumpet and tambourine, of the lute and harp and the clashing cymbals: quiet us so we may notice you. Pull out all the stops to remind us of unrestrained joy. Make music in our sanctuaries and our hearts, so we may worship you in every way. Praise the Lord! Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 13, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Hunter Farrell, Director of the World Mission Initiative

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 121

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
2 My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
4 He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
5 The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
6 The sun shall not strike you by day
nor the moon by night.
7 The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
8 The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

DEVOTIONAL

During the 1980s and 90s, Peru's Andes Mountains reverberated with acts of violence on an order of cruelty rarely experienced in modern history. Shining Path Liberation Army fighters killed and dismembered farmers, teachers, and children, leaving whole communities traumatized and families frozen in grief. Tragically, the Peruvian Army responded in kind, inflicting gross violations of human rights, especially among indigenous communities. "For 12 long years, we went to bed each night not knowing if the violence was coming for us," said Presbyterian elder and my research colleague Olmedo Huamaní of the indigenous community of Santa Barbara, Huancavelica.

In the face of such profound moral injury, I found what the social psychologists expected: the erosion of interpersonal trust, intimate relationships, and the capacity to plan for tomorrow. What surprised me, though, was the deep resilience I found among so many of the region's Christians. The biblical narrative of an all-powerful God who abides among God's people, knows them by name, and will not stop loving them—despite their experience—was celebrated and shared in every prayer meeting, worship service, and family devotional time I attended in Huancavelica. By evoking God's watchcare, people were enabled to hold on to each other. It won't surprise you, then, that the most popular hymn by far among Christians in the region is Psalm 121. The Psalm's laser-like focus on God's protection helps me in my perceived self-sufficiency to "right-size" my sense of importance—and remember in whose gracious hands I live.

PRAYER

Gracious God, you are our rock and our shield. Remind us of life's fragility and of our need to hold on to each other even as we look to you for protection and nurture. In the powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 14, 2023

The Rev. Jacob Judy '19

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 25

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
2 O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!
8 Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
9 He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.
11 For your name's sake, O LORD,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.
12 Who are they that fear the LORD?
He will teach them the way that they should choose.
13 They will abide in prosperity,
and their children shall possess the land.
14 The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.
15 My eyes are ever toward the LORD,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.
16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
17 Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.
19 Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they hate me.
20 O guard my life, and deliver me;
do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.
22 Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all its troubles.

DEVOTIONAL

What I see as the fundamental ask in Psalm 25 is for God to change the circumstances of the psalmist's situation. I assume many people would sympathize with the psalmist's request. But even when change is sought, many individuals still experience elevated anxiety levels, often leading to avoidance of the situation altogether. Before 2015 I had not sat in a classroom, listened to an academic lecture, or taken notes for nine years. Honestly, I was not particularly good at doing any of those things. The last time I was enrolled in a four-year academic program, it took me five years to complete.

Nonetheless, I sat in Dr. Tappy's Old Testament class—my first class in nine years—and let me say I had more than a few

doubts about how I would do this time around. Have you ever felt as if there was a continuously wide and infinitely deep chasm between where you are in life and where you desire to be, without any discernable way to get across? That is the exact feeling I had in the pit of my stomach when I looked at the chalkboard and saw several lines of text written in Hebrew.

Seminary proved to be a lesson in understanding that the most effective way to change circumstances is by allowing God to change the person in the midst of them. Just as the psalmist cried out for God to help change, what seemed to be, a desperate situation, my cry to God during those four years in the master of divinity program was the same. I wondered whether God had meant to call me or if I was just supposed to relay that message to someone else. Even though I expected change would happen, I did not expect that the thing that would change so drastically would be me. Psalm 25:4-5 states, "Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long." If I had fought the circumstances as I intended to, I am sure my doubts and fears would have overtaken me. If I had tried to create my own route instead of waiting on God to reveal the right path, I would never have had a chance to experience the life waiting for me on the other side of that chasm.

PRAYER

Merciful and wise God, thank you for the life-changing gift of your son, Jesus the Christ. Help me see all others in light of Christ's love displayed on the cross for me. Let me receive that mercy and grace as an invitation to be better in chaotic circumstances according to your plans and not my own. I pray these things in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15, 2023

The Rev. Drew Himes '13

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 5

1 Give ear to my words, O LORD;
give heed to my sighing.
2 Listen to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
3 O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.
4 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you.
5 The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.

6 You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.
7 But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house,
I will bow down toward your holy temple
in awe of you.

8 Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.
9 For there is no truth in their mouths;
their hearts are destruction;
their throats are open graves;
they flatter with their tongues.
10 Make them bear their guilt, O God;
let them fall by their own counsels;
because of their many transgressions cast them out,
for they have rebelled against you.
11 But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
so that those who love your name may exult in you.
12 For you bless the righteous, O LORD;
you cover them with favor as with a shield.

DEVOTIONAL

What we sigh to God reveals a lot about us. If we have harmed others, we will sigh with guilt. If we have been harmed by others, we will sigh with pain and anguish. Strangely we all find ourselves looking for the same thing: God's ear.

The Hebrew word translated as "sighing" in this Psalm is *hagigi*, which can alternately be rendered as "groaning." Our groaning, aching sighs show the depth of our painful prayers to God, seeking intervention, reconciliation, and the renewal of God's image among our communities.

Lent offers each of us a time to reflect on our guilt or our hurt. We are offered a time of introspection and investigation and ultimately an invitation: commit your prayers to our loving and liberating God.

Each of the other readings for today work with these themes. Jeremiah 8 offers an indictment to the people who have dishonored God's image in the holy community. Paul in Romans 5:1-11 reminds us of God's grace, given by the truckload for the victims of the broken world, oppressor and oppressed alike.

And the apex comes to us from John 8:12-20. "I am the light of the world," Jesus tells his disciples. When we commit our cause to God—our groaning, our pain, our guilt—we find that Christ's light is the one that shines in the darkness of our souls, offering each of us a more excellent way and the perfect embodiment of God's image made real in his flesh.

PRAYER

Holy, loving, liberating, and grace-giving God: In the flesh of Jesus our Christ, you make your light shine. In Jesus' healing touch, we are offered a new way. Commit our lives by your Spirit to this new way of living that we too could bear your holy image in this world. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2023

Katelyn Fisher '22, Administrative Assistant for the Center for Adaptive and Innovative Ministry

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 126

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
5 May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
6 Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

DEVOTIONAL

In February, among the drib and drab of Pittsburgh's darkest days, I set in motion the early processes of my summer garden. In the darkness of my chilly basement, a hopeful stirring begins as I delicately fold tiny snapdragon seeds into soil and set them under a grow light, awaiting the glory of their beauty that will appear after the passing of many days.

Just as my summer seeds are grown in the darkness of winter, our psalmist is intimately aware of a hope that persists amongst difficult circumstances. At one time the Israelites rejoiced, but now there is only sorrow. She recalls the days the Lord "restored the fortunes of Zion" (v 1) as a way of remembering the goodness of what once was and declaring the possibility of what will be again.

So many of the stories we most cherish speak of triumph and overcoming, but here the psalmist is offering the gift of what it means to endure. We know God's promise of restoration is coming, but in the interim, it's good and right to weep over all that is broken. It is our tears that go on to water the soil from which all future abundance will grow. In the midst

of our suffering, sometimes the only thing we have to cling to is a dream; a vision of the Kingdom as it will be. It is in our dreaming, however, that God gives us the courage to continue; enduring each day and sowing seeds that paint a picture of all that is possible in the Kingdom of God.

PRAYER

As we await the future restoration of all things, give us the patience to endure, and the courage to sow seeds even when the climate seems inhospitable. Comfort us in our mourning and allow our tears to knit us closer to you and to the world; for the glory of your name and to the restoration of shalom. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 2023

The Rev. Greg Steible '14

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 11:1-8, 14-17

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 3 You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Cursed be anyone who does not heed the words of this covenant, 4 which I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron-smelter, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God, 5 that I may perform the oath that I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day. Then I answered, "So be it, Lord." 6 And the Lord said to me: Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem: Hear the words of this covenant and do them. 7 For I solemnly warned your ancestors when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. 8 Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of an evil will. So I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not.

14 As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. 15 What right has my beloved in my house, when she has done vile deeds? Can vows and sacrificial flesh avert your doom? Can you then exult? 16 The Lord once called you, "A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit"; but with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed. 17 The Lord of hosts, who planted you, has pronounced evil against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal.

DEVOTIONAL

There's grace here, you know.

These are some hard words from the prophet Jeremiah. But then again, prophets are good at that: sharing hard words with people who need to hear them. I suppose sometimes we need to hear it. Many of us have people in our lives who will call us to task, lovingly, when we do something wrong. Occasionally, trusted friends will say things to us like, "Hey, maybe you need to apologize to that person." I hope you have a friend like that.

But here, the prophet is sharing this message of God with the people, and it's more than, "Hey, maybe you need to apologize." This is a message of cursing and condemnation for unfaithful people. Even gentle corrections are hard to hear, but this is eardrum-piercing. The people have shown covenantal infidelity, and the Lord is furious.

And yet, there's a subtler side to this passage as well. God is faithful to the covenant. God is gracious. Just like when our friends don't write us off when we put our foot in our mouth, neither does God. God doesn't abandon the people. God calls them to task. At their core they are God's people, as are we. We are made in God's image, with goodness and mercy in us. It doesn't always shine through, but instead of abandoning us, God graciously calls us to task, graciously calls us to change, graciously calls us to something new.

PRAYER

Covenant Lord, we look to you for help. We, your faithless people, turn to you because you continue to be faithful to us, and we are grateful. Guide us this season as we turn our hearts and minds to you. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 18, 2023

The Rev. Catherine (Kay) Day '97

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 13:1-11

1 Thus said the LORD to me, "Go and buy yourself a linen loincloth, and put it on your loins, but do not dip it in water."
2 So I bought a loincloth according to the word of the LORD, and put it on my loins. 3 And the word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, 4 "Take the loincloth that you bought and are wearing, and go now to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock." 5 So I went, and hid it by the Euphrates, as the LORD commanded me. 6 And after many days the LORD said to me, "Go now to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there." 7 Then I went to the Euphrates, and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where I had hidden it. But

now the loincloth was ruined; it was good for nothing. 8 Then the word of the LORD came to me: 9 Thus says the LORD: Just so I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. 10 This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own will and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. 11 For as the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the LORD, in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen.

DEVOTIONAL

In this story of the ruined, useless belt, we see a contrast between Jeremiah and the proud of Israel. Look at the instructions given to Jeremiah: *Go and buy . . . So I bought . . . Take the loincloth . . . and hide it . . . Go now to the Euphrates and get the loincloth . . . I went to the Euphrates and dug.* (vv 1-2, 4-7). In all of this, Jeremiah promptly obeyed God. The belt is symbolic of Israel's holiness as a kingdom of priests, a symbol of the intimate relationship between God and Judah. It becomes dirty and useless. The symbol of obedience and faithfulness becomes worthless. The contrast with Jeremiah's obedience is striking.

This image is discouraging and encouraging at the same time. Here were a people created in the image of God, created to be his faithful servants, his obedient and grateful people, and they became proud and arrogant. They easily tarnished and abused the privilege that God had given them as those created in his image. We, too, can lose ourselves in pride that we are God's people. We can abuse that position. The contrast is Jeremiah's faithful obedience, even when he didn't fully understand what was meant by all of this. We can choose to obey, to hear God's voice and follow. The choice is ours to hold onto the image of God, or to tarnish that image. Choose wisely.

PRAYER

Holy God, you have created us in your image, but we know that we have a choice to honor your image and to be faithful to you, or to tarnish and abuse your image. Give us the strength and the wisdom to uphold your image within us, to honor you in all we do. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Rick Willhite '86

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 42

1 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.
My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
7 Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.
8 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
9 I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”
10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

DEVOTIONAL

Reading Psalm 42, I’m reminded of a chilly October morning twenty-four years ago. I was on retreat near the end of a year that seemed marked by a series of relational and professional failures. I’d made mistakes. There had been too, in that year, an uncanny number of deaths, one after another, among people I knew. So much seemed to be ending. Trying to imagine the future was peering into midnight fog. I was hollowed out, empty. Awakening from a broken sleep, I left my bed at sunrise and went for a solitary walk. I walked up a country road and through a gate into a fallow field filled with end-of-season goldenrod. I laid down and closed my eyes, exhausted at 8:15 a.m.

A single goldenrod stem arched over the withered grasses where I lay. When I opened my eyes, I noticed a drowsy bumblebee slowly beginning to stir in the warming light of the rising sun. Minutes passed as I watched the bee while near and far around me, crickets began to sing. The lives of these, their whole world, would end quite soon with the coming freeze and snows of winter. The bumblebee began to probe for nectar as the crickets sang, out of a knowing deeper than thought, beyond vision or words or imagination. I remembered in those moments, perhaps for the first time, that my heart too, knew something; had always known, in the space between beats, what the crickets knew.

It sustains me still. *Selah.*

PRAYER

Dear God, whose grace unfolds in every moment, open our hearts to your loving presence, ever before us in this moment too. May it be so. Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 20, 2023

The Rev. Andy Greenhow, Chief of Staff and Secretary to the Board of Directors

SCRIPTURE

Romans 7:1-12

1 Do you not know, brothers and sisters — for I am speaking to those who know the law — that the law is binding on a person only during that person’s lifetime? 2 Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. 3 Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

4 In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. 5 While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. 6 But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

7 What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. 9 I was

once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

DEVOTIONAL

You're reading this in March but I am writing this over the Christmas holiday, and my 6-year old niece Emilia has just asked me for the 75th time if I'm done with my homework so we can play yet. To whatever extent any strategy has bought me time, it has been directing her to do a specific task in a specific manner: "Go to the door, twirl three times, meow like a cat, and then come back on tiptoes." Simply saying, "I cannot play right now but I will be able to play at some point soon" is too ambiguous. It's not a S.M.A.R.T. goal, and sometimes we need specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely goals.

So yes, it is good news that we are dead to the law, and the freedom we have in Christ is extraordinary. But I have to say that freedom can feel a little too ambiguous sometimes, especially when waiting. For me, the gift of a Lenten observance is a chance to reconnect with the specificity of the law and my specific responses to it. It invites me into structure, order, and a way to await what is coming. It may be easier for me than it is for Emilia because I know where this journey ends: the cross, the empty tomb, and the right hand of the Father. But as I walk toward all those things, one step at a time, I am grateful for the gift of the law and the company of the rules.

PRAYER

Liberating God, we know of the freedom we have in your son's life, death, and resurrection and yet we do not always know what to do with that. Guide us this Lenten season as we renew our commitment to you. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 21, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Graham D.S. Deans '06

SCRIPTURE

Romans 7:13-25

13 Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. 15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I

hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

DEVOTIONAL

There is no denying that Romans 7 is one of the most difficult passages in the apostle Paul's writings. Here he is revealed as "a man rent in two" (in Karl Barth's memorable phrase), wrestling with the problem of how anyone who, like himself, may be described as *creatus in imagine Dei et a Christo redemptus*, can be beset by such serious doubts as to their ultimate salvation. The reality is, however, that it is often the noblest of saints who feel their personal unworthiness the most acutely.

The passage is almost certainly autobiographical, but it doesn't refer exclusively to Paul's pre-Christian period. He faces an *ongoing* struggle, and the awful possibility of a fall from grace terrifies him (as it did the author of Heb 10:31). Even though those living in covenant loyalty and faithfulness need have no fear of their ultimate destiny, the apostle feels deeply troubled by his inability to act as he knows he ought to do (v 15). That has been a well-recognized condition; such moral perplexity is not confined to Christians, as is clear from the writings of people like Aristotle and Ovid.

Even the law (in which the apostle was an expert) is powerless (despite its inherent goodness) to save him. He knows only too well that he is but a work in progress, and only after the deepest soul-searching does he realize that the answer to humanity's moral dilemma is to be found, not in human wisdom, but uniquely through Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

While we deeply regret that all who are created in the image of God have, by their sin, marred it; we give thanks that it can and will eventually be perfectly restored uniquely through the ministry of Jesus Christ, to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit,

be all honour, glory, and praise
for ever and for evermore. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 2023

The Rev. Annamarie Groenenboom '17

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 27

1 The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
2 When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh —
my adversaries and foes —
they shall stumble and fall.
3 Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.
4 One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.
5 For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
6 Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.
7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
8 "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
9 Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!
10 If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.
11 Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.
12 Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.
13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD

in the land of the living.
14 Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

One of my favorite classes in seminary was Psalms with Dr. Creach. The lectures, discussions, and readings were interesting but the thing that inspired me most was our final projects. We were given a psalm to research, learn about, become an expert on, and present creatively. I had the opportunity to delve into Psalm 27.

Whether you are reading the Psalm of the Day in a worship service or needing some personal encouragement in the depths and busyness of Lent, Psalm 27 is filled with inspiration, beauty, and comforting truths. The psalm starts out with God's light. March is still considered winter in Michigan and continues to plunge us into days of darkness and dreariness. Yet this psalm starts by reminding us that no matter what is going on in life, whether it's a dark day or a somber season, we still can rely on God's beautiful shining light piercing through the darkness.

Verse 11 is also especially appropriate for this season of Lent: "Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies." As we try to remember, respond to, proclaim, and prepare for the death of Jesus Christ, let us be inspired to be taught the ways of God. Let us be encouraged to follow the path that God has set for each one of us and trust in the grace that God gives to us.

As we wait and prepare for Holy Week, let us wait for the Lord; be strong, and let our hearts take courage.

PRAYER

Gracious God, you are our light and our salvation. As we journey through this Lenten season, gives us grace to learn your ways and to walk the paths that you have set out for us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 2023

The Rev. Brian Wallace '06

SCRIPTURE

Romans 8:12-27

12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — 13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For

you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. 18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

DEVOTIONAL

“What if you treated every child like they were made in the image of God?”

This quote, from Reggie Joiner, is one of just a handful of quotes that have fundamentally shaped the way I do ministry. In the abstract, the question is nonsensical—after all, every child is created in the image of God. But the power of this question isn’t in the abstract but in the day-to-day work of ministry.

Every ministry I’ve been a part of involving kids has had “that kid.” They’re the kid whose family car you recognize as it pulls into the parking lot and your heart beats a little faster. They’re that kid who you, in theory, want to be at youth group or Sunday school, but also know that when they’re not there, things run smoother. They’re the kid who you love because Jesus commands you to, but they seemingly try to do everything in their power to make that a difficult task. And yet, these are so often the kids who need to be connected to the church and a community of caring adults. Adults who will, in obedience to Jesus’ commands through the sacrament of baptism, choose to love “that kid.” Who will, in a spiritual sense, adopt “that kid” as their own, just as the Triune God has given us a spirit of adoption and chosen us.

PRAYER

God of grace, help us to remember that all whom we encounter are created in your image. When we face the hardest and most challenging situations and people, remind us to draw our strength from your spirit, so that we might reflect your love to those around us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 2023

The Rev. Sarina Odden Meyer ’07

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 148

1 Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
2 Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
3 Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
4 Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
5 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.
6 He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
7 Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
8 fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!
9 Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
10 Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
11 Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
12 Young men and women alike,
old and young together!
13 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
14 He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!

DEVOTIONAL

“A society with harmony-way values cares for the most marginalized—for the poor and needy—because how we treat those who are most in need reveals the heart of who we are. Such a society will protect Mother Earth, our source

of life, at every turn.” - Randy Woodley in *Becoming Rooted: 100 Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth*

Psalm 148 reminds us that we are interconnected with all of life on earth. God created everything to live in harmony together. But now, the biodiversity of our planet is in crisis. We are the image of God on this planet, called to nurture life in everything we do. Can anything we do make a difference? Just as God saved the world by becoming one person (Jesus), willing to make a personal sacrifice (death on the cross), God can work through each of us to make a difference for biodiversity.

For example, what is our relationship like with the land on which we live? We can control the habitats in our yards and create life for biodiversity. Is our yard a habitat for soil microbes, pollinators, and migrating birds? Or is it filled with a non-flowering monoculture? How would the land on which we live cry out to God? With praises for the humans who dwell there, or with laments?

As we prepare to remember Jesus’ death and resurrection, let us contemplate how we might bring the good news of new life to the land on which we live. Let us take up our cross and make personal sacrifices to invest in creating life-filled habitats for the least-of-these who live in our yards. Let us be the image of God, enabling life to thrive, so that all of Creation who knows us will cry out in praise to God.

PRAYER

God of all Creation, we confess that we have forgotten our calling to nurture life on earth. Help us to bear your image in Creation by enabling life to thrive. Give us courage and determination to change our ways so that all of Creation who knows us would cry out to you in praise. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 25, 2023

The Rev. Carol Divens Roth '85

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 31

1 In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.
2 Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.
3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name’s sake lead me and guide me,
4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me,

for you are my refuge.
5 Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.
6 You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the LORD.
7 I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have taken heed of my adversities,
8 and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.
9 Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.
10 For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.
11 I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
12 I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
13 For I hear the whispering of many —
terror all around! —
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.
14 But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, “You are my God.”
15 My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.
16 Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.
17 Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD,
for I call on you;
let the wicked be put to shame;
let them go dumbfounded to Sheol.
18 Let the lying lips be stilled
that speak insolently against the righteous
with pride and contempt.
19 O how abundant is your goodness
that you have laid up for those who fear you,
and accomplished for those who take refuge in you,
in the sight of everyone!
20 In the shelter of your presence you hide them
from human plots;
you hold them safe under your shelter
from contentious tongues.
21 Blessed be the LORD,
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me
when I was beset as a city under siege.
22 I had said in my alarm,
“I am driven far from your sight.”
But you heard my supplications
when I cried out to you for help.
23 Love the LORD, all you his saints.
The LORD preserves the faithful,

but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.

24 Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the LORD.

DEVOTIONAL

Today is March 25. In exactly nine months, it will be Christmas Day. Some church traditions celebrate this day as the Annunciation, when God's messenger, Gabriel, announces to a young woman that she will conceive a child who will be called Son of God. This reflection is being written on the fourth Sunday of Advent, a season to anticipate the Word made flesh coming into our lives. Today is the 32nd day of Lent, a time to ponder the wondrous love of the cross, the empty tomb, and how to live between the already and the not-yet, in the hope that all God's intentions will be completed.

Psalm 31 sings of a powerful faith in a God for all seasons: a rock and a refuge in the lonesome valley when we are called to face down injustice, a hand that reaches out to wipe away the tears of grief and misery that threaten our ability to take one more step, and a steadfastness that sparks the courage to live and love when "NOs" are omnipresent.

I wonder if Mary learned this psalm at her mother's knee; if it might have been her earworm as she listened in astonishment to Gabriel, and if it was this image of God she kept in her heart that inspired her astounding "YES." May we, too, reflect on the ways to en flesh the "YES" of faith in our lives on the Lenten journey.

PRAYER

Holy One, in this sacred season, we seek to deepen our faith in you as rock and refuge, as giver of abundant goodness, and as one who hears. Show us how to live as those created in your image as we live and love and give. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 2023

David Peters '07

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law.

22 To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

24 Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. 25 Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. 26 So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; 27 but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is about connecting with God. The goal is not self-sacrifice for its own sake, but rather it is about how we can clean out the unnecessary parts of our existence to fully experience who God is. As Paul points out here, we often experience God through our interactions with other people. However, not any interaction will do. We must have purposeful interactions with others, where we listen for God in an effort to hear what he wants for us.

Hearing God through other people is tough. Paul does not say otherwise. It involves meeting people where they are at in their personal and spiritual lives. It can be uncomfortable, like when an athlete pushes their body to the brink. By helping others see God, we experience God. As Paul says, "I have become all things to all people . . . so that I may share in [the gospel's] blessings." When we take the time to listen to those who are lonely, downtrodden, or scared, we experience God. When we help those who seem unworthy of help, we experience God. When we are generous and we don't have to be, we experience God.

However, as Paul says, it is not good acts for the sake of good acts. Like an athlete who reaches the top level, we must go above and beyond. It is only when we do these things with our eyes and ears open to where God wants us to be, that we share in the gospel's blessings.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, in a world full of distractions, help us to see your will. In a world full of noise, help us to listen for you. Help us not to sacrifice during this Lenten season merely for its own sake, but in an effort to find you in all that we do. In Jesus name. Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 27, 2023

The Rev. Scott Dennis '13

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 24:1-10

1 The LORD showed me two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the LORD. This was after King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the artisans, and the smiths, and had brought them to Babylon. 2 One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. 3 And the LORD said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" I said, "Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten." 4 Then the word of the LORD came to me: 5 Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. 6 I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. 7 I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

8 But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who live in the land of Egypt. 9 I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth — a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. 10 And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they are utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their ancestors.

DEVOTIONAL

During our journey of Lent, we move from our usual, comfortable piety and practices—which can easily become routine and feel like 'cheap grace'—to what seems like a spiritual exile of law and penitence, regret and sorrow. However, the good news for us is that if we did not have special liturgical seasons and changes, like Lententide, then it would be all too easy to be complacent in cheap, easy grace, and thus we would rot like bad figs. Such easy spiritual complacency could rot us to the extreme point that we rotten figs would be "a byword" and "a horror for evil to all" (v 9) before the witnessing world which seeks to mock, denigrate and ignore the Christian faith.

Fortunately, grace means that God, in the freedom of his love, chooses to move us to a better place for a season until it is time to return to the place of comfort, familiarity, and joy.

We do not enjoy exiles, be it Babylon or Lententide. Yet such a season may produce a bountiful harvest of good figs for the benefit of us, our brothers and sisters, and those not even born yet, who themselves shall have their own Lententide exiles, if we preserve the fire of the faith tradition into which God calls us to sojourn and serve. Surely this is what is meant by our Lord's promise to give us "hearts to know that I am the Lord and they shall be my people" (v 7).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, as we continue our Lententide sojourn that ends beholding you upon the cross, give us those hearts which you promise to give us for love and service. Indeed, help us to finish our sojourning exiles by looking forward to beholding

your empty tomb and arriving back to our spiritual homes in the promised land of your grace. Amen..

TUESDAY, MARCH 28, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Steve Shussett '93

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 146

1 Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
2 I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
7 who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
9 The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

DEVOTIONAL

In the horror movie, *The Invisible Man*, no one could see the title character unless he was bandaged and clothed. His hands couldn't be seen without gloves, but what he performed with them was evident to everyone.

The God we know in Jesus is love, not evil as with the movie villain. But God is even less visible than a chemically-altered scientist. Since Moses was told he could not see God's face, we've been repeatedly told that "no one has ever seen God." What does it mean to be made in the image of God, if ours is the invisible God?

Paul writes that Jesus is "the image of this invisible God," and in 1 John we read that "we know what true love looks like because of Jesus." When we see Jesus we see God, and

though we can't see God, through Scripture we can see Jesus and his effect on so many.

Today, God's Spirit still shapes the world. Those baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ, and Psalm 146 is just one link in the long chain of Scripture revealing what our justice-seeking God looks like. What it means for us to look like God in service of all those made and loved by God. When we help free those imprisoned, whatever their chains, or lift up any who are bowed down, regardless of their burden, these are the effects of the Holy Spirit who daily shapes us into the image of the invisible God.

PRAYER

Holy One, make us pure in heart by water, fire, and Spirit, that we might see you, and find you in everyone and in all things. But rather than as passive observers and guilty bystanders, who see you and say nothing, make us instruments of your peace and justice, that by truth and action all will know we follow Christ. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 2023

The Rev. Rebecca D. Reeder '19

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 5

1 Give ear to my words, O LORD;
give heed to my sighing.
2 Listen to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
3 O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

4 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you.
5 The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.
6 You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.
7 But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house,
I will bow down toward your holy temple
in awe of you.
8 Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.
9 For there is no truth in their mouths;
their hearts are destruction;
their throats are open graves;
they flatter with their tongues.
10 Make them bear their guilt, O God;
let them fall by their own counsels;
because of their many transgressions cast them out,
for they have rebelled against you.
11 But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
so that those who love your name may exult in you.
12 For you bless the righteous, O LORD;
you cover them with favor as with a shield.

DEVOTIONAL

I notice there is a repetition of phrases relating to speaking, listening, and words. Tied to these phrases are truth or lies, joy or deceit. The NRSV adds the heading, "Trust in God for Deliverance from Enemies." Oh how often our "enemies"—anyone or anything that is against us in some way—use words to harm us! Maybe it's the voice of a colleague or boss, a spouse or sibling, or sometimes worst of all, the face in the mirror. I hear the psalmist cry for God to hear what's really going on inside the psalmist—for God to bring to the surface only that which is true, and cast out the lies that seek to destroy.

There are so many voices in our world telling us who we are or should be, telling us we are not good enough, or fill-in-the-blank enough. And the more we listen to those voices, the more we start to believe what they say. But "there is no truth in their mouths . . . their throats are open graves" (v 9), seeking to swallow us whole. Yet God hears the deeper cries of our hearts, attending to our sighs of heartache, grief, or doubt—sighs of defeat. Into that space God speaks blessing and favor: "You are my beloved child" (Mark 1:11, Matt 3:17, Luke 3:22). As we near the end of Lent, may you rest in those words; take refuge and rejoice in the One who sees and hears the real you; the you that God created and loves and accepts even when the world would tell you otherwise.

PRAYER

Listen to my words, O Lord; attend to my sighing. Listen to the sound of my cry, and speak words of truth, words of love. Especially when the world would have me believe differently, remind me again that I am loved, and in Jesus Christ I am accepted just as I am—I do not have to prove myself to you, my God and my Savior. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 30, 2023

The Rev. Darryl Lockie '17

SCRIPTURE

John 10:19-42

19 Again the Jews were divided because of these words. 20 Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?" 21 Others were saying, "These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

22 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; 26 but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30 The Father and I are one."

31 The Jews took up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" 33 The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God." 34 Jesus answered, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'?" 35 If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods' — and the scripture cannot be annulled — 36 can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'? 37 If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. 38 But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." 39 Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.

40 He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there.

41 Many came to him, and they were saying, "John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true." 42 And many believed in him there.

DEVOTIONAL

"Look man, I don't need your whole life story." Do you ever feel like saying that to a particularly garrulous friend, coworker, or family member? Maybe/hopefully you're not as grumpy as I am and have never felt this way, but I know I sure have. One might want to say the same to Jesus in today's Gospel passage. At the temple Jesus is asked a simple, albeit loaded question: "Are you the Messiah?" His response is almost 100 words long. The old axiom might apply: sometimes a simple "yes" or "no" will suffice. After all, it was Jesus who once said, "Let your 'yes' be 'yes'" (Matt 5:37), though granted in a slightly different context there. Jesus' gratuitous response encapsulates well what this season is about though. Lent is a time when we seek to more finely tune our ears to the Good Shepherd's voice. It's where we consider more deeply, how closely, we ourselves are following after that voice. Lent is a season when we might also rest in this present gospel truth: no matter what we are wrestling with, demons that are personal or societal, the One who made us in his image has us firmly within his grasp. There is no darkness nor evil that can indelibly mar that image or snatch us from God's hand. That's a good word for a world as broken as ours. Hence, perhaps we might add a bit of correction to that axiom above. Sometimes a "yes" or "no" will simply *not* suffice.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for Christ the teacher. He who so often answers our prayers and questions, not in the way we expect but in the way we need. Give us then our daily bread; that which *you* determine is necessary for the journey ahead. In these days, tune our ears to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 31, 2023

The Rev. Lisa J. Lyon '92

SCRIPTURE

Romans 11:13-24

13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry 14 in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! 16 If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the

whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. 19 You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. 24 For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature,

into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

DEVOTIONAL

Horticulturists cultivate plants to maximize health and growth by adding nutrients to soil, developing irrigation systems, and pruning diseased branches. In Romans 11:17-24, Paul describes God the Horticulturist grafting branches from a wild olive tree (Gentiles) onto a cultured tree (Israel).

Many Jewish Christians objected to Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Even those who understood that salvation in Christ is for all insisted that Gentiles be fully Jewish (circumcised) to be fully Christian. This division between "us" and "them" frustrated Paul, who prayed for the reconciliation of the world.

Israel's branches were broken off because of unbelief; Gentiles were grafted on because of faith, but Paul urges them not to become proud, for "those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in . . . again" (v 23). But will those who are re-grafted welcome the "wild" branches or demand God remove them?

Today as people huddle in like-minded groups fearful of contamination by "them", let's look to God the Horticulturist: Grafting branches from a wild tree onto a cultivated tree's rootstock increases hardiness and resistance to insects and disease, resulting in larger fruit and bigger yields. Yet, surprisingly, each part of the grafted tree keeps its original character. God's intention is not the contamination of Israel by Gentiles, but cross-pollination. God's design is for a strong, healthy, fruit-producing hybrid. All varieties of people sharing the same roots, branching out to share our gifts in ministry to a hurting world.

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, you assure us that "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me . . . that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15: 1-2). Help us to be pliant in the hands of the Horticulturist who prunes us of our faults and imperfections that we may be strong, healthy and fruit-producing. Amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 1, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Trevor Jamison '01

SCRIPTURE

Romans 11:25-36

25 So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. 26 And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

"Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob."

27 "And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins."

28 As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. 32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

33 O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

35 "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?"

DEVOTIONAL

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (v 33).

Though Paul wrote that, it's never stopped us from trying to comprehend God's judgments and ways. That's because we find them puzzling, and at times, distressing.

Paul was puzzled (and perhaps distressed) that "a hardening has come upon part of Israel" (v 25). Most of his fellow Jews

did not accept Jesus as the Messiah/Christ. Why would God work in this way? What does that say about God?

In our time, we are puzzled (and sometimes distressed) by God's ways with the world. Why put people in power who misuse it? Why permit suffering to be handed out to the innocent, whilst allowing the guilty to go free and prosper? Why arrange for people of faith to be persecuted?

Paul suggests God permits some things to happen in order to bring a greater good into being: "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (v 32). Here, the apostle provides only a partial answer, but then, God's ways are inscrutable.

If we can't understand God fully, then we are going to have to trust. We have greater grounds for trust if God not only permits political injustice, violence, suffering, and persecution in this world, but also is prepared to be among those at its receiving end. And at this point in Lent, Jesus is approaching Jerusalem, and his encounter with these very things.

PRAYER

O God, we cannot fully understand you, so help us to trust in you. Encourage us to confront, endure, and overcome the evils of this world, even as we remember your Son, the Christ, travelling to Jerusalem, ready to confront them. Amen.

SUNDAY, APRIL 2, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Jim Graham '66

SCRIPTURE

Zechariah 9:9-12

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

10 He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

11 As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

12 Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.

DEVOTIONAL

It's Palm Sunday. Though it's also Passion Sunday, preventing us from jumping from triumphal entry to resurrection, and missing Jesus' pain and death on the cross. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week still speaks powerfully as a visual of who he was and is to us, and how we might reflectively follow him.

It was a demonstration, a march on Jerusalem, an expression of how things should be. This was brought home to me in 1968 when Palm Sunday fell three days after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., known for his peaceful protests. Jesus was trying to tell/show us something, even though its meaning was lost on the crowd that followed him into the city that day, when he chose to fulfill the vision of the prophet Zechariah, proclaiming that lordship, leadership, authority come with a large dose of humility. I love to illustrate that by reading verse 9:9 aloud, with deliberate crescendo: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he," then pausing and saying softly, "*humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey!*"

Whether it's politics, business, church, family, or any context in which we're called to lead others, we're called to do so with humility—not lording it over them, but by demonstrably serving them.

Let us pause and reflect, on this Palm Sunday, how we may better follow Jesus who fulfilled, and fulfills through us, Zechariah's vision of humble service. God's image!

PRAYER

Lord of all, you sent Jesus to save us from self-righteousness and to set before us a humble servant way of life. When we are bossy leaders, make us kind and understanding; when we are proud, bring us down some, that we may demonstrate before others what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ and your servant people. Amen.

MONDAY, APRIL 3, 2023

The Rev. Kori Robbins '22

SCRIPTURE

Psalms 119:73-80

73 Your hands have made and fashioned me;
give me understanding that I may learn your commandments.

74 Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice,
because I have hoped in your word.

75 I know, O LORD, that your judgments are right,
and that in faithfulness you have humbled me.

76 Let your steadfast love become my comfort according to your promise to your servant.
77 Let your mercy come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight.
78 Let the arrogant be put to shame, because they have subverted me with guile; as for me, I will meditate on your precepts.
79 Let those who fear you turn to me, so that they may know your decrees.
80 May my heart be blameless in your statutes, so that I may not be put to shame.

DEVOTIONAL

In college, a mentor of mine always said, “Show me your friends, and I’ll show you your future.” When he said this—to the middle schoolers at the summer camp he helped organize, to the high schoolers desperately trying to fit in, or to the college students that worked as camp counselors—it was always in reference as to how the world, and people, around us shape who we are ourselves. Human beings are shaped by many things: our upbringing, our education and social settings, our economic and political standing. We are shaped by the events of our lives: the exhilarating adventurous parts, and the mundane, everyday ordinary stuff.

In these specific verses from Psalm 119, we are reminded of all the ways in which we are also shaped by God. In my first year of seminary, Dr. Ron Tappy taught “Introduction to the Old Testament,” and one of the most poignant images that he talked about that sticks with me is that of an “anthropomorphic God.” Dr. Tappy talked of Genesis, and of the dust that formed humans, the type of dust that comes out when you hit the ground hard and a little puff of dust rises up. And he talked of God walking about the garden, acting as gardener, shaping and loving God’s creation.

Now, this image has always stuck in my head a bit, because I like the idea of an anthropomorphic God. I like the idea of God walking around and interacting with God’s creation, a la Morgan Freeman style. I like the idea of God having hands and feet and a face, just like you and me. I like the idea of a God that can shape things with their hands, forming each one of us from the dust of dust.

While I doubt the psalmist was thinking of an anthropomorphic God, I do think that the psalmist is asking to be shaped by God, to be shaped by God’s words and actions. To be shaped by God’s love and mercy, so that the psalmist can then in turn share God’s love with others. God created humans for relationship, with love, and we are called to manifest our participation in the image of God through that same love. God so loved the world, so cared for the beings made in God’s own image, that God made the ultimate declaration of love in sending Jesus to be our Savior.

PRAYER

Holy God, Loving God: we give thanks and praise for the way your hands shaped and made us. We give thanks for the words you’ve given to us, shaped like paint on a canvas, slowly creating an image that reflects you. As we continue to move through the Lenten season and beyond, we ask for wisdom, reflecting on the beauty of us made in the image of you, and the ability to share your vivid love throughout the world. Amen.

TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Jonathan D. Lawrence ‘97

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 34

1 I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
2 My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
3 O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
5 Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
6 This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD,
and was saved from every trouble.
7 The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
8 O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
9 O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.
10 The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.
11 Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
12 Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
13 Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
14 Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.
15 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.
16 The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.
17 When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.
18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.

19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.
20 He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.
21 Evil brings death to the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
22 The LORD redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

DEVOTIONAL

A few years ago, I heard a Jewish colleague say that of all the Torah's commandments, peace and justice are the only two things that are to be "pursued" because they are the hardest to achieve.

"Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (v 14) appears in the midst of a litany of promises of care and protection for God's people. At first glance some of these promises might suggest that those who follow God will never suffer, but if that were the case, why would the psalmist need to say in verse 18, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit"? Many people have held onto their faith despite their suffering, remembering the promise of verse 15: "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry."

What might it look like for God's people to seek peace and pursue it in the face of suffering? This last year my neighbors in Buffalo have dealt with a racially-motivated massacre, and a year-end blizzard in which many people lost their lives and many others were left shivering in homes without heat or power. Our religious leaders of many faiths struggled to meet people's basic needs and educate people about the injustices underlying the crises facing the community, even while nursing their own and others' broken hearts. It is indeed hard to achieve, but pursuing peace can transform the world.

PRAYER

This Lenten season, may we take refuge in God, listen to others' cries for help, comfort the brokenhearted, depart from evil, seek peace, and pursue it. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Susan Lyn Moudry '10

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 4:1-13

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.
2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion,

help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.
4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

10 I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. 11 Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

DEVOTIONAL

During a recent Holy Week, I realized I was kind of holding my breath as the time proceeded. I was waiting for the next shoe to drop. You see, our extended family had a string of unwelcome events spread over a few years that all tied to Holy Week: death, loss, injury, illness. So, familiar anxiety set in as the time approached.

While the specifics will vary, those of you serving churches can likely relate. We often collectively hold our breath, worrying about the plethora of services and sermons, if the weather will cooperate, what illness and death may intervene, and countless other things. We wait, wondering what might go wrong next.

Yet, it's into that space the Scripture speaks to us today. We are reminded to give thanks and focus on the good, staying present to all that God is doing in the world. We are told not to worry, but rather to communicate with God. By giving our anxious hearts away, we are gifted peace and presence of mind to get through whatever may come. This is God at work in us.

In the midst of a world full of fears, we can be grateful and rejoice, because no matter our very legitimate concerns, God hears and God is with us. You and I are not alone. Thanks be to God for that peace.

PRAYER

God who knows all the wanderings of our worried hearts, come fill us today with a sense of your presence and peace. Guard us from the worry that creeps in again and again. Help us to rejoice. Amen.

THURSDAY, APRIL 6, 2023

Dr. Helen Blier, Director of Continuing Education

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 126

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”
3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
5 May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
6 Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

DEVOTIONAL

It is hard to read this Lenten psalm without hearing echoes of that oldest of Advent hymns, the Magnificat. The advocacy for the oppressed; the anticipated joy; the verse, “The Lord has done great things for [us], and [we] rejoiced.” And to go a step further and hear this song of ascent on the lips of a people oppressed—or a poor teenaged girl living on occupied land—deepens the impact of these words. It’s no wonder that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Magnificat “the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung.”

So what is a reference to Advent—when we anticipate the birth of the Messiah—doing on Maundy Thursday, as we enter into the Triduum and the memory of Jesus’ crucifixion? From its beginning to its end, the arc of Jesus’ life was about the unexpected and the improbable. The God of the incarnation chose to enter fully this experience of being human in the most outrageous of ways—a baby born into inconsequential and impoverished circumstances. And his ministry? It was the realization of the psalmist’s vision and Mary’s hymn—radical attention paid to those who suffer, with the promise of abundance and joy. The God of the

psalmist and of Mary, the God incarnated in Jesus, is one of delight and justice both who intends to do “great things” for those who need it most. Indeed, knowing something of the shape of the day that would follow, Jesus still chose to spend this one sharing a meal with his friends.

But power doesn’t like to be challenged, and the rich do not appreciate being sent away empty. Yes, God’s subversive promise of abundance intends the flourishing of all—but getting there is inevitably disruptive. And so we prepare for that costliest day, Good Friday.

PRAYER

God of the unexpected, you see our suffering and join us in its midst, promising that it will not have the final say. You desire our flourishing; you want the captive to be free, the hungry to be fed, the sorrowful to rejoice. Remind us of this when we lose heart and forget, and strengthen us to work with you towards that day when all your people can proclaim with joy, “The Lord has done great things for us!”

FRIDAY, APRIL 7, 2023

Rebecca Konegen '22

SCRIPTURE

John 13:36-38

36 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.” 37 Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” 38 Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.”

DEVOTIONAL

It’s an exchange full of intention, as well as present and future time shifts: “I am”, “you will”, “what about now?” and then “I will”, “will you?”, and “you won’t.” Now, then later in the future, back to now, and then in the near future. What will happen versus what won’t? There’s a lot of skipping around, time-wise. And then there’s identity: who Jesus is, which defines what he will do and is capable of doing, and who Peter is, which defines in turn what he is capable of doing and therefore will (or won’t) do. Not to mention all of those pronouns.

We’re kept so busy keeping track of the conversation that we can miss an essential point: Jesus says that Peter will follow after him *before* he tells Peter that Peter is about to deny him. Peter hasn’t even yet faced the temptation to deny his association with Jesus.

Jesus offers assurance of salvation—the confidence of having been saved—even *before* the next sin occurs. The confidence is there before the cross—it’s already a sure thing. Peter will go to that place Jesus is preparing.

The God whom we serve—whom we, like Peter, aspire to serve—offers love and grace, even knowing that we will stumble, badly. Our God sees our sins coming—not just the ones in our past, over which we no longer have control—and still acts to save. Still loves, still promises, still assures.

PRAYER

God who sees, God who suffers at our own hands, you know us thoroughly. Our aspirations and our blunders, the moments when we live into your gifts and your promises, and the moments when we fail you utterly. And still, you act on our behalf. We are, as Peter is, humbled. Let us always know your grace. Amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 8, 2023

The Rev. Charles L. Fischer III, Vice President for Seminary Advancement

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 143

1 Hear my prayer, O LORD;
give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness;
answer me in your righteousness.
2 Do not enter into judgment with your servant,
for no one living is righteous before you.
3 For the enemy has pursued me,
crushing my life to the ground,
making me sit in darkness like those long dead.
4 Therefore my spirit faints within me;
my heart within me is appalled.
5 I remember the days of old,
I think about all your deeds,
I meditate on the works of your hands.
6 I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.
7 Answer me quickly, O LORD;
my spirit fails.
Do not hide your face from me,
or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.
8 Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning,
for in you I put my trust.
Teach me the way I should go,
for to you I lift up my soul.
9 Save me, O LORD, from my enemies;
I have fled to you for refuge.
10 Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God.

Let your good spirit lead me
on a level path.

11 For your name’s sake, O LORD, preserve my life.
In your righteousness bring me out of trouble.

12 In your steadfast love cut off my enemies,
and destroy all my adversaries,
for I am your servant.

DEVOTIONAL

“Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust. Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.” (Psalm 143:8, NRSV)

There is something about the midnight hour that holds one in suspense. There is no certainty about what is before you. The late evening when you can’t see yet know that something is in front of you. The late evening when you wrestle with the decisions that are to be made and wait with great anticipation as to what the new day might reveal. In the midnight hour, there are the ruminations that one may go through as they think about the day that has passed and the day before them. It may be the tossing and turning of what had not been accomplished which gives you angst. Or it may be the enthusiasm around the excitement of a new day that is to come.

The words of the psalmist are a plea to the Lord. What might be the sound of love that one yearns to hear? Is it a familiar sound of affirmation? Will it be the chirping of birds after morning has broken? The sound of steadfast love may be the most assuring sound. The confirmation that all is well and that there is nothing else to be worried about.

I can hear these same pleas coming from those who witnessed the horrific events of a lynching the day before. Their teacher has been executed and those who had followed him are now hopeless. They have lost the one who had been the manifestation of all assurances. And now they find themselves in the dark, a midnight hour like no other, desiring nothing more than to hear the steadfast love of the Lord in the morning.

PRAYER

Collect for Holy Saturday, *The Book of Common Prayer*

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.

SUNDAY, APRIL 9, 2023

Richard Norris III, M.Div. student

SCRIPTURE

Luke 24:13-35

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, 16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17 And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" 19 He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. 21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. 22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, 23 and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. 24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." 25 Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29 But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. 30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. 32 They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" 33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. 34 They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" 35 Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

DEVOTIONAL

Each Gospel writer presents a different account of the resurrection. But one of the narrative elements that is consistent across each account is this: no one expected Jesus to be alive that Sunday morning. The darkness of the crucifixion on Good Friday continued to hover over all of his disciples. This is arguably best exemplified in this episode on the Emmaus road. You don't have to look far to get a sense of the defeat that Cleopas and the other disciple had to have been feeling. It's right there in verse 21:

" . . . we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place." In other words, they said, "We thought he was our Messiah, but we've given up any hope of that now." But after they had spent some time communing with the Lord and intently listening to his voice, they came to realize that he had indeed risen, just as he promised.

Often, it is so easy to get so caught up in the hardships of life that we, too, lose hope and abandon our faith in God. But what the resurrection teaches us is: 1) God is always at work, even when darkness abounds all around us; and 2) no matter what, God keeps God's promises. As the Lenten season comes to a close and we move into Eastertide, may we all remember to take time to commune with and listen to God. For it is in those moments when we are pressed on every side and we can't see our way that we must be bold enough in the Spirit to declare, "I still expect God to work it out."

PRAYER

Kind and loving God, thank you for the gift of the resurrection. May it always serve as a reminder to us of your incomprehensible, incalculable, overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love for us, and your commitment to do whatever it takes to save your people. Help us to confront our doubts when evil seems to prevail. Help us to depend on your promises when trials come. Help us to always expect a miracle. In your name we pray, Amen.

The Scripture quotations contained in the lectionary readings are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

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